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Plans, Progression and Post-Compulsory Education: Measuring the Success of a School–University Widening Participation Programme in Ireland

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Abstract: It is widely recognised that addressing inequality in tertiary education is a complex and multifaceted issue. Studies involving students from lower socio-economic backgrounds consistently show that educational disparities exist at the post-secondary education level, with these students' encountering obstacles in both accessing and completing tertiary education compared to their wealthier counterparts. Understanding how widening participation interventions may influence young people's post-compulsory education is an important part of addressing the participation gap. This paper investigates longitudinal data from 227 students in Dublin, Ireland, who were attending post-primary schools located in areas that have low progression to tertiary education. The paper examines the extent to which students' post-secondary plans, formulated in their final year of secondary school, are realised six months after graduation. The paper continues to examine the influence of external interventions provided by an Irish university's widening participation (WP) programme on secondary school students' progression to post-compulsory education. Taking into account contextual factors (e.g., gender, ethnicity, school type, parental education, parental support), this paper examines how WP programmes in secondary school impact post-school progression. Programme engagement (guidance outreach activities) was associated with 4.91-greater odds of post-secondary education once other contextual factors had been controlled for. Participating in mentoring programmes did not have a significant influence on post-secondary progression. Findings in relation to these are discussed, and recommendations for how practitioners and policy makers can approach widening participation outreach programmes with secondary school students are highlighted.

Keywords: widening participation; tertiary education; educational inequality; post-secondary education; access to education; marginalised groups; mentoring; school–university partnerships



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1. Introduction

Although there has been an increased focus on policies addressing educational disadvantage, recent research has emphasised how the education system continues to reinforce and justify inequality. It has been long accepted that education perpetuates intergenerational advantages for dominant social groups, revealing the deep connections between education, inequality, and social class (Fleming and Harford 2023; Burke 2013; Vignoles and Murray 2016). Studies involving students from lower socio-economic backgrounds consistently show that educational disparities exist at the post-secondary level,

with these students encountering obstacles in both accessing and completing tertiary education compared to their wealthier counterparts (Burney and Beilke 2008; HEA 2022). It is widely recognised that addressing inequality in tertiary education is a complex and multifaceted issue (Piketty 2021; Boliver et al. 2022). Barriers to education often originate from earlier life experiences that have marginalised parents and students, including financial constraints, lack of information, insufficient guidance, and limited access to mentors with relatable experiences (Sanderson and Spacey 2020; Hoxby and Turner 2015; Smyth and Banks 2012; McCoy et al. 2014). The repercussions of such disenfranchisement are evident in lower academic achievement, strained student–teacher relationships, elevated rates of early school dropout, and negative perceptions of higher education (HE) (Chowdry et al. 2013; McCoy et al. 2014; Keane 2016; Bray et al. 2021).

Various initiatives have been implemented to address the underrepresentation of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in tertiary education (Guerin 2014). National-level policies aimed at widening participation play an increasingly important strategic role in supporting education providers across tertiary education to implement inclusion and diversity goals at a more local level. A key focus of Ireland’s National Access Plan 2022–2028, for example, is to create more inclusive and diverse student populations in higher education, with a specific focus on student participation and success (HEA 2022). More specifically, many countries seek to implement pedagogical and attainment interventions, bursaries, and mentoring, guidance, and information interventions, all with the common aim of increasing access and entry to further and higher education (Guerin 2014; Kaye 2021; Younger et al. 2019). This paper focuses on the latter, mentoring, guidance, and information interventions. Despite the welcome policy emphasis in this area, little is known about the impact of such interventions (Baines et al. 2024; Younger et al. 2019) and even less on the impact of these interventions on post-school pathways specifically (Ní Chorcora et al. 2023). A recent systematic literature review of widening participation (WP) outreach programmes internationally, Ní Chorcora et al. (2023), reported that just eight studies (published between 2012 and 2022) measured post-school progression or college enrolment as an outcome variable (Bettinger and Evans 2019; Crump et al. 2015; Hyman 2020; Avery et al. 2021; Avery 2013; Hoxby and Turner 2013; Barkat 2019; Corwin and Maruco 2018). The findings highlight the need for studies with larger sample sizes and longitudinal designs to measure the impact of outreach programmes with the aim of widening participation. This paper attempts to address this gap by utilising data from a large-scale, longitudinal WP study by Trinity Access Programmes (TAP) which was conducted in secondary schools in the Republic of Ireland (Bray et al. 2022; Tangney et al. 2021) to measure the success of the WP programme on students’ post-school progression. It examines the extent to which students’ post-secondary plans, formulated in their final year of secondary school, are realised six months after graduation. Additionally, the paper investigates whether students’ progression after school is influenced by contextual factors (e.g., gender, ethnicity, school type, parental education) and how external interventions of guidance and mentoring activities provided by the WP programme impact progression once these contextual influences are accounted for. The paper addresses the following overarching research questions:

1. Do students in schools linked to a university achieve the post-school plans they set out during their final year of secondary school?
2. Is participation in a WP outreach programme associated with the likelihood of second-level students’ post-school progression (once other factors are controlled for)?

1.1. Post-Compulsory Education Pathways

Internationally, research highlights the level of variability in young people's post-secondary pathways. The post-secondary pathways individuals take through education vary widely, both internationally and within the same country. While primary and secondary education experiences tend to be more uniform across countries, tertiary education represents more diversities in educational programmes and participation modes. Generally made up of further education, vocational training, and higher education, these education systems aim to cater to different abilities, needs, and preferences by offering a range of programmes (OECD 2023). While vocational and post-secondary, non-tertiary programmes offer earlier entry into the job market, higher levels of education typically lead to greater earning potential and improved employment prospects (OECD 2023). In 2022, the proportion of individuals aged 25–34 in the EU who attained tertiary education stood at 42% (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2022). OECD research shows that, on average, over half of students in general education programmes enrol in bachelors education a year later (OECD 2023). The corpus of international research shows that post-school pathways are stratified by social class and, in particular, that there are stark inequalities of access and participation in HE (McCowan and Bertolin 2020; Chesters and Watson 2013; Jerrim et al. 2015; Parker et al. 2016).

In Ireland, findings from the Growing up in Ireland Longitudinal study suggest that by the age of 20, there was extensive participation in education/training in Ireland (O'Mahony et al. 2022). Over two-thirds (68%) were in education/training, 27% were employed, and 5% were not in education, employment, or training. Those in education/training included those in higher (third-level) education (57%), on Post Leaving Certificate courses (6%), and those on other education/training courses (including apprenticeships and Youthreach, 5%) (O'Mahony et al. 2022). Mirroring patterns internationally, participation rates in HE are stratified along socio-economic lines, as individuals from less-advantaged backgrounds are less inclined to pursue HE and exhibited a slightly elevated likelihood of discontinuation if they did enrol (HEA 2022). Furthermore, young people from more advantaged families are more likely to go to a university: 77% of the children of graduate parents went to a university compared with 45% of those whose parents had lower second-level education (O'Mahony et al. 2022).

Similarly to trends internationally, there is great diversity in the further education student population compared to higher education. Further education courses (PLC and other FE, including apprenticeships and Youthreach) in Ireland cater more for those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (O'Mahony et al. 2022). Research shows that participation in PLC courses is twice as high among the lowest-educated families (where the parent had a Junior Certificate qualification or lower), with 24% of this group taking part compared with 10% of 20-year-olds whose parent had a degree or higher (O'Mahony et al. 2022). Similar patterns were found in terms of social class, household income, and family structure, with higher levels of FE participation among those from lower skilled/never-employed, lower-income, and lone-parent households (O'Mahony et al. 2022). Previous research (McGuinness et al. 2018) has indicated that PLC courses can provide a pathway to HE, especially for more disadvantaged groups.

1.2. Factors Influencing Progression

Decision making around post-secondary pathways is complex and multi-faceted. Contextual factors influencing this process can include but are not limited to a young persons' gender, ethnicity, their parents' education level, and support given, as well as each students academic attainment. Gender disparity in tertiary education is increasingly evident, with a higher percentage of women in tertiary education compared with men (48%

of women and 37% of men, respectively) (Eurostat 2023). In the UK, longitudinal research shows that women are significantly more likely to attend university than their male peers (Crawford and Greaves 2015). Focusing on ethnicity, studies show that participation in university for ethnic minorities has seen a more rapid increase in recent years compared to their White British peers, with those from minority backgrounds now significantly more likely than White British pupils to attend university (even after accounting for socio-economic background and prior attainment) (Crawford and Greaves 2015). It is widely acknowledged in the literature that the educational background of a young person's parents has a significant influence on their post-school progression (Erola et al. 2016; Wagner et al. 2014; Korupp et al. 2002).

Irish research on post-secondary pathways shows similar results. Studies show that HE participation rates for males in disadvantaged areas are lower than those for females in similar contexts (HEA 2022). Males are more likely to enter the labour market directly, while females tend to enrol in HE at higher rates (Smyth and McCoy 2021). Within further education, males are over-represented among apprenticeships (8% compared with 0.5%) and under-represented on PLC courses (10% compared with 26%) (Smyth and McCoy 2021).

While the findings on differences in educational attainment by ethnicity are less prevalent, there is a significant body of research on the impact of social class background on post-secondary decision making. Findings show that there are particularly high levels of HE participation among those whose mothers had higher levels of education (86%) compared with those whose mothers had the lowest educational level (48%). In contrast, participation in PLC or other education/training courses was more common among those whose mothers have lower levels of educational attainment. Young people whose mothers have the lowest level of educational attainment are more than twice as likely as those whose mothers had the highest qualifications to take a PLC course, and more than four times as likely to take another form of education/training (Smyth and McCoy 2021).

Similar findings were found when looking at school type. In Ireland, the government has targeted schools which are located in socio-economically disadvantaged areas and assigned them as 'DEIS' schools (Delivering Equality of Education In Schools). DEIS schools are then allocated additional resources and funding from the government in attempt to combat certain educational disadvantage. Research shows that young people in Ireland who had attended a DEIS school were significantly less likely to go on to HE than those who went to a non-DEIS school (50% compared with 76%) (McCoy et al. 2014). They were more likely to take a PLC course (29% compared with 15%) or another FE course (16% compared with 8%). Students attending middle-class schools tend to exhibit higher rates of participation in HE, while those from working-class schools were more inclined to enter the labour market directly upon leaving school (McCoy et al. 2014; Smyth and McCoy 2021). Ní Chorcora et al. (2023) emphasise that widening participation outreach interventions need to ensure they are supporting all low-income students to reach their full potential, whether that entails pursuing further education and training, or facilitating access to HE and/or selective universities.

1.3. School–University Widening Participation Programmes

There is limited understanding of the factors that influence widening participation, and the research available on the effectiveness of these programmes is often conflicting (Ní Chorcora et al. 2023; Gorard et al. 2006); however, some have been shown to influence students' future plans and aspirations as well as their progression to post-secondary education (see Torgerson et al. 2014; Ní Chorcora et al. 2023). Although the academic attainment of young people is undoubtedly important in influencing progression, students need to aspire and have the self-belief to go to university, qualities that will likely motivate them

in their studies once there. Students also need to navigate the application system, again requiring confidence, information, and the knowledge and ability to access that information (Vignoles and Murray 2016). Widening participation outreach programmes for secondary school students can be categorised into three categories: pedagogical interventions, multi-dimensional interventions, and guidance interventions (Ní Chorcóra et al. 2023). Guidance interventions primarily aim to provide information about college and careers. These are also referred to in the literature as information, advice, and guidance (IAG) activities (TASO 2020) or pathways activities (Bray et al. 2022). Research suggests that these types of information and guidance activities can be particularly effective in promoting university aspirations (Baines et al. 2024; Hannon et al. 2017) and post-school educational progression (TASO 2020). Campbell and McKendrick (2017) suggest that sustained interventions of this kind were perceived to be impactful by participants as they increased awareness of university life. Additionally, Moore et al. (2013) also emphasise the lack of empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of widening participation interventions focused on information, advice, and guidance. They stress the importance of developing a comprehensive, integrated approach between practitioners and researchers to address this gap. A comprehensive discussion on school–university widening participation programmes, including detailed descriptions of the methodologies and critical evaluations of the robustness of the cited studies, can be found in the authors systematic review (Ní Chorcóra et al. 2023), as well as in an earlier systematic review by Torgerson et al. (2014).

Within the TAP schools outreach programme, students are provided with opportunities to engage in pathways activities that promote post-school educational progression. These types of activities include, for example, projects relating to college/course choices, mock college applications, college campus visits, career fairs, talks by professionals, and workplace visits. In addition to these, the TAP schools outreach programme involves various types of mentoring programmes, designed to foster academic and personal growth among all students. These include college-focused mentoring, peer-to-peer mentoring, and career-focused mentoring. Mentoring provides students with a supportive relationship with a more experienced individual who can serve as a role model. The WP literature describes the positive impact of mentoring on widening participation (Torgerson et al. 2014; Robinson and Salvestrini 2020). There is limited understanding of the effectiveness of widening participation programmes in Ireland, and this paper attempts to begin to address this gap by utilising data from a large-scale, longitudinal WP study conducted in Ireland with secondary schools participating in TAP schools outreach programme (Bray et al. 2022; Tangney et al. 2021). The paper attempts to measure the success of the WP programme's mentoring and pathways programmes on students' post-school progression.

2. Methodology

2.1. Context and Participants

The data used in this paper are based on students attending schools that are designated disadvantaged or DEIS (Delivering Equality of opportunity In Schools) (DES 2017) by the Irish government. These schools are identified as catering largely for students from socio-economically disadvantaged (SED) backgrounds and are allocated additional funding and resources to support them in breaking down barriers and eradicating inter-generational disadvantage (DES 2017; Weir and Kavanagh 2018).

This study uses data generated from 227 students from 11 secondary schools in the greater Dublin area in Ireland that are linked to the TAP schools' outreach widening participation programme. While two of the schools do not have official DEIS status, all of them have been identified as having catchment areas where progression to HE is low. The

DEIS (N = 188) and non-DEIS (N = 39) classification is however considered as a contextual variable in this research.

Students in the university-linked schools who had provided parental and personal consent were asked complete a survey annually, at the end of each school year (April–May), as part of a major longitudinal educational initiative in Ireland, TAP schools' outreach programme (Bray et al. 2022; Tangney et al. 2021). The full questionnaire, its measures, and their scoring can be found in (Tangney et al. 2021). This study provides an in-depth exploration of data generated by final-year students at two time points in 2022 (April 2022 and October 2022). This unique, longitudinal perspective explores students' post-school plans two months before they complete their final-year state examinations and then collects data on students' post-school progression 6 months later in October 2022. A total of 495 final-year students from 19 schools were surveyed in April 2022. Eleven of those schools chose to participate at Time 2 of the collection of post-school progression data (319 students).

In Ireland, post-school progression data are not collected centrally, and many schools collect this information anecdotally to inform their own planning and decision making. TAP developed a standardised tool to collect this information as part of this study (Tangney et al. 2021). A post-school progression data collection tool was developed for the guidance, careers, and transitions teams within the linked secondary schools to work with students to collect post-school progression information in a standardised way. Teachers and guidance counsellors within the 11 schools emailed and phoned past pupils during the months of October 2022–December 2022 to check-in with them and collect post-school progression information.

A total of 319 final-year students from the 11 participating schools completed the survey in April 2022 and of those, 227 (71%) students also provided post-school progression information 6 months later. Students participated in 'Pathways and Mentoring' activities throughout their final year of secondary school. Of the 277 students, 115 of them completed between 0 and 2 pathways activities in their final year of secondary school and 112 completed between 3 and 6 pathways activities. These were coded as low and high pathways engagement. Further, 136 students had a mentor in their final year of secondary school and 91 did not have a mentor. The mentors in this study were either teachers, past pupils, or university students.

Of the 227 students surveyed, 118 identified as male and 105 as female. In terms of ethnicity, 161 participants were White Irish, while 66 identified as belonging to other ethnic backgrounds. Regarding parental education, 76 students reported that their mothers had attended university, whereas 151 indicated that their mothers had not attended university. Similarly, 54 students reported that their fathers had attended university, while 173 indicated that their fathers had not attended university. As mentioned, the majority of the students (188) attended DEIS schools, with 39 attending non-DEIS schools. Additionally, 176 students had attended mixed-gender schools, whereas 51 had attended single-sex schools.

The quasi-experimental design employed in this study is likely the most feasible method for conducting outcome evaluations in the social sciences. It uses pre-existing groups, adolescents already participating in mentoring or pathways activities, enabling evaluation and avoiding ethical concerns related to withholding or delaying the intervention, or providing a less effective intervention to a control group. The major drawback of this design is the lack of randomisation, which means the study groups might have pre-existing differences that influence the outcomes after the intervention, and these differences cannot be fully accounted for in the analysis. Thus, this design offers practical but weaker evidence of programme effects compared to a randomised design. Baines et al. (2024)

highlight that randomised controlled evaluations of widening participation interventions are often impractical due to financial and logistical challenges, such as difficulty recruiting schools. Incorporating randomisation while ensuring the evaluation is perceived as fair, accessible to students, and minimally disruptive to daily schooling is particularly challenging (Baines et al. 2024). In the absence of randomisation, using a matched comparator group can offer a reasonable estimate of an intervention's impact while maintaining transparency in study design, data handling, and analysis, and can improve evaluation quality. According to the work of Crawford et al. (2017), this study would thus be classified as a Level 2 evaluation of practice. While the influence of various demographic factors is controlled for through the regression analysis, causality cannot be fully determined.

2.2. Materials

This study uses students' self-reported post-school plans (as captured at time point 1), and post-school progression (as captured at time point 2) to compare whether students in schools linked to a university achieved the post-school plans they set out during their final year of secondary school.

The second research question looks to investigate whether participation in a WP outreach programme is associated with second-level students' post-school progression (once other factors are controlled for). Measurements of the outreach programme (mentoring and pathways activities) were the independent variables. A series of other demographic variables were used as contextual independent variables. A breakdown of each measure and their values are listed below (Table 1).

Table 1. Time 1 survey materials.

Name	Measure	Variable
Post-School Plans	What do you plan on doing once you finish school? I plan on going to university; I plan on doing a Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) course; I plan on doing an apprenticeship; I plan to work/ gain employment; I do not plan to complete secondary school; I don't know/ none of these options apply to me; Other.	Descriptive statistics exploring RQ1.
Ethnicity (CSO 2022)	What is your ethnic or cultural background? White or white Irish; Irish Traveller or Roma community; Black or Black Irish; Asian or Asian Irish; Indian/ Pakistani/Bangladeshi/Irish; Other; Unknown.	Independent (RQ2)
Parental Support (The Economic and Social Research Institute)	This academic year, how often have your parent(s)/ guardian(s): Checked that you've done your homework; Discussed how you are getting on in school; Discussed how you did in tests or exams; Discussed post-secondary school options with you? Five-point Likert scale Never or hardly ever (1), a few times (2), about once a month (3), several times a month (4), several times a week (5).	Independent (RQ2)
Gender	Male/Female/Prefer not to say	Independent (RQ2)
Year group	1st to 6th year	Independent (RQ2)
Mother's Education Level	Does your mother have a university degree? (Yes/No)	Independent (RQ2)
Father's Education Level	Does your father have a university degree? (Yes/No)	Independent (RQ2)

Table 1. Cont.

Name	Measure	Variable
School Type	DEIS/Non-DEIS School (Meta data)	Independent (RQ2)
School Gender	Mixed gender school, male pupils only, female pupils only (meta data).	
Mentoring Programme	In the last academic year, did you take part in a mentoring programme? (Yes/No)	Independent (RQ2)
Pathways to College Activities	In the last academic year, did you participate in any of the following pathways to college activities? (Yes/No) (College fairs, campus tours, careers fairs/talks, workplace visits, college finance workshops, college admissions clinics, talk by an expert, talk by a college student, other).	Independent (RQ2)

Students were asked about whether they participated in a mentoring programme and if so, what type of mentor they had. They were also asked to select all the pathways activities they participated in during their last school year (if any). Not all students in the school participated in every programme. Some volunteered and some were chosen by teachers or school management as they were identified as children who may benefit or were at risk of disengagement. All students were enrolled in a linked school, so the culture of the school might have been oriented a certain way. To identify students who had been exposed to prolonged and consistent interactions, a new variable was created that differentiated between students who had performed three or more pathways activities and those who had performed less than three activities in the last school year.

In order to provide some contextual data, students were asked to provide information related to ethnicity, parental support, and parents' education level. Given that personal questions of this kind could be perceived as sensitive and could thus potentially skew subsequent responses negatively for students who may feel 'less' than others (Hoff and Pandey 2004), they were positioned at the end of the survey. This allowed the students to complete the substantive part of the survey, therefore giving them time to understand its objectives and gain trust in the research overall. Although attainment data were not available for this study, the inclusion of factors like gender, ethnicity, parental education, school type, and year group helps to account for a significant amount of variability.

For time point 2, a post-school progression data collection tool was developed in order for the guidance, careers, and transitions teams within linked secondary schools to work with students to collect post-school progression information in a standardised way. Details of this tool are described by Tangney et al. (2021). These data were then categorised into dichotomous variations of 'continued education' or 'did not continue education'.

2.3. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics of student's post-school plans prior to sitting their final-year state examinations are included, as well as their actual post-school progression status six months later. The aim of the intervention discussed in this paper is to widen participation to further and higher education, so the main section of the analysis looks to investigate whether the mentoring and pathways activities had an impact on students' progression to post-school education. Chi-square analyses (2×2) were conducted between those who participated (or not) in a mentoring programme or pathways activities in their final year of secondary school and those who continued to post-secondary education (or not).

Finally, a binomial logistic regression was performed to ascertain the effects of gender, ethnicity, parents' education level, parental involvement, school type (gender and DEIS

status), and engagement in pathways and mentoring activities on the likelihood that students will continue to post-secondary education. The chi-square test and the logistic regression both used post-school progression as the dependent variable.

3. Results

3.1. Post-School Plans vs. Post-School Progression

The tables below show descriptive statistics of students' post-school plans two months before they completed their Leaving Certificate examinations (Table 2) and their actual post-school progression at least six months after they completed upper secondary school (Table 3). At Time 1, 64% of students reported planning to continue to higher education. At time 2, 41% of students had accepted a higher education place, and 2.2% had accepted an offer onto a higher education foundation course with a further 1.3% deferring a higher education space. At Time 1, 17.6% of students reported planning on completing a Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) course. An increased number of students subsequently enrolled in a PLC course after they finished school (24.2%). At Time 1, nearly 11% (24 students) expressed a plan to undertake an apprenticeship once they completed school. At Time 2, 27 students (12%) had started an apprenticeship course. Of the 227 students who gave data at both time points, 142 had followed through on their plans and 85 students were doing something different to what they had originally planned, six months later.

Table 2. Overall students' post-school plans (Time 1—April 2022).

Post-School Plans (April 2022)	Frequency	Percent
Higher Education	145	63.9
Post Leaving Certificate (PLC)	40	17.6
Apprenticeship	24	10.6
Work	10	4.4
Work/Travel/College	1	0.4
Military	2	0.9
I Do Not Plan on Completing Secondary School	1	0.4
I Do Not Know	4	1.8
Total	227	100.0

Table 3. Overall students' post-secondary progression (Time 2—December 2022).

Progression Status (December 2022)	Frequency	Percent
Accepted Higher Education Place	93	41.0
Deferred Higher Education Place	3	1.3
Foundation Course for Higher Education	5	2.2
Apprenticeship	27	11.9
Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) Course/Further Education and Training (FET)	55	24.2
Repeating Leaving Certificate	1	0.4
Studying Abroad	2	0.9
Not working or studying	1	0.4
Working	38	16.7
Other	1	0.4
Total	227	100.0

There were 85 students who did not follow their plans six months later. Nine students who had originally planned to do an apprenticeship subsequently enrolled on a PLC course (three students) or were working (six students). Those who were not sure of their plans at Time point 1 all subsequently went into employment. Of the 13 students who originally planned to do a PLC course, four of them subsequently entered higher education, one did an apprenticeship, another started an employment course, and seven went straight into employment. There were 56 students who had originally planned to go onto university, but this did not actualise 6 months later. Instead, 23 of them went on to do a PLC course, 10 started an apprenticeship, and 11 went straight into employment. Others either deferred their higher education place, enrolled on an access or foundation course for higher education, or decided to repeat their Leaving Certificate.

3.2. *Impact of WP Interventions on Post-School Progression*

The widening participation programme discussed in this paper aims to increase the number of students who continue their education after they complete school. The next section looks to investigate the influence that engaging in WP programmes (mentoring and pathways activities) has on students' post-secondary education. Of the 227 students who participated in data collection at both time points, 185 progressed to some form of post-secondary education and 42 did not.

3.2.1. Pathways Engagement and Post-Secondary Education

A 2×2 chi-square test for association was conducted between those who participated (or not) in pathways activities in their final year of secondary school and those who continued to post-secondary education (or not). All expected cell frequencies were greater than five. There was a statistically significant association between pathways engagement and post-secondary education, $\chi^2(1) = 18.915$, $p < 0.001$. The chi-square test revealed that there was a positive relationship between pathways engagement and post-secondary education, $\phi = 0.289$, $p < 0.001$.

3.2.2. Mentoring Engagement and Post-Secondary Education

A 2×2 Chi-square test for association was conducted between those who participated (or not) in a mentoring programme in their final year of secondary school and those who continued to post-secondary education (or not). All expected cell frequencies were greater than five. There was no statistically significant association between mentoring engagement and post-secondary education, $\chi^2(1) = 0.165$, $p < 0.685$.

3.2.3. Binomial Logistic Regression

A binomial logistic regression was performed to ascertain the effects of gender, ethnicity, parents' education level, parents' educational involvement, school type (gender and DEIS status), and engagement in pathways and mentoring activities on the binary dependent variable (continued to post-secondary education/did not continue to post-secondary education).

The linearity of the continuous variables with respect to the logit of the dependent variable was assessed via the [Box and Tidwell \(1962\)](#) procedure. A Bonferroni correction was applied, resulting in statistical significance being accepted when $p < 0.05$ ([Tabachnick and Fidell 2014](#)). Based on this assessment, all continuous independent variables were found to be linearly related to the logit of the dependent variable. The logistic regression model was statistically significant, $\chi^2(9) = 32.262$, $p < 0.001$. The model explained 21.7% (Nagelkerke R²) of the variance in students' progression to post-secondary education and correctly classified 80.7% of cases. Sensitivity was 97.2%, specificity was 9.5%, positive predictive value was 82.2%, and negative predictive value was 44.4%.

Of the eight predictor variables, only two were statistically significant, parental involvement ($p = 0.029$) and pathways engagement ($p < 0.001$) (as shown in Table 4). Those who engaged in three or more pathways activities were associated with 4.95 times greater odds to continue to post-secondary education. Increasing parents' educational support was associated with an increased likelihood of continuing to post-secondary education.

Table 4. Binomial logistic regression results.

Independent Variables	B	S.E.	Wald	df	Sig.	Odds Ratio	95% C.I. for EXP(B)	
							Lower	Upper
Gender is female	−0.382	0.404	0.894	1	0.344	0.683	0.309	1.506
Ethnicity (is of White Irish ethnicity)	−0.170	0.443	0.147	1	0.701	0.844	0.354	2.011
Mother attended university	0.012	0.478	0.001	1	0.979	1.013	0.397	2.584
Father attended university	0.799	0.607	1.734	1	0.188	2.224	0.677	7.306
Parental involvement	0.413	0.200	4.282	1	0.039	1.511	1.022	2.234
Attended DEIS school	−0.652	0.613	1.131	1	0.288	0.521	0.156	1.733
Attended mixed gender school	−0.601	0.535	1.262	1	0.261	0.548	0.192	1.564
Pathways Engagement	1.601	0.439	13.303	1	0.000	4.956	2.097	11.712
Mentoring Engagement	0.081	0.401	0.041	1	0.839	1.085	0.494	2.380
Constant	0.838	0.979	0.734	1	0.392	2.312		

Ethnicity: White Irish is coded as 1; other ethnic minorities are coded as 0.

4. Discussion

Given the increased policy emphasis on addressing educational inequality in the transition from post-primary to further and higher education around the world (OECD 2023), it the lack of research examining the extent to which WP programmes impact student plans and progression to education when they leave school is surprising. Longitudinal findings from 227 Irish secondary school students in this paper offer unique insights into whether secondary school students' plans (when they are in their final year of school) are achieved six months later. Overall, 142 (63%) of respondents achieved the post-school plans that they had set out six months earlier, with 37% of students ($N = 85$) engaging in different plans than they had originally set out. The majority of students (64%) planned on attending higher education once they finished school; however, just 41% had accepted a higher education place six months later. In contrast, while 18% of students planned on doing a Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) further education course, 24% of respondents were enrolled in these courses 6 months later. There are many possible reasons as to why these students' plans might not have been realised. These include very concrete blocks, such as not achieving adequate grades (Greene and Forster 2003), the cost of continuing education, the perceived probability of success, and the perceived returns of each educational outcome (as demonstrated in Breen and Goldthorpe 1997). Of those who had planned to go to university but did not, 23 of those students instead ended up doing a PLC course 6 months later. McGuinness et al. (2018) discuss how PLC options can often be a good pathway into HE, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Embarking on a PLC course is often a less risky option for those who may be unsure about the study field, as

it is a substantially cheaper and shorter time commitment compared to enrolling on a higher education course. These reasons could also explain why five students (2.3%) chose to enrol on a foundation course for higher education or why three (1.3%) students deferred the course they were offered when they had originally planned on going to university. These findings are in contrast to those emerging from the Growing up in Ireland data, which reflect the general Irish population, and show that specifically among those whose anticipated a higher education route at age 13, approximately 80% proceeded accordingly upon leaving school (O'Mahony et al. 2022). These patterns show that, for many young people, expectations emerged early and were linked to actual behaviour. However, for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, this is not seen to the same extent.

Interestingly, the overall percentage of young people who had planned on doing an apprenticeship (11%) stayed relatively stable, with the numbers enrolled in an apprenticeship increasing by just one percentage point six months later. However, when we look at the matched plans and progression (Table 3), we can see that nearly half the people who planned on doing an apprenticeship instead went into either a PLC or work and that ten students who planned on going to university ended up doing an apprenticeship.

A marked difference was seen between those who had planned to go straight into employment compared to the amount that did so six months later. At Time 1, just 4.4% of students had planned on going directly into employment; however, nearly 17% were working six months after completing secondary school. When we look at matched findings, all those who planned to work did end up working six months later. In addition to this, some students who had originally planned to go to university (N = 11), complete a PLC course (N = 7), or did not know what their plans were (N = 4) were working six months later. These findings align with international research, which indicates that while many students from marginalised backgrounds hold high aspirations and wish to pursue further education, they are less likely to attend university and more likely to pursue managerial or skilled jobs instead (Kintrea et al. 2015; Goodman et al. 2010). This could be linked to attainment (Baker et al. 2014) or a gap between aspirations (what we hope for) and expectations (what we believe will happen) (Harrison and Waller 2018). Khattab (2015) estimates that 25% of young people have high aspirations but low expectations, with such mismatches most common among lower socioeconomic groups (Boxer et al. 2011).

This paper also investigated the influence of engaging in the TAP schools' outreach widening participation programme on students' post-school progression. The results highlight that when controlling for the variables of gender, ethnicity, year group, parental support, parents' level of education, and school status, participating in three or more pathways activities was associated with higher progression to post-school education. Those who engaged in three or more pathways activities were associated with 4.95-times greater odds to continue to post-secondary education.

Increasing parents' educational support was associated with an increased likelihood of continuing to post-secondary education than those who participated in little or no pathways activities. This suggests encouraging evidence for the need for sustained in-school models of pathways/IAG/guidance activities and is in line with previous international research (Campbell and McKendrick 2017). Furthermore, when controlling for all other variables, parental involvement (not their level of education) and pathways activities were significant contributors to students continuing their education after they finish school. These results indicate that the impact of such interventions could be increased further through partnership with students' parents.

Despite there being a positive correlation between mentoring and post-school progression, there was no significant association between the two. Similarly, an analysis of data from HEAT (Higher Education Access Tracker) in England found the association between

mentoring and participation and outcomes to be inconclusive (TASO 2021). This is in contrast with previous research around the benefits of mentoring for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds (Torgerson et al. 2014; Robinson and Salvestrini 2020). Research by Ní Chorcóra and colleagues found that students who had engaged in the same mentoring programmes discussed in this paper (TAP Schools' outreach programme) were significantly more likely to have higher future goals and aspirations than those who had not engaged in mentoring programmes (Ní Chorcóra et al. 2023). This suggests that there is an association between mentoring and increasing future goals and aspirations; however, it might not support students in actually progressing to HE. Other reasons could include the difficulty disentangling the types and quality of mentors that each student had (Reilly 2024). Previously, Ní Chorcóra et al. (2023) also found that engaging in pathways activities was significantly associated with higher future goals and aspirations scores. Similarly, pathways activities were associated with supporting students' progression to further or higher education after secondary school and highlight the importance of information and guidance activities for students from educationally disadvantaged areas. The results are encouraging and pave the way for a more robust evaluation.

5. Implications for Researchers, Policy Makers, and Practitioners

Widening participation is a very complex space, and the context of every individual within this space has diverse influences acting upon it. It is important to try to consider how these contextual elements interact on the variables under examination before attempting to explore the influence of an external programme. The quasi-experimental design utilised in this study allows us to compare students within schools and environments according to who has (or has not) participated in the WP initiatives. By utilising a moderately sized dataset, this paper controls for many variables within the individuals' environment in order to answer the research question while accounting for as many other factors as possible within both groups. Future research should incorporate student attainment data, given the documented associations between academic performance and progression in the literature. Although this study did not have access to attainment data, the inclusion of other variables such as gender, ethnicity, parental education, school type, and year group allowed for a substantial amount of variability to be addressed. As a result, this paper remains both novel and valuable in its contributions. Future research should also focus on disentangling why mentoring may be beneficial in increasing future goals and aspirations but not actual progression to post-secondary education. Researchers could also look to follow up with students annually after they complete secondary school to see whether those who initially engaged in further education continued onto a higher education degree. The availability of data of this kind is a challenge for researchers in measuring the effectiveness of post-primary widening participation programmes. In this paper, the collection of progression data was conducted by the partnering school and the data were analysed for the school by the university. This model was useful but resource-intensive as schools had to contact individual students themselves and information was self-reported by the students. Despite its limitations, this model is currently the only possible method of collecting this information in Ireland. As highlighted by Bernstein-Sierra and Corwin (2018), this challenge in accessing enrolment information can make it difficult for evaluative studies to prove their impact. Sharing of these types of data between schools and universities would not only allow schools to make evidence-based decisions on what is needed for their students but would also allow for widening participation programmes to tailor their activities to ensure maximum impact. It must be acknowledged that, despite the significance of the model and its high positive predictive value (82.2%), the negative predictive value was relatively low at 44.4%. While the model demonstrates effectiveness in predicting cases where students continue their

education—successfully identifying 82.2% of such cases—it is less effective in predicting cases where students do not progress, correctly identifying only 44% of these instances. This limitation suggests that the model may be missing important factors that influence why some students do not continue to post-secondary education. These unmeasured variables could include personal, familial, or systemic barriers that were not captured by the current set of predictors, indicating an area for further research.

Many policies around the globe are placing more focus on and funding towards WP programmes (HEA 2022; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2022); however, a huge emphasis also needs to be placed on researching the effectiveness of these programmes and why certain programmes are more effective than others. Policies should focus on enabling cross-collaboration across different sectors within the education system to allow for centralised data sharing. This paper highlights to policy makers the need to create policies that encourage collaboration across secondary and tertiary sectors within the education system to facilitate sharing of data. This has been achieved relatively successfully in England (TASO 2021) and Scandinavian countries (Jensen and Rasmussen 2011; Haley 2020). Only when these data-sharing barriers are removed will we start to see the true impact of these programmes over time.

This paper highlights that greater engagement with pathways activities was associated with 4.91-greater odds of post-secondary education once other contextual factors were controlled for. WP practitioners, schools, and teachers should develop, organise, and provide opportunities for students to engage in pathways activities in their final year. The literature highlights that many students from lower socio-economic backgrounds may not be given as many opportunities to explore their post-school pathways, and so this paper highlights the importance of school–university partnerships for widening participation. The findings also highlight the importance of parental involvement in students’ post-school progression, and so widening participation programmes that also focus on partnerships with parents may be particularly beneficial and could deliver even greater benefits for students.

Policy makers should focus on providing funding to schools which ensures that students experiencing educational disadvantages are given opportunities to explore their post-school options through pathways activities. This paper highlights how school–university partnerships are a good model for widening participation; however, it is important to emphasise that school–university pathways activities should happen in addition to the guidance counselling students receive in schools and should not be a retrofitting exercise to fill a gap in an overstretched and under-resourced system. Given the limited longitudinal quantitative studies that evaluate widening participation programmes for young adults (Ní Chorcóra et al. 2023), it is crucial that research be funded to investigate their impact on students’ post-school progression. This paper underscores the significance of a specific school–university partnership in broadening access for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, and it illustrates the positive impact that pathways activities can have in supporting students’ progression beyond secondary school. In this context, there remains a pressing need to enhance the awareness and understanding of educational pathways, ensuring that students are informed about the diverse entry points into further and higher education, as well as the steps required to secure financial and other forms of support.

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