‘There are thousands of options out there’:
Exploring the Effectiveness of a Widening Participation Outreach Programme on Second-level Students’ Educational Outcomes

A Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements

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Thesis Including Published Works Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work. I agree to deposit this thesis in the University's open access institutional repository or allow the Library to do so on my behalf, subject to Irish Copyright Legislation and Trinity College Library conditions of use and acknowledgement

This thesis includes three original papers published in peer reviewed journals. The core theme of the thesis relates to the work Trinity Access Programmes' (TAP) School-University widening participation outreach programmes with secondary school students. The ideas, development and writing up of all the papers in the thesis were the principal responsibility of myself, the student, working within the School of Education under the supervision of Professor Joanne Banks and Dr Aibhín Bray. The inclusion of co-authors reflects the fact that the work came from active collaboration between researchers and acknowledges input into team-based research. In the case of Chapters 4, 5, and 6, my contribution to the work involved the following:

Table 1: Study I - Contribution of Research Supervisors Work on Publications which make up Chapter 4 – 6 of this Thesis.

Thesis Chapter	Publication Title	Status	Student Contributions	Co-author Contributions
4	A systematic review of widening participation: Exploring the effectiveness of outreach programmes for students in second-level schools.	Published	Development of research concept & methodology, designed search strategy & inclusion criteria, screened articles, wrote draft manuscript & subsequent revisions data collection, data analysis, wrote first draft, revised and refined subsequent peer review revisions.	**Aibhín Bray** Assisted with the study design, double screening articles & reviewed manuscript **Joanne Banks** Assisted with the study design, double screening articles & reviewed manuscript

5	Measuring Success: A School-University Partnership Model for Widening Participation in Higher Education.	Published	Conceptualised research study & design, conducted data cleaning, performed statistical analysis, wrote first draft manuscript & subsequent peer review revisions.	**Aibhín Bray** Assisted with the study design, data analysis & reviewed manuscript **Joanne Banks** Assisted with the study design & reviewed manuscript)
6	Plans, Progression and Post-Compulsory Education: Measuring the Success of a School-University Widening Participation Programme in Ireland.	Published	Conceptualised research study & conducted data cleaning, performed statistical analysis, wrote first draft manuscript & subsequent peer review revisions.	**Joanne Banks** Assisted with the study design & reviewed manuscript **Aibhín Bray** Assisted with the study design & reviewed manuscript

I hereby certify that the above declaration correctly reflects the nature and extent of the student's and co-authors' contributions to this work.

I have added chapter introductions and chapter reflections to the start and end of chapters 4, 5 and 6 in order to highlight the consistent thread between published papers. The journal articles themselves are pasted directly as they are within the chapters.

Student Name: Eilís Ní Chorcora

Student Signature: 

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Summary

This thesis explores the long-term impact of widening participation (WP) outreach on educational aspirations and post-school progression among students from marginalised backgrounds in Ireland. The research is grounded in national concerns about inequality in access to higher education, particularly for students attending schools designated as disadvantaged (DEIS) under the National Access Plan 2022 to 2025 (HEA, 2022). Despite ongoing policy efforts, there is limited empirical research on how WP interventions influence students' pathways over time. This study addresses that gap through an integrated, longitudinal research design that draws on both quantitative and qualitative data from students in Trinity Access Programme (TAP) partner secondary schools.

The research is structured in three phases. Phase 1 comprises a systematic review of international literature, identifying the types of WP interventions studied and their impact on student aspirations and progression. Phase 2 uses secondary data from the TAP Longitudinal Study to examine the influence of outreach on students' goals, aspirations, and educational outcomes, while also exploring the role of contextual factors such as gender, ethnicity, and school type. Phase 3 involves primary qualitative interviews with former students from TAP partner schools, providing retrospective insights into how engagement in WP activities shaped their post-school trajectories.

Findings show that sustained engagement with TAP outreach, particularly through multi-touchpoint pathways activities, was associated with increased future goals and aspirations and a higher likelihood of post-school progression. However, structural and contextual barriers continued to influence outcomes, suggesting that WP interventions alone cannot fully counteract systemic disadvantage. The thesis adopts a blended theoretical framework, drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of capital and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, to explore how social, relational, and structural factors interact over time.

The study makes an original contribution by offering a multi-dimensional, contextually grounded understanding of WP effectiveness in the Irish context, with implications for policy, practice, and future research both nationally and internationally.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Origins of this Study

The global education agenda has increasingly focused on inclusion and equality, as emphasised in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals, Goal 4 is dedicated to ensuring inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education for all, promoting lifelong learning. Within this, Target 4.5 aims to tackle disparities in access and outcomes, ensuring learners from all backgrounds can benefit equally from educational opportunities.

Across Europe, the early 2000s saw a marked policy shift towards improving access, participation, and fairness in higher education. Central to this movement were the efforts of the European Commission and the Bologna Process, which began in 1999 and sought to harmonise and enhance the competitiveness of the European Higher Education Area. Over time, educational inequality has been recognised as a deeply complex issue. The Bologna Follow-up Group, along with its advisory panels, has played a significant role in advancing the social dimension of higher education, advocating for more inclusive systems across the continent. Acknowledgement of the layered and systemic nature of inequality has become more widespread in policy debates (Piketty, 2021).

In 2022, equity and inclusion were firmly established as priorities by the European Commission in its Strategy for Universities. Shortly after, the Eurydice report titled *Towards Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education in Europe* was released. This report underscored that many current education systems and policies still marginalise vulnerable groups, who remain underrepresented in higher education across the EU. In response, ten guiding Principles were adopted by the European Higher Education Area to support member states in enhancing the social dimension of their higher education systems. These Principles also serve as benchmarks for assessing how well national policies address equity and inclusion.

The Eurydice report presents a point-based evaluation for each EU country, based on ten indicators derived from these Principles. Ireland was ranked 24th out of 38 countries, earning 15 out of a possible 40 points. This indicates that Ireland has implemented just under 38% of the policies required to meet EU commitments, revealing that while some progress has been

made, significant gaps remain in tackling higher education inequality (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2022).

Persistent structural and systemic inequities within Ireland's higher education landscape continue to underscore the need for targeted widening participation programmes. Such initiatives play a vital role in mitigating barriers faced by underrepresented groups; however, they cannot, on their own, address the deeper policy and institutional shortcomings embedded within the system. Ireland's relatively low ranking (24th out of 38) in the Eurydice evaluation can be attributed to several factors that highlight both policy and implementation gaps. While Ireland has taken steps to promote equity and inclusion in higher education, its national strategies tend to include general commitments rather than specific, measurable targets. In contrast, higher-ranking countries such as Finland, Norway, and Austria have embedded both qualitative and quantitative objectives within their equity frameworks, allowing for clearer accountability and progress tracking. Moreover, although Ireland provides funding for community engagement activities within higher education institutions, these initiatives are not integrated into external quality assurance evaluations, limiting their systemic impact. Ireland scored only one out of four possible points on the indicator assessing public authority support for community engagement, reflecting this shortcoming. Another key weakness is the absence of a structured policy dialogue between public authorities, higher education institutions, and stakeholders to oversee the implementation of the Principles and Guidelines. This stands in contrast to countries that have established formal mechanisms for such dialogue, which facilitate coordination, monitoring, and sustained progress on equity and inclusion goals. Collectively, these factors explain Ireland's mid-to-lower ranking and indicate that while commitment exists, the lack of measurable objectives, evaluative integration, and policy dialogue continues to constrain its advancement in achieving a more equitable higher education system. Addressing these systemic issues will therefore require reform beyond the scope of WP initiatives, ensuring that inclusion is not an add-on but an embedded principle guiding the structure and governance of higher education in Ireland (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2022).Despite decades of national and international efforts to reduce educational disadvantage, students from marginalised socio-economic backgrounds remain significantly underrepresented in higher education (Burney & Beilke, 2008; HEA, 2022; Piketty, 2021).

Although widening participation (WP) has become a central focus of access policies across tertiary education sectors (Guerin, 2014; Fleming, Loxley and Finnegan, 2017), the persistent structural and social barriers that hinder equitable progression demand continued research attention, particularly within the school-university outreach space. Barriers to educational progression frequently originate from earlier negative schooling experiences that have left both students and their parents feeling marginalised. These experiences are often linked to lower academic performance, limited parental involvement, strained relationships with teachers, increased early school leaving, and unfavourable views of higher education (Chowdry et al., 2013; Smyth et al., 2014; Keane, 2016; McCoy et al., 2014). In addition, young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds often face financial constraints, a lack of accessible information, and insufficient guidance, all of which further hinder their ability to progress in education (Hoxby and Turner, 2013; Smyth and Banks, 2012a; McCoy et al., 2014). In response, outreach programmes at second-level education have been developed to support students from low-income families in overcoming these challenges and to encourage their transition into further and higher education.

In recent years, a number of significant systematic reviews have explored the area of widening participation. Contreras (2011), for instance, reviewed forty different interventions and found that those incorporating multiple elements tended to have a more positive impact on students' educational outcomes. This, she suggests, is due to students engaging with the intervention across various formats over time. She argues that programmes aimed at underrepresented groups should include a combination of supports such as financial aid workshops, extracurricular activities, and mentorship opportunities. In a more recent review, Renbarger and Long (2019) examined widening participation interventions specifically for low-income students, though their inclusion criteria were limited to those identified as academically gifted. Their findings indicated that initiatives such as summer programmes, advanced coursework, financial aid, college-related information sessions, and year-round support structures can be effective in enabling low-income gifted students to access higher education.

Similarly, See et al. (2012) reviewed a range of strategies designed to improve college access and identified several approaches of particular benefit. These included financial incentives, personalised and academic mentoring, and more complex ‘black box’ interventions that

combine multiple components. Building on this work, Younger et al. (2019) highlighted the need for more rigorous experimental methods to evaluate the impact of widening participation programmes. They also called for further research to be conducted beyond the United States, in order to broaden the evidence base. It is notable that none of the interventions targeting second-level students in the most recent reviews included studies from Ireland (See et al., 2012; Younger et al., 2019). While WP strategies at the post-secondary level have been widely explored, there is a notable gap in the evidence base in Europe and in Ireland, particularly regarding interventions delivered at second level, especially in terms of their long-term impact on students' aspirations, readiness, and progression outcomes (Younger et al., 2019; Baines et al., 2024).

At the national level in Ireland, reducing social inequality in higher education has become a major strategic focus. The National Access Plan (HEA, 2022) prioritises students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly those attending DEIS schools. Ireland has been working on equity of access since 2005, when its first National Access Plan was introduced. The *National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030* stresses the need for diverse and flexible entry routes into higher education (HEA, 2011). Although there have been improvements in participation among marginalised groups, substantial disparities persist. Only 10% of higher education students currently come from disadvantaged areas (HEA, 2022).

The most recent National Access Plan identifies socio-economically disadvantaged students, as well as those from the Irish Traveller and Roma communities, as the most underrepresented groups. It outlines performance targets focused on increasing participation and supporting students from DEIS schools through their educational journey. The Plan promotes a lifelong, system-wide approach, starting in early childhood and continuing through all stages of education. It highlights the importance of early intervention, fostering a sense of belonging, and creating clear pathways to help young people realise their potential. A key ambition is to increase the transition rate from school to higher education among disadvantaged students from 42% to 54%. As shown in the latest National Access Plan, the Irish government have utilised the levers it most readily controls - targets and funding. However, little guidance has been given on how best to use this funding to make change, particularly for increasing access and participation of students from DEIS schools and what are the best ways to support students at pre-entry stage.

The Focus of this Study

This thesis addresses that gap by examining the role of sustained, school-university WP partnerships, such as the Trinity Access Programmes (TAP) in Ireland, in influencing the educational pathways of marginalised students over time. Trinity Access Programmes (TAP) is a suite of widening participation programmes that aim to support students from lower-socioeconomic and marginalised backgrounds. TAP's mission is to "work in partnership across the education sector with students, teachers, families, communities and businesses to widen access and participation at third level for under-represented groups". This is done through a range of pre-entry (primary and secondary outreach), entry (alternative access routes to higher education) and post-entry supports (supporting students to successfully graduate). This thesis explores the widening participation sector internationally as well as within the Irish context with a particular focus on investigating the impact (if any) of TAP's (pre-entry) secondary school outreach interventions on second-level students' educational outcomes.

Overview of the TAP Secondary Schools Outreach Project

The Trinity Access Programmes Secondary Schools Outreach Project is a project run by Trinity Access Programmes (TAP), in Trinity College Dublin (TCD). It is this outreach project that forms the basis of this study. The TAP outreach project aims to help schools to create a college going culture within their school by supporting students and teachers through outreach programmes and professional development. The project consists of three core practices, which schools aim to embed into their school culture. These are Pathways to College, Mentoring and Leadership in Learning (See Figure 1). This thesis focuses on the first two core practices: Mentoring and Pathways to College.

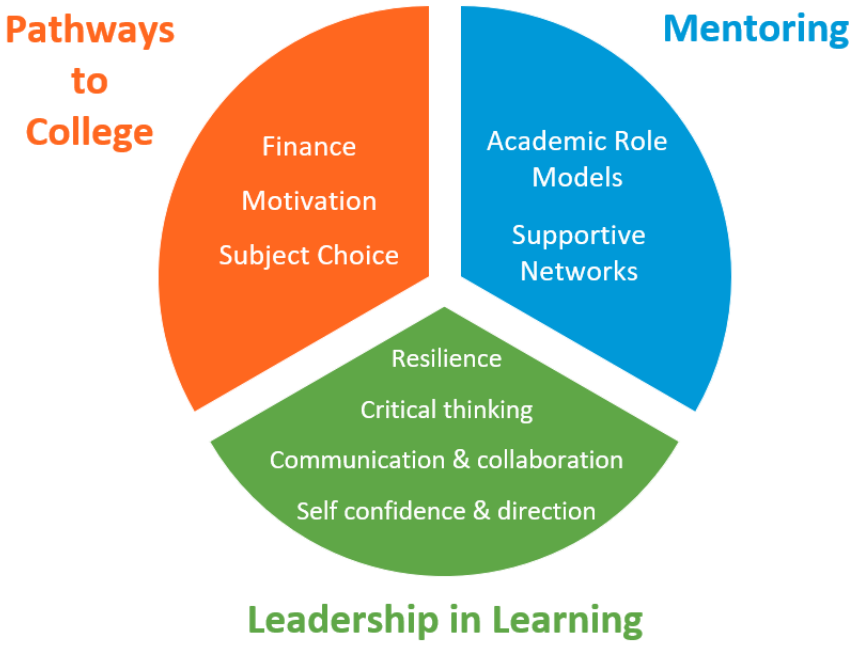

Figure 1: The Three Core Practices Associated with the TAP Secondary Outreach Intervention.

Pathways to College

Pathways activities form part of an outreach initiative designed to support students in exploring post-secondary options by providing them with information, advice, and guidance (IAG). Research indicates that IAG-based activities can be particularly effective within widening participation programmes (Hannon, Faas, & O'Sullivan, 2017; TASO, 2020). Sustained interventions, in particular, are perceived by participants as impactful because they increase understanding of university life (Campbell & McKendrick, 2017). Similarly, Robinson and Salvestrini (2020) found that early, tailored IAG interventions beginning in the lower years of secondary school are especially effective in shaping students' aspirations.

Pathways activities encompass a variety of initiatives, including projects related to course and college choices, mock applications, subject-specific taster programmes, campus visits, career fairs, professional talks, and workplace experiences. Within the Trinity Access Programme (TAP) schools outreach framework, students from first to sixth year have the opportunity to participate in activities designed to encourage college participation. These initiatives aim to foster an inclusive approach to higher education, ensuring that students

from diverse backgrounds are supported and motivated to consider college as a realistic and achievable option.

Mentoring

The Mentoring core practice involves a range of programmes designed to foster both academic and personal growth among 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 and offer guidance through key transitions in knowledge, skills, and personal development (Hamilton & Hamilton, 1992). The widening participation literature highlights the positive impact of mentoring, demonstrating that it can raise aspirations, challenge negative perceptions of higher education, and increase students' confidence in both the application process and their potential for success at university (Reilly, 2024; Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020; Torgerson et al., 2014; O'Sullivan, Mulligan, Smith and Hannon, 2017).

Within the Trinity Access Programmes (TAP), mentors include teachers, past pupils, university students, and older pupils supporting younger students. The programmes are structured to encourage sustained, long-term engagement, with students participating as both mentees and, over time, as mentors themselves. This approach fosters not only academic and career-related support but also the development of confidence, self-esteem, and a sense of belonging. By combining structured guidance with relational and role-model support, TAP mentoring operationalises the key benefits identified in the literature, helping students from underrepresented backgrounds navigate barriers to higher education access and achievement.

Leadership in Learning

The third core practice focuses on students and teachers. It aims to support the development of students' leadership skills and also focuses on 21st century teaching and learning, and on enabling teachers to embrace related pedagogical approaches through professional development. This thesis focuses on the first two core practices: Mentoring and Pathways to College.

These core practices are influenced by the US-based, College for Every Student (CFES), Brilliant Pathways programme (CFES, 2025). TAP secondary outreach programmes engage directly with secondary school students from 2nd year through to 6th year (ages ~ 13-18) as well as indirectly with students through their schools and teachers. These programmes take place either on the Trinity College campus, in school or in the local community. Programmes vary in length of engagement from a few hours over the course of a day or week to 100+ hours over the course of several months. TAP offers a range of activities aimed at increasing students' familiarity with higher education. Initiatives like campus visits and informational talks connect students with university ambassadors, giving them a chance to learn about college life and alternative pathways to entry. More intensive, week-long programmes allow students to explore specific academic areas, such as STEM, while long-term initiatives like *Pathways to Law* support sustained engagement from secondary school through to degree completion, with a focus on progression into particular professions. Alongside these opportunities for students to explore higher education options, TAP also enhances academic achievement at second level by providing subject-specific supports, including revision sessions and grinds/ tutoring in core subjects like mathematics at both upper and lower secondary school. Collectively, these efforts result in approximately 10,000 student engagement opportunities each year. A detailed overview of the outreach interventions and research project can be found in Bray, Hannon, and Tangney (2022) and Tangney and colleagues (2021). In their 2021 report, the numbers for direct student engagement in the 20/21 academic year are shown and have been reproduced in Table 1.

Table 2: Summary of direct student engagement 2020/21

Programme Type	*Duration*	*Engagement Hours*	*Participants*
Campus visits, talks and Educational Awards	*1 day*	*1 to 5*	*6815*
Junior Cert & Leaving Cert Tuition	*1 to 3 months*	*8 to 10*	*1402*
Exploratory weeks and Summer Schools	*1 to 2 weeks*	*20 to 50*	*673*
Pathways Programmes	*6 to 18 months*	*20 to 110*	*373*

Trinity Access Programmes are partnered with 21 secondary schools located across the greater Dublin area in Ireland. These schools are referred to as linked schools, and they participate in TAP's secondary school outreach initiatives. The majority of these schools (18 out of 21) have been designated as DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) by the Department of Education. DEIS status is assigned to schools in areas with high levels of social and economic disadvantage and low progression rates to higher education. Schools with this designation receive additional government funding and supports aimed at promoting educational equity and social inclusion. The remaining three TAP-linked schools, while not officially designated as DEIS, continue to experience persistent low progression rates to higher education and are therefore also included in TAP's outreach work.

TAP began implementing its secondary school outreach programmes in 2014 with the goal of widening participation and promoting educational equity among underrepresented groups. In 2018, the TAP Longitudinal Study was established as part of this outreach strategy. Ethical approval for the study was gained in 2018 and the first data collection cycle began in 2019. This study was designed to systematically track students' educational and psychological development over time and was initiated prior to the involvement of the author of this thesis.

The TAP Longitudinal Study uses a set of pre-validated survey instruments, developed by the original project team, to assess various aspects of students' educational engagement, aspirations, self-concept, and broader developmental outcomes throughout their secondary school years. A detailed account of the questionnaire design and methodology is provided in Tangney et al. (2021).

The rationale for this study is rooted in both national and international concerns about inequality in access to higher education. Increasing levels of social and economic inequality present a significant challenge for universities seeking to diversify their student populations. In Ireland, the National Access Plan 2022–2025 (HEA, 2022) outlines a commitment to supporting access and participation among students from underserved backgrounds (see Figure 2), including those attending DEIS schools.

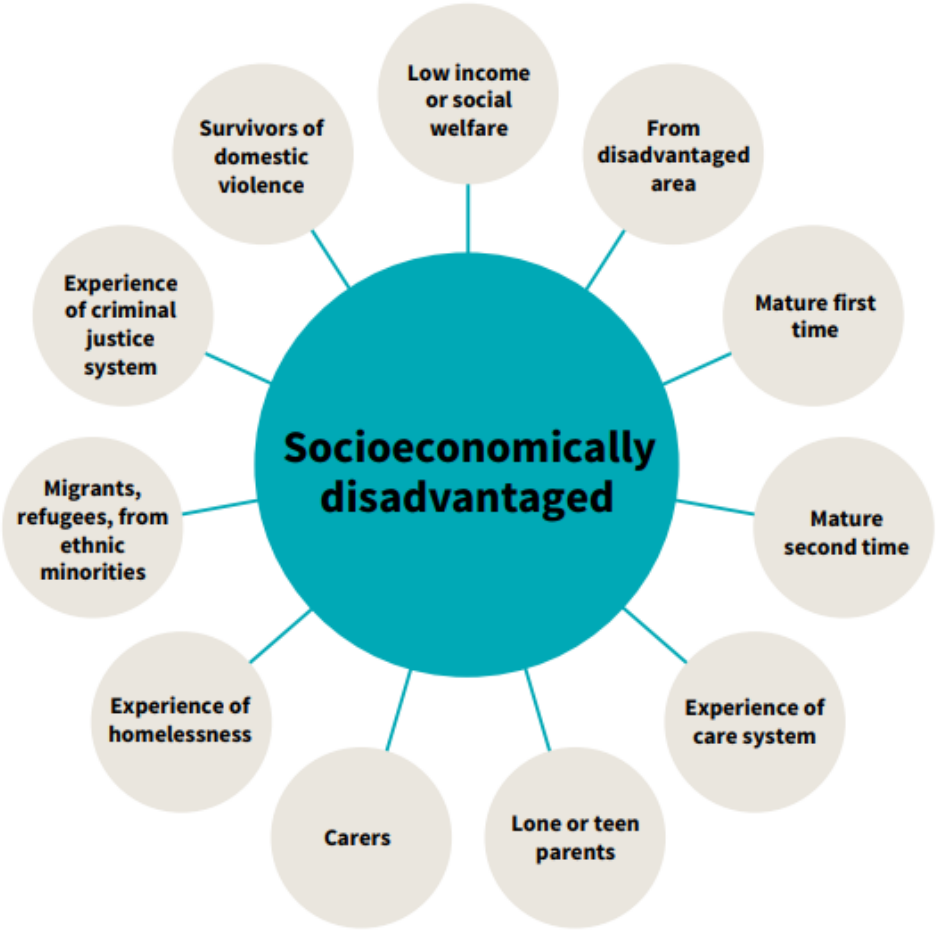

Figure 2: Life experiences that can cause socio economic disadvantage (HEA, 2022).

There is an increasing policy emphasis on how education systems can support students from these groups to progress to Higher Education. In Ireland, the National Access Plan 2022-2025 identifies students attending schools designated as disadvantaged (DEIS) as a priority group for access and participation. However, research on the effectiveness of interventions that increase secondary students' aspirations and progression to higher education is limited.

This research aims to address that gap by analysing data from the TAP Longitudinal Study. It explores how students in TAP-linked schools, particularly those in DEIS contexts, experience outreach interventions and how these experiences may shape their educational journeys. A detailed overview of the study participants and the sampling strategy used in each phase of the research is presented in the methodology chapter.

Study Aim and Research Questions

The aim of the research presented in this thesis is to measure the impact (if any) that the TAP outreach project has made on the educational attitudes and outcomes of students in TAP linked schools. The overarching research question of the study asks: ***To what extent do school-university widening participation outreach programmes influence the educational aspirations, and post-school progression of marginalised secondary school students, and how are these outcomes shaped by intervention type and contextual factors?***

Within the umbrella of the overarching research question there are three Phases of investigation, all of which have their own sub research questions, as outlined below.

Phase 1

The first phase of this thesis explores the evidence base for university access strategies by examining the impact of widening participation outreach interventions on college readiness and enrolment, both in Ireland and internationally. This begins with a systematic review of international literature from 2012 to 2021, which identifies the types of WP interventions aimed at second-level students and their reported outcomes. The review offers a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge while also revealing key gaps that require further empirical attention (Ní Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023).

Study I: Exploring the evidence base

- RQ1a: What evidence (2012-2021) exists regarding the effectiveness of WP programmes for second-level students from low socio-economic backgrounds?
- RQ1b: What types of WP interventions have been studied?
- RQ1c: What is the impact of these interventions on aspirations, readiness, and enrolment?

Phase 2

The second phase of this thesis draws on secondary data from the longitudinal study conducted by the Trinity Access Programme (Tangney et al., 2021; Bray, Hannon and Tangney, 2022) to evaluate the impact of a specific WP intervention in Ireland. Using this dataset, Study II investigates how TAP WP outreach influences students' future goals and

aspirations scores over time, taking into account contextual factors such as gender, ethnicity, and school type (Ní Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2025). Study III then examines whether students' post-school plans are realised, and explores the relationship between the WP intervention and levels of educational progression (Ní Chorcora, Banks and Bray, 2025).

Study II: Secondary data analysis (TAP longitudinal data)

- RQ2a: What influence does TAP outreach have on students' future goals and aspirations?
- RQ2b: What contextual factors moderate this impact?
- RQ2c: Are effects on goals/aspirations sustained over time?

Study III: Secondary data analysis (TAP longitudinal data)

- RQ3a: Do students achieve the post-school plans made during final year?
- RQ3b: Is participation in WP programmes associated with higher likelihood of post-school progression?

Phase 3

The third phase involves the collection of qualitative data to explore students' retrospective perceptions of their participation in the WP intervention, two years after leaving school. Through in-depth interviews with former TAP participants, this phase captures long-term reflections on how engagement in WP activities influenced their post-school pathways and educational trajectories.

Study IV: Qualitative data analysis (Primary data)

- RQ4b: How did engagement in TAP-linked school outreach programmes influence students' future aspirations, goals, and post-school pathways?

By combining a systematic review, quantitative analysis of longitudinal data, and qualitative interviews, this research aims to provide a comprehensive, multi-dimensional understanding of the effectiveness of a WP outreach initiative in the Irish context. It contributes to the international literature by foregrounding the perspectives and outcomes of marginalised

secondary school students and examining how contextual factors shape the efficacy of WP interventions. While the thesis cannot conclusively determine what works in all settings, it offers grounded insights to support policymakers, researchers, and practitioners in refining access strategies that are contextually responsive, inclusive, and evidence informed.

Structure of Dissertation

Given the national policy priority of this topic in the National Access Plan (HEA, 2022 - 2028), and in order to inform its midway review in 2025, an approach to research that ensured timely dissemination of results in national/international fora was seen as most appropriate. For this reason, an integrated approach to conducting research for the thesis was utilised. In this way, three peer reviewed academic research papers were published within the four years of the researcher's PhD candidacy.

In addition to providing a coherent framework for the research and meeting all requirements of a traditional PhD (literature review, methodology, theoretical framework etc.), such publication of the research in a public forum has ensured timely dissemination of findings that are directly relevant for national and international policy development (HEA, 2022; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2022, UN, 2024). Furthermore, by engaging in the peer-review process, the researcher has gained valuable peer-review feedback from experts in the field, thus further developing critical thinking, research and writing skills and strengthening the overall thesis. Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature and outlines the development of the conceptual framework. Chapter 3 describes the research design and methodology for the integrated thesis approach. Chapters 4 - 7 describes the results and findings of each study. Finally, chapter 8 consolidates and synthesises the findings through an integrated discussion of all of the findings' chapters, drawing relevant conclusions, and will outline the main contributions of the thesis.

An overview of the structure of this thesis is highlighted in Figure 3.

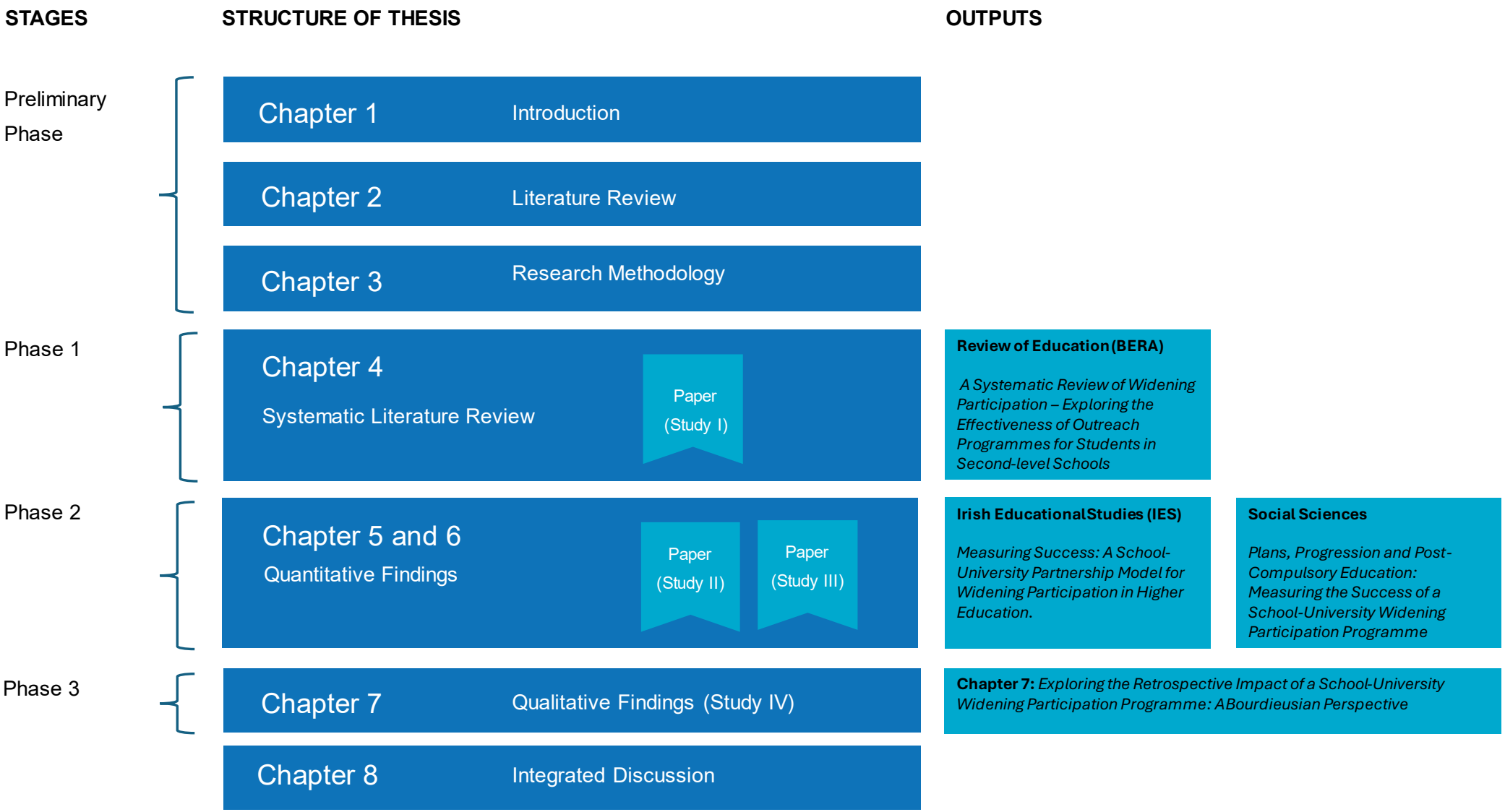

Figure 3: Overview of structure of thesis including published manuscripts

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

This chapter offers a comprehensive and integrative review of the literature that underpins this study, establishing the theoretical, policy, and contextual foundations upon which the subsequent research is built. While each of the published papers presented in Chapters 4 through 6 contains its own focused and in-depth literature review aligned with its specific aims, this chapter serves a broader purpose. It draws together, extends, and deepens the key conceptual and empirical discussions that recur across the papers, providing a cohesive theoretical narrative that supports the overall research project.

The literature review is structured into several interrelated sections. It opens by outlining the Conceptual Framework that informs the study, with particular emphasis on Bourdieu's theory of capital, habitus, and field and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory. These theoretical models, referenced throughout the published papers, are brought together here to establish an overarching framework that illuminates the complex interplay between individual, institutional, and structural factors in shaping educational trajectories. The review then turns to the concept of educational disadvantage, contextualised within the Irish education system, spanning second-level, further, and higher education. While the published papers engage with aspects of this system in varying depth, this chapter provides a more comprehensive mapping of its structure and evolution, particularly in relation to access and equity.

Subsequent sections examine key national policy initiatives such as the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme, and the development of widening participation strategies in Irish higher education. The final sections of the chapter explore the policy context and intervention landscape for widening participation, both nationally and internationally. These discussions provide a critical foundation for understanding the rationale behind this study and for situating the research within broader discourses of equity and social justice in education. In sum, this chapter not only supports but also enhances the literature reviews included in the individual papers. It offers a holistic view of the theoretical and contextual landscape of widening participation in education in Ireland, and lays the groundwork for understanding the empirical findings and interpretations that follow.

Conceptual Framework: Towards an Ecology of Widening Participation

While human capital theory has long been influential in shaping higher education access policies, particularly those tied to economic growth, it offers a limited lens for understanding the complexities of educational inequality. Rooted in the idea that expanding access to post-secondary qualifications will enhance national productivity and economic opportunity, human capital theory was instrumental in broadening participation in second-level education in Ireland from the 1960s onwards (O'Connor, 2014; Clancy, 2015; Fleming, Loxley and Finnegan, 2017). This framework contributed to significant growth in higher education participation, rising from approximately 20% in the 1980s to approximately 80% of school leavers in recent years (O'Brien, 2025a; HEA, 2022).

However, despite these gains, research has shown that the benefits of expanded access have disproportionately accrued to students from more advantaged socio-economic backgrounds, with patterns of exclusion and inequality persisting (Clancy & Wall, 2000; O'Connell, Clancy & McCoy, 2006). As such, the economically driven rationale of human capital theory fails to adequately capture the structural and cultural barriers that continue to shape educational trajectories.

For this reason, this thesis adopts a blended theoretical framework that moves beyond the reductive logic of economic return. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus and field, this approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of how individual experiences, social contexts, and institutional structures interact to influence students' educational outcomes and post-school pathways. This combined framework offers a more holistic lens through which to examine the complex realities of widening participation.

Many school-university widening participation interventions focus narrowly on raising aspirations among students from low socio-economic backgrounds without addressing the deeper, systemic inequalities these communities face. This approach risks reinforcing rather than disrupting educational disadvantage, particularly when universities adopt a competitive, expansion-driven model that prioritises increasing application numbers over building meaningful, long-term engagement (Armstrong and Cairnduff, 2011; Fleming, Loxley

and Finnegan, 2017). While access to higher education can be transformative, the pressure to meet aspirational targets, often shaped by government funding and accountability measures, can result in performative rather than substantive outreach. A more impactful strategy involves universities working collaboratively across the education sector and with diverse communities to foster inclusive participation (Armstrong and Cairnduff, 2011). This shift aligns with the central research question by highlighting the importance of intervention type and contextual responsiveness in shaping students' educational aspirations, readiness for higher education, and post-school progression.

An implicit acceptance of 'deficit models' often underpins school-based intervention programmes that try to 'bridge the gap' (Armstrong and Cairnduff, 2011). These 'deficit models', along with the lack of equity strategies, may contribute to factors that not only undermine the impact of these interventions, but can also contribute to an entrenchment of disadvantage among groups with the lowest participation rates at university. As such, Archer, Hutchings and Leathwood (2001) highlight the importance of WP strategies which are theoretical in their approaches, that specify how they conceptualise social class and that theorise the role of higher education within society. The next section will discuss two theories that have been considered in relation to this study and provides a rationale for the need to move towards a blended theoretical approach of widening participation.

This thesis draws on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and Bourdieu's theories of cultural and social capital and habitus (see Bourdieu, 1987, 1989, 2018 and Bourdieu and Richardson, 1986) to create a blended theoretical framework. Both theories are frequently used in social science disciplines such as sociology, social work and social policy, psychology, and education. Often within disciplines, researchers can get caught up different stand-alone theories with difficultly understanding how they relate to each other or the real world. The blended approach taken in this study accounts for the multi-faceted and complex reasons that influence a student's decision to continue to tertiary education. Others who have used this blend of the two theories include but is not limited to works by Strayhorn (2010), Houston (2017) and Fearnley (2020). It is important to note that, given their different epistemological orientations, this blended approach is not a synthesis between the two theories but rather a pragmatic alignment that enables a much broader perspective to emerge on how and why widening participation programmes can support

young people from low-socio economic backgrounds to go to college or university. This blended approach allows the researcher to investigate a variety of factors in the young person's social world which has both enabling and constraining social structures, asymmetrical relations of power and unequal access to resources.

Bourdieu's Theory of Capital, Habitus and Field

Social class remains a central yet contested concept in sociological and educational research. In Ireland, class is often examined through structural markers such as educational attainment and access to higher education (Smyth & McCoy, 2009; Lynch & Crean, 2018; Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998). However, research from the UK has drawn attention to more relational and lived understandings of class, emphasising how inequalities are reproduced through identity, aspiration, and cultural practices as much as through material resources (Reay, 2005; Skeggs, 1997; Ball, 2003). These perspectives are particularly relevant to this study, which is concerned with how working-class students navigate widening participation programmes and make post-school choices. To capture both the structural and the lived dimensions of social class, this research draws on Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework, particularly his concepts of capital, habitus, and field.

Much of the existing literature highlights Pierre Bourdieu as a key figure in understanding the challenges faced by working-class students in accessing higher education (Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller, 2013; Reay, 2019; Naidoo, 2004). Finnegan et al. (2017) apply Bourdieu's ideas using his concepts of different types of capital, cultural, social, symbolic, and economic, to explain these challenges. Their aim is to move beyond a basic divide between those who have resources and those who do not. Some scholars, such as Reay (2004), have raised concerns that Bourdieu's work is sometimes overused or oversimplified to support narrow arguments about class conflict in education. However, Webb and colleagues (2017) argue that theoretical extensions of Bourdieu's legacy allow for more nuanced understandings of the complex and intersecting social inequalities present in higher education.

These class-based differences have long-term effects, influencing how people see themselves and others within the educational system. Sayer (2005) critiques the repeated reliance on Bourdieu, suggesting that it limits progress in understanding the deeper cultural, emotional, and moral dimensions of class. Nevertheless, theorists like Cahill and Sullivan (2022) support

Finnegan and colleagues (2017) and Sayer's (2005) view that theory plays an important role in challenging social inequality. They argue that theoretical frameworks offer tools to question and resist systems that maintain privilege.

This perspective aligns with Freire's (1970) belief in education as a path to personal growth and social awareness. A practical example comes from Lynch and O'Riordan's (1998) study of over 40 working-class students, which revealed that economic and cultural barriers were the main obstacles to equal access to education. More recent studies by O'Sullivan, Byrne, Robson, Winters (2019), and Keane (2009, 2011) continue to highlight the subtle but powerful influences that affect working-class students' progression into higher education.

The idea of social reproduction and the analysis of educational practices is most closely associated with Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), who introduced the concept of cultural capital as "institutionalised or widely shared high-status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours, possessions and credentials) used for cultural and social exclusion from jobs and resources and the latter to exclusion from high-status groups" (p. 158). Bourdieu argued that cultural capital is acquired early in life through family socialisation. To build on this, he introduced the concept of *habitus*, described as a "system of lasting transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions" (Bourdieu and Passerson, 1977, pp. 82-83).

This perspective helps explain how young people from low SES backgrounds often possess forms of cultural capital that are undervalued or unrecognised within educational settings (Villalpando & Solorzano, 2005). As a result, these students may be less likely to leverage, or "cash in on", their cultural capital in ways that benefit them academically. For example, first-generation students or those from lower socio-economic backgrounds may be less inclined to engage in conversations about higher education, discuss academic success with family or peers, or participate in enrichment activities outside of school (Perna & Titus, 2005). These seemingly minor everyday interactions, often taken for granted by more affluent families, contribute significantly to the development of cultural capital.

Building on Bourdieu's foundational concepts, scholars such as Yosso (2005) have introduced the idea of *familial capital*, the cultural knowledge, values, and support nurtured through

kinship and extended family networks. This form of capital highlights the importance of emotional and instrumental support passed intergenerationally, often overlooked in traditional accounts of cultural capital. While not always recognised or rewarded by dominant educational institutions, familial capital plays a crucial role in shaping students' aspirations, resilience, and sense of belonging, particularly among marginalised groups.

Bourdieu also identified *social capital* as the benefits gained through one's network of relationships, noting that community resources and social ties can support individuals' access to institutional opportunities (Bourdieu, 1986). Students from high socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds typically demonstrate greater familiarity with college-going cultures, regularly engage in discussions about higher education, and are encouraged to pursue academic pathways. Such continuous exposure from childhood through adolescence contributes to educational decision-making, particularly around post-school transitions (Smyth, Dunne, Darmody and McCoy, 2004; Perna & Titus, 2005). In contrast, students from less advantaged backgrounds often lack access to these influential networks, reducing their awareness of and confidence in navigating post-secondary pathways (Bell, Rowan-Kenyon, & Perna, 2009; Farmer-Hinton, 2008; Morgan, McDonagh & Acton, 2023; Villalpando & Solorzano, 2005).

It is within this context that access programmes in higher education institutions operate, aiming to bridge these disparities in cultural and social capital. Through in-reach and outreach initiatives, such as campus visits, college application workshops, and guidance on financial supports, these programmes attempt to redress imbalances by providing early and sustained engagement opportunities. This theoretical lens is further applied in Chapter 7 to critically analyse students' perspectives on participating in such widening participation initiatives.

Bourdieu's work has been critiqued for being overused or oversimplified to support narrow arguments about class conflict in education (Reay, 2004) as well as the idea that Bourdieu reinforces inequality by presuming it as the starting point of his analysis (Pelletier, 2009). However, Webb and colleagues (2017) argue that theoretical extensions of Bourdieu's legacy allow for more nuanced understandings of the complex and intersecting social inequalities present in higher education. Furthermore, Bourdieu's theory can intersect meaningfully with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (see Strayhorn 2010; Houston, 2017 and

Fearnley, 2020), which is examined in greater detail later in this chapter (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) emphasised that the effectiveness of educational settings is enhanced when roles across different contexts (e.g., home and school) are aligned and supported by mutual trust. He suggested that the key to improving public education lies not solely within the school itself, but in the broader connections schools share with other societal structures (p. 226). However, Bronfenbrenner also acknowledged that exposure to unfamiliar contexts and activities can promote personal development, particularly when microsystems (like home and school) interact in varied ways across cultural and sub-cultural lines.

Nonetheless, this ecological model has been critiqued for not adequately addressing systemic power imbalances. Downes (2019) argued that despite an abundance of policies advocating for equitable education, structural blockages persist that maintain the status quo, benefiting dominant groups while marginalising others across cultural, linguistic, ethnic, and socio-economic lines. This critique highlights a key limitation in Bronfenbrenner's model: its insufficient attention to power dynamics.

In contrast, power is central to Bourdieu's social theory. He posited that individuals possess varying amounts and types of *symbolic capital*, such as cultural and social capital, which confer legitimacy and status within a given social field. Cultural capital encompasses the knowledge, behaviours, and experiences valued by dominant social groups, while social capital refers to one's affiliations and networks, which facilitate access to and participation in social institutions (Bourdieu and Passerson, 1977, Bourdieu 1986). For example, middle-class families often leverage their networks to navigate educational systems and advocate on behalf of their children (Horvat, Weininger & Lareau, 2003). These forms of capital are closely linked to economic capital, reinforcing privilege and access.

Field represents the structured social space, such as education or employment, within which various forms of capital circulate and are contested. One's *habitus*, shaped by past experiences and social positioning, influences how individuals perceive, act, and are perceived within these fields. Further, Bourdieu introduced *doxa* to describe the taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions that operate within a field, assumptions that are rarely questioned but deeply influence practice. For instance, educators may unconsciously operate under the belief that working-class or racialised families lack interest in their children's education, which becomes a self-reinforcing stereotype within the educational

field. These doxa align closely with Bronfenbrenner's notion of dominant ideologies within the macrosystem, reinforcing structural inequities (Downes, Li, Van-Praag & Lamb, 2024).

In conclusion, Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of capital, habitus, field, and doxa offer a critical lens for understanding how school-university widening participation outreach programmes function within broader structures of inequality. His work draws attention to the ways in which access to and recognition of cultural and social capital influence students' educational aspirations, college readiness, and progression beyond secondary school. This framework is particularly relevant for examining how different types of outreach interventions interact with students' lived experiences and institutional contexts. By focusing on how advantage and disadvantage are reproduced through everyday practices and assumptions within the educational field, Bourdieu's theory supports a deeper exploration of the structural and relational dynamics that shape programme outcomes. Therefore, this approach provides a strong conceptual foundation for addressing the central research question and investigating how intervention type and contextual factors impact the educational trajectories of marginalised students.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Development

In contrast to Bourdieu's theory, Bronfenbrenner's provides a broad ecological model is that allows researchers to make sense of other theories within sociology, psychology and education. Bronfenbrenner's model recognises that, in reality, children do not exist in compartmentalised worlds for ease of research. The bio-ecological model focuses on the environmental systems within development, which enables researchers to consider many different factors as well as consider the work of different theorists and how different theories fit together (Hayes, O'Toole and Halpenny, 2017). Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) illustrates how the developing child is embedded within a series of environmental systems that interact with each other and with the child to influence development (Shaffer and Kipp, 2014). Bronfenbrenner describes environment as "set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a series of Russian dolls" (p.22). The developing child is said to be at the centre of these nested environments, embedded in several environmental systems, and each of these systems interact with each and the person to influence human development in important ways (Cole, 2005).

Bronfenbrenner discusses how human development takes place through *proximal processes*. These are the interactions between the child, their environment, and the other people within that environment. Many researchers studying underrepresentation in higher education focus on consequences resulting from a single setting in which the student interacts (e.g., home, school). However, less attention is given to the nested network of interactions between multiple environments that play a role in underrepresentation in tertiary education. The holistic perspective, with its focus on proximal processes influencing developmental outcomes as well as the environment(s) in which development occurs, offers a powerful theoretical lens for understanding how students from low SES households make decisions about college and evaluating whether widening participation programmes can support students in making these decisions.

Bronfenbrenner's theory describes how young people are nested in multiple environments through a larger ecology consisting of the person, place, context, and time (PPCT model). The child (person) interacts with their school (place), which is influenced by his parents' occupation and school university partnerships (context) and ultimately by dominant ideologies and political environment (time) (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, Karnik, 2009; Tudge et al., 2016). Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital explains how the frequent and sustained interactions (proximal processes) occurring within the various systems or environments of an individual could help to reproduce social inequalities. The graphic below (Figure 4) illustrates the systems within Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, each of which will be discussed within the context of the research presented in this thesis.

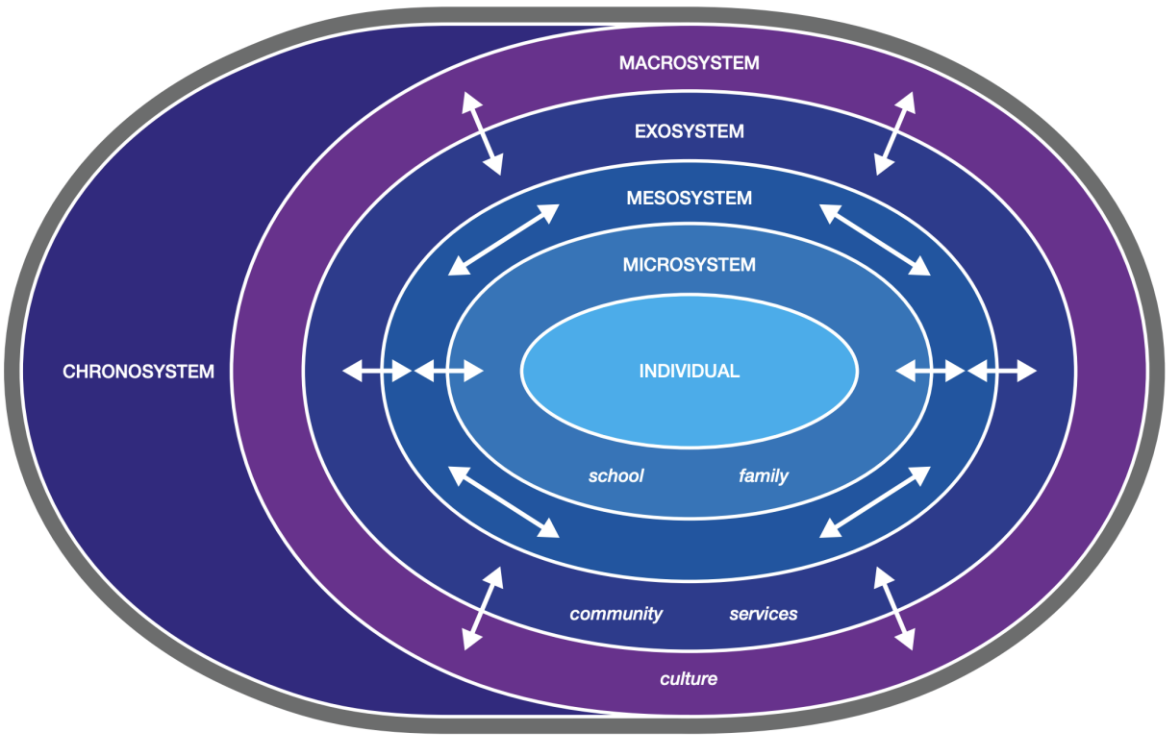

Figure 4: Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Perspective on Child Development (Adapted from Greene et al., 2010).

The *microsystem* focuses on settings with which the student directly participates. The students' relationships with parents, siblings and grandparents commonly contribute to students' familial capital (Yosso, 2005). A parent or family member who has been to college before or had a positive experience of education in the past may positively influence the child's educational trajectory by providing resources such as college information, advice, support and shared experiences with the child. However, if this support system is not in available within the family, it is important that students can find it elsewhere in their microsystem, such as at school or through participating in a widening participation programme (Mueller and Haines, 2012), see Figure 5 as an example. These additional contacts contribute to a student's social capital, or instrumental and emotional support that students can use to navigate through the current, often biased, education system (Bourdieu, 1977; Yosso, 2005). Non-supportive interrelationships within a child's *mesosystem* can have a negative impact on their educational pathways. For example, if an adolescent's group of friends devalues academics or attendance at school, this can often undermine their academic achievement and motivation to go to college, despite parents' or teachers' best efforts (Shaffer and Kipp, 2014). Importantly, as Downes (2019) and Sadiq (2022) highlight,

children and families possess agency, an element that is not always fully acknowledged in Bronfenbrenner's earlier work. However, by utilising Bronfenbrenner's later writings, alongside Bourdieu's theory of social capital (see Downes, Li, Van Praag & Lamb, 2024 for similar approaches), the author seeks to explore the extent to which school-university widening participation outreach programmes influence the educational aspirations, college readiness, and post-school progression of low SES secondary school students. The graphic below (Figure 5) shows an adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory, which illustrates the widening participation context of the research presented in this thesis.

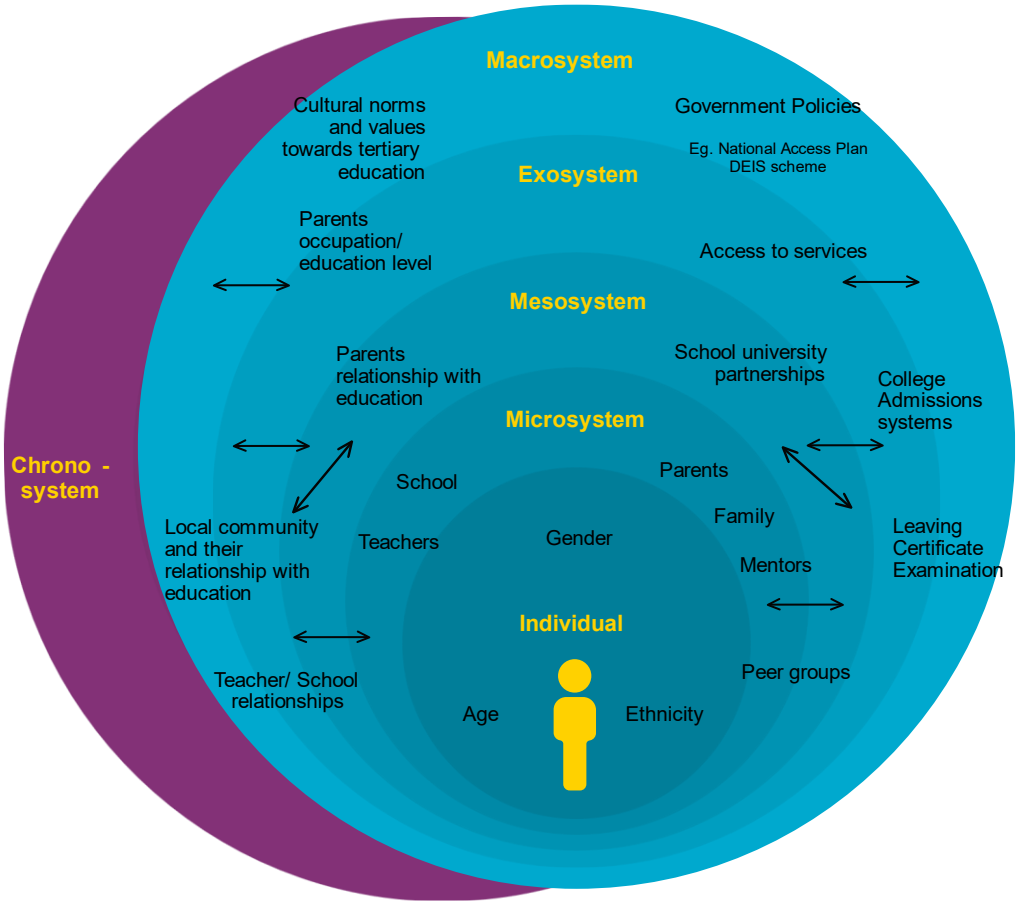

Figure 5: School Influences on Students (Note: Adapted by the author from Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Perspective on Child Development (Green et al., 2010).

Examples within a child's *exosystem* would be the interactions between a child's parent and their workplace, their access to jobs, health and welfare services. The parents' occupation can influence the resources that are made available to their children, and the people in their social networks who can provide support in accessing higher education (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1986; Bourdieu 1977). Strong relationships and connections between schools and universities can positively impact the resources they offer and help foster cultural understanding, which in turn may encourage students to pursue further education after school. A determinant in the exosystem may be a school board's decision to reduce career guidance hours (often replaced with wellbeing or pastoral counselling, albeit with good intentions), which in turn may impact low SES students' ability to gain accurate and timely information about college and application processes or the focus on high stakes exams to gain entry to college through the Ireland's College Admissions systems (Smyth and Banks, 2012a). Bronfenbrenner highlights how values, morals and traditions differ across cultures, subcultures and social classes (exosystem), which can greatly influence higher education participation. For young people living in an area in which going to college is not the norm, there may be a shared belief that college is not worth the time or financial investment, and therefore young people in the area are more likely to go straight into employment when they finish school.

Finally, the chronosystem reminds researchers that transitions occur over time in areas such as state and educational policy, for example, changes in government funding for secondary and tertiary education. Other time-based factors within the chronosystem that may influence access to higher education include changes to state examinations for secondary school students, college entry routes and requirements, equity, diversity and inclusion policies in higher education, and evolving research on best practices for widening participation programmes.

As outlined in the introduction, this study investigates how widening participation outreach programmes support the educational progression of students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as an evaluative lens, the research places the secondary student at the centre of analysis. The application of the PPCT model enables an exploration of how multiple levels of influence, across domains, contexts, and time, shape students' educational aspirations, readiness for higher education, and post-

school trajectories. This theoretical approach provides a structured yet flexible framework for evaluating the effectiveness of widening participation interventions. The TAP Schools Longitudinal Project is used as a case study within the Irish context to illustrate how these dynamics play out in practice.

In sum, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and Bourdieu's notions of capital and habitus serve as a lens through which the influence of widening participation programmes, schools, families, and individual characteristics on working class students' post school plans can be understood. A blended framework may be effective in setting the future agenda for maximising the participation of low SES students in higher education as it pays attention to structural barriers and individual-level factors that students can employ to exercise their own agency in making decisions about their post-school plans. This approach may also prove useful for identifying new tools to address HE participation disparities more effectively. This approach turns previous deficit models upside down, as suggested by Strayhorn (2010), Downes, Li, Van Praag &Lamb, 2024; Valencia and Solorzano (1997) and Ladson-Billings (2007), and views students, families, schools, and universities as empowered change agents in the process (Hayes et al., 2017).

Educational Disadvantage

The term 'educational disadvantage' is frequently defined however definitions are usually complex, broad and unspecific. The OECD (The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) describe it as a complex phenomenon that is the outcome of the interaction of deep-seated economic, social and educational factors (OECD, 2024). In Ireland, it was defined in the Education Act (Government of Ireland, 1998) as "impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevent students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools". Kellaghan (2001) suggests a more concise definition by focusing on the nature of the issues experienced by children from these backgrounds, when attending school. He defines it as discontinuities between the competencies and dispositions that children bring to school, as well as those valued in schools, and the factors of economic, cultural and social capital that influence development of the competencies and dispositions (Kellaghan, 2001). Variables that are associated with educational disadvantage in the United States include minority racial/ethnic group identity, living in a poverty household, living in a lone-parent family, having a poorly educated

mother, and having a home language that differs from that used in the school (Pallas, Natriello, & McDill, 1989).

In the UK, educational disadvantage is assessed using a mix of individual, school, and area-level indicators. A key proxy is eligibility for Free School Meals, specifically the "Ever 6 FSM" measure, which informs both school accountability and Pupil Premium funding (Department for Education, 2025; Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2018; Gorard, Siddiqui & See, 2022). Area-based metrics like the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and the participation of local areas (POLAR) are also used to gauge socioeconomic context and higher education participation (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019; Office for Students, 2022). Together, these measures provide a nuanced picture of structural educational inequalities.

In Ireland, the factors used to identify disadvantage are focused on parental income, single parent households, number of persons per room in each household; number of pupils in the school whose families reside in local authority housing and the number of pupils whose families reside in a flat or non-permanent accommodation; the number of pupils whose families hold medical cards; and the number of pupils whose families are in receipt of unemployment benefit or assistance under schemes administered by the Department of Social Welfare (Haase & Pratschke, 2015).

Reflecting on this terminology, although well intentioned, it seems that the term 'disadvantage' emphasises a pathologising view of inequality. Cahill and O'Sullivan (2022) have noted how the use of this corrective language immediately suggests (albeit subconsciously) that the education system is an equitable one and that these educational inequalities that some students' experience are simply anomalies within an equitable system that is able to be corrected or fixed. They describe the Education Act as presenting deficit-oriented view of individuals living in poverty, suggesting that they are amendable to 'fixing' as opposed to recognising or admitting that they fall victim to wider ideological motivations that promote inequalities across a wide range of aspects of peoples' lives, not just education. Cahill (2021) emphasises how the view of social and economic disadvantage is also outdated with conversation in the literature now turned to the importance of intersectional understandings of experience. He highlights that educational disadvantage is

as much about garnering advantage and privilege within our neoliberal society as it is about the education of those living in poverty (Davies and Bansel, 2007; Angus, 2015).

Similar to Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction, Cahill and O'Sullivan (2022) draw conclusions that addressing educational disadvantage is in many ways, is about retrofitting for those who do not fit the system, in a system that has been designed by those who it does fit, without changing it in any meaningful way that could potentially jeopardise the advantages garnered by those who are meant to succeed within it. To quote philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre one of the key figures in philosophy of existentialism (and phenomenology) - 'Words are loaded pistols.' The foundation of any collective action, of any community, is language. It influences how we feel, react, and understand. Thus, dismantling educational inequalities starts with analysing the language we use, as it speaks volumes about how we see people.

When discussing or writing about individuals or groups who find it difficult to access higher education, deficit language is too often used to describe them. Much of the literature on educational disadvantage tends to label individuals within these groups as 'disadvantaged,' 'underrepresented,' or 'non-traditional.' While such terminology may serve practical purposes, such as informing policy targets or allocating funding, it reflects a deficit-based perspective. This framing places the burden on students and their families, rather than recognising the structural and systemic barriers that may limit their access to higher education. Moreover, this language can be harmful, as it undermines the group's agency and denies them the power to define their own identities (Williams, 2020). For example, the Cambridge dictionary defines the prefix under- as 'not enough', 'not done as well' or 'below' suggesting feelings of unworthiness. The word underrepresented suggests that this group are choosing not to represent themselves, the term disadvantaged suggests there is a deficit within the group and non-traditional suggest that this group do not fit the norm, that they were not always meant to be there. Additionally, such language masks the diverse experiences within the group and strips them of the agency to define their own identities (Williams, 2020).

The target population of this study comprises students in TAP-linked schools, which are classified as socio-economically disadvantaged according to the Higher Education Authority's National Plan due to being located in areas experiencing high levels of educational

disadvantage (Haase & Pratschke, 2015). This is by no means a homogeneous group (as is discussed later in Ní Chorcora, Bray and Banks (2023)); rather, it specifically names those whom widening participation programmes target internationally. It includes all students in these schools who may experience barriers to progression to higher education because of socio-economic disadvantage. Within this focus, the study considers students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, which also may encompass a range of intersectional cohorts, such as individuals of different races and ethnicities, those with disabilities, students from diverse family backgrounds, and those with experience of the care or justice system.

The literature on widening participation often contains deficit language when describing these groups. While the authors recognise that such language may be harmful, it was also used as part of the systematic literature review to identify relevant studies. For consistency and to avoid deficit framing, this thesis uses the terms *students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds*, *marginalised students*, or *underserved students* when discussing the students participating in this study. This terminology intentionally shifts the focus from deficits within individuals to structural inequities, while acknowledging the heterogeneity of the group and the diverse barriers they face.

Irish Education System

Second-level system in Ireland

'Secondary education' is the term used in this thesis to describe second-level schooling which consists of 5 or 6 years of post-primary (secondary) education in Ireland. It begins with a three-year Junior Cycle (lower secondary) followed by a three-year Senior Cycle (upper secondary). There is a Transition Year in year 4, which is optional in some schools. Students take one of three programmes in their Senior Cycle, each of which leads to a State Examination: the traditional Leaving Certificate Established (LCE), the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) or the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) (Department of Education and Skills 2017). The Leaving Certificate examinations are a series of high-stakes exams and provide the main pathway for students to enter higher education. Students take at least five exam subjects, of which English, Gaeilge and Mathematics are mandatory in most cases for students (some exceptions apply to those with an additional learning need or English as an additional language). Students can take these subjects at higher or ordinary

level and a foundattion level is available for Mathematics and Gaeilge. Students' end of Senior Cycle exam grades are converted into points in a system where students compete against each other for university places. The Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) is completed alongside a minimum of five other Leaving Certificate subjects and focuses on technical subjects, and subjects like Enterprise Education, Preparation for Work and Work Experience.

The Central Applications Office (CAO) manages applications for undergraduate courses in Irish higher education institutions by converting a student's top six Leaving Certificate subject grades into a points-based system, which aligns with course availability and demand. In 2009, two alternative admission routes were established to address structural inequalities in access to higher education: the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and the Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) (Byrne, Doris, Sweetman, Casey & Rae, 2014). HEAR is designed to support applicants from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, while DARE is intended for students with disabilities. Applicants who meet the criteria for either or both schemes may benefit from additional educational and financial supports and/or reduced points requirements for entry into higher education courses.

The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) Programme is separate from the Leaving Certificate. It is a two-year course which aims to prepare students for adult and working life. The programme consists of general education, vocational education and vocational preparation. The LCA cannot be used to gain entry to third level education (Banks, Byrne, McCoy and Smyth, 2010). The table below depicts an overview of the secondary and tertiary education in Ireland.

Table 3: Overview of the Secondary and Tertiary Education in Ireland.

Level	Years / Stages	Options / Pathways	Outcome / Next Step
Secondary Education	Junior Cycle (1st-3rd Year)	Broad general education, ends with Junior Certificate	Progress to Transition Year or Senior Cycle
	Transition Year (TY)	Optional 1-year programme focused on life skills & work experience	Proceed to Senior Cycle

Level	Years / Stages	Options / Pathways	Outcome / Next Step
	Senior Cycle (5th & 6th Year)	Two main programmes:	Leads to end-of-school qualifications
		Leaving Certificate (LC) - academic route	Generates CAO points for university/college entry
		Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) - vocational/practical route	Leads to further education, apprenticeships, or work
Tertiary Education	Post-Secondary Options	Based on LC results (CAO Points) or LCA completion	
	Universities & Institutes of Technology	Entry via CAO system based on LC results, HEAR and DARE entry routes.	Degrees (Level 7, 8 on NFQ), Postgraduate options afterwards.
	Further Education Colleges	Post-LCA or LC, may include PLCs, apprenticeships	FETAC awards, can lead to higher education
	Apprenticeships	Typically, after LCA or LC with additional criteria	Work and/or training-based qualification

Research highlights significant differences in how students from various socio-economic groups engage with career and education guidance services. McNamara, Murphy, Murray, Smyth and Watson (2020), in the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) study, show that 83% of 17- and 18-year-olds were still in secondary education, with 12% in post-school education or training. Parental expectations for educational progression were high overall at 80%, but differences between socio-economic groups (SEG) were evident. Although progression to higher education has become the dominant expectation, the way these cultural norms are realised varies by SEG. For instance, 79% of students from never-employed households sought career advice from their mothers, compared with 92% in professional or managerial households. Additionally, students from families with no employment history are almost twice as likely to consider career guidance classes very important compared to their peers from professional or managerial backgrounds (McNamara et al., 2020). Individual sessions

with guidance counsellors also hold greater value for students from lower socio-economic groups, reflecting their heavier reliance on school-based support for information and advice. This reliance underscores inequalities in access to experiential knowledge and college-going networks that students from more advantaged backgrounds often take for granted.

Further and Higher Education system in Ireland

Higher education in Ireland is provided mainly by universities and technological universities, institutes of technology and colleges of education. There are 12 publicly funded universities and another 12 institutions that receive public funding. Other third-level institutions provide specialist education in fields like art and design, medicine, business studies, rural development, theology, music and law. The National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is an awards framework of ten levels that is aligned with the European Framework of Qualifications. Quality and Qualifications Ireland's (QQI) role is to quality assure institutions, validate educational courses and make awards to learners. Higher education qualifications are levels 6 - 10 in the framework (Department of Education and Skills 2017). To gain entry to a higher education course in a higher education institution, a minimum entry requirement of a Leaving Certificate with at least grade D in five subjects is usually required (Hyland, 2011). Further Education in Ireland includes post second-level education and training, but it is not part of the higher education system.

The Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) Scheme

In 2015, the Irish government responded to the issue of educational disadvantage with a formalised 'Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools' DEIS scheme. This scheme is, as Fenwick and colleagues (2022, p 515) put it, 'a policy of positive discrimination, whereby schools with a high number of students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds received additional funding from the government'.

An independent, standardised system using a calculation of deprivation was introduced to determine which schools in the country should be included in the DEIS scheme. The deprivation index (Trutz & Pratschke, 2017) calculates a score based on Small Areas (SA) in Ireland using measures of employment status, levels of education, number of single parents, overcrowding and dependency rates. Small Area (SA) mapping was developed jointly by the Ordnance Survey of Ireland (OSI) and the Central Statistics Office (CSO) for the publication of

the 2011 Small Area Population Statistics (SAPS). The aim is to ensure that these small areas are as homogenous as possible in their social composition, with the average population size within each SA is just under 100 households. Schools that were identified as catering largely for students from low SES backgrounds (lower deprivation scores) were then allocated additional funding and resources to support them in breaking down barriers and eradicating inter-generational disadvantage (DES, 2005; Weir, 2016).

The 2017 DEIS review identifies that the aim of the DEIS scheme is: 'for education to more fully become a proven pathway to better opportunities for those in communities at risk of disadvantage and social exclusion' (DES, 2017, p 6). The 2017 DEIS report also identifies the government's ambition 'to become the best in Europe at harnessing education to break down barriers and stem the cycle of inter-generational disadvantage.' The review outlines a variety of targets of the DEIS scheme, which include increased literacy and numeracy standards, increased retention rates and increased progression rates to further and higher education (DES, 2017).

While the DEIS scheme is well intentioned, it remains limited in scope, causing some children in need to be overlooked (Fleming & Harford, 2023; Singleton, 2025). One major concern is its dependence on residential addresses to assess deprivation, which can exclude children experiencing homelessness, living in temporary accommodation, or in Direct Provision (Trutz & Pratschke, 2017; Children's Rights Alliance, 2020). Furthermore, Pavee Point National Traveller and Roma Centre (2024) notes that the area-based approach fails to capture disadvantaged Traveller and non-Traveller families living outside designated DEIS zones. Consequently, their children attend schools ineligible for DEIS support, missing out on critical resources. In March 2025, the minister for Education pledged to increase supports for pupils at risk follows a programme for government commitment on introducing a *DEIS-plus* scheme aimed at providing more help for schools with the highest concentrations of disadvantage students. Interestingly, the Minister wants a new DEIS plan to include building stronger links with further and higher education and into the world of work (O'Brien, 2025b).

Despite the introduction of policies aimed at tackling educational disadvantage, recent research has highlighted how the education system continues to reproduce intergenerational advantages for dominant social groups, exposing the close relationships

between education, inequality and class (Fleming and Harford, 2023). The social class divide was exacerbated further by the recent Covid 19 pandemic for students in underserved communities (Bray et al., 2020; 2021; Mohen, Carroll, McCoy, Mac Domhnaill and Mihut, 2021; Darmody, Smyth and Russell, 2020; Devitt, Bray, Banks and Ní Chorcora, 2020; Ross, Kennedy and Devitt, 2021; Pavee Point and the National Traveller Women's Forum; 2020) as the move to remote learning was particularly difficult for those students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Moreover, due to the high-stakes nature of the Leaving Certificate, there has been an increase in students accessing private tuition outside of school, usually in the form of grinds or summer courses (Lynch and Crean, 2018; McCoy and Byrne, 2022). Again, availing of this can be expensive and not something many families can afford and yet another example of how social class is fuelling the already privileged to use their social and cultural capital to mobilise further advantage.

Access to Higher Education

Research suggests that educational disadvantage exists across the life course and education sectors including the transition from second to third level. Recent decades have seen a dramatic decrease in early school leaving across Europe. However, in their 2024 report, EUROSTAT data has shown that 84% of young people in Europe aged between 20 and 24 have gained at least second/ intermediate level education. Despite this high level of school completion, just 44% of the EU population aged 25-34 had a third level degree. Ireland has surpassed the EU policy target of 45% of 25-34-year-olds attaining tertiary education by 2030 with 2024 data revealing that 65% of young people at that age had attained at least a bachelors NFQ level 8, higher education degree (EUROSTAT, 2025).

However, while Irish participation rates in second and third-level education are among the highest in Europe, barriers to participation for those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds have remained, and while our educational standards have improved, these have not led to any meaningful decrease in educational inequalities (Lynch and Crean, 2018). Today a student in Ireland from a high socio-economic background is approximately twice as likely to attend higher education than their peers from a low socio-economic area. Just 10% of students enrolled in higher education in Ireland come from disadvantaged backgrounds (HEA, 2022).

The Growing up in Ireland study suggest that as students transition to adulthood, the patterns of inequality continue. By age 20, 69% of the cohort were in education or training, 26% were in employment, and 5% were neither in education, employment nor training (O'Mahony et al., 2022). Parental experience with education emerged as the strongest predictor of HE progression. While 91% of young people from professional backgrounds entered HE, only 52% from the lowest socio-economic group did so. Those with lower educational attainment were more likely to be in employment (39% versus 17%) or not in education, employment, or training (9% versus 2%). School type also played a significant role: 76% of students in non-DEIS schools progressed to HE compared to 50% in DEIS schools. This gap widened among the lowest academic performers, with only 28% of those in DEIS schools continuing to HE, compared with 46% in non-DEIS schools. These statistics illustrate the combined impact of material (economic capital) and immaterial (social and cultural capital) resources in shaping access to HE. Byrne and McCoy (2017) reinforce this view, emphasising that school type, socio-economic status, and household income are the dominant factors influencing educational aspirations and attainment. The findings underscore how parental involvement and experience strongly shape young people's ambitions, especially for those whose parents lack experience with HE. For students from low-SEG backgrounds, career and financial guidance provided by schools is a critical source of information about alternative entry routes and supports, further exposing the unequal foundations upon which educational decisions are made.

In addition to national level policies, there are several initiatives aimed at addressing educational inequality in access to HE. One such example is the Trinity Access Programmes School-University Partnership for Widening Participation. The Trinity Access Programme works collaboratively with linked schools in the greater Dublin area that experience high levels of educational disadvantage. Figure 6 below shows a breakdown of the percentage of students progressing to college by Dublin postcode. Data were calculated from the State Examinations Commission, based on the number of students who sat the leaving certificate from each school in the country and these data were then cross checked with data on the number of students from each school who have enrolled in a higher education institution that same year. By examining data from each school, the researcher was then able to calculate a mean progression rate to college for each postcode in Dublin to create the

heatmap below. The map highlights the nuances of the educational inequality that exists just within Dublin postcodes. Progression rates range from 20% in Dublin 17 to 95% in Dublin 2. Taking a closer look at the brackets beside each postcode, one can see the range of progression rates between schools in that same postcode. For example, when looking at a high level, Dublin 4 has a progression rate of 91%. However, this ranges between schools with a 27% progression rate to schools with a 100% progression rate, highlighting the pockets of disadvantage that exist at a school level and the poignant educational inequalities that remain.

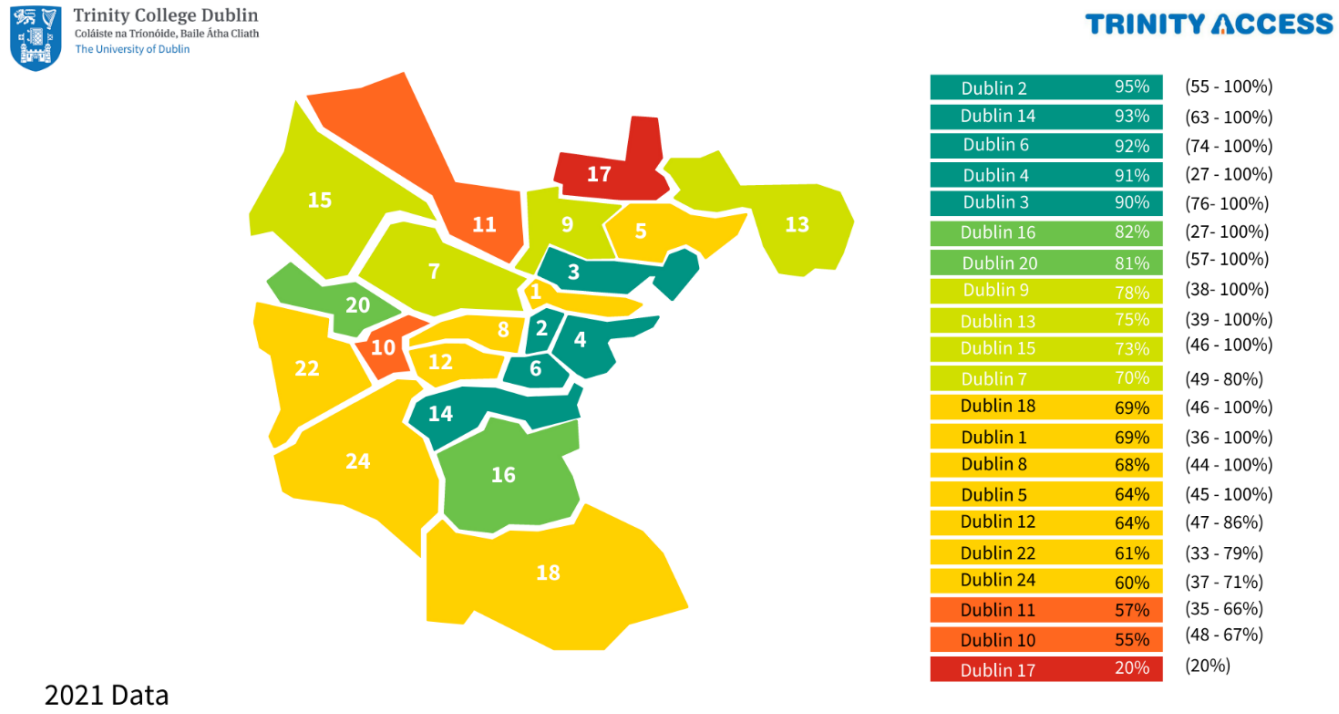

Figure 6: Progression to Higher Education of Leaving Certificate Students in Dublin Schools (Note. Figure created by the author using data from The Irish Times (O'Caollaí, Mooney and McGuire, 2022)).

Determinants in Access to Higher Education

The barriers for students from low socio-economic backgrounds to access higher education are broad and multi-causal. A growing body of research highlights how structural and systemic inequalities significantly restrict the pathways of young people from low socio-economic backgrounds into higher education. These barriers are deeply embedded in the education system and broader social context, rather than being the result of individual deficits. For example, persistent underperformance in school, often cited in the literature, must be viewed as unequal access to resources and support, rather than inherent ability

(Chowdry et al., 2013; Smyth et al., 2011; Keane, 2016). Similarly, lower levels of parental engagement or aspiration must be understood within the context of intergenerational educational disadvantage and a lack of familiarity with the higher education system (McCoy et al., 2014).

Systemic challenges such as high teacher turnover in DEIS schools, inconsistent access to guidance counselling, and inadequate provision of relevant, timely information about higher education further compound these inequities (Smyth & Banks, 2012a; McCoy et al., 2014). Negative student-teacher relationships and experiences of educational disengagement are often symptoms of a system that fails to meet the needs of all learners equitably, contributing to a lack of belonging and diminished perceptions of higher education as a viable or welcoming pathway.

International research challenges the assumption that students from disadvantaged or marginalised backgrounds inherently lack aspiration. Guerin (2014), in a review of EU policy, notes that while the evidence is varied, the claim that lower-income families have lower ambitions for their children is not strongly supported. Studies from the UK further support this, showing that many young people from low-income backgrounds aspire to university but often transition instead into skilled or semi-skilled employment (Kintrea et al., 2011; Goodman & Gregg, 2010).

Even when aspirations are present, systemic barriers can impede their realisation. McCoy et al. (2014) found that a significant proportion of young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, were unable to follow through on their post-school plans. Some faced barriers such as underperformance in the Leaving Certificate, misalignment between expectations and course realities, or a mismatch between second-level learning and the demands of higher education. Regret and non-completion were more prevalent among these students, pointing not to poor decision-making, but to the structural inequities embedded within the transition to higher education.

Research on post-school transitions in Ireland has consistently highlighted the complex interplay of motivation, aspiration, social class, and access to guidance in shaping young people's educational choices. Studies like Leaving School in Ireland (McCoy et al., 2014) show that while many students choose further or higher education for personal reasons

such as interest in a subject or personal growth, those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, especially in DEIS schools, are more likely to be motivated by job security and income. This reflects a pattern of risk aversion that is strongly shaped by structural constraints and limited safety nets, rather than any lack of ambition or potential.

Growing up in Ireland findings have shown that having high aspirations and goals is important for achieving academic resilience (even when levels of maths and literacy are controlled for) (Kong, 2020). This is reflected in other Irish studies which suggest that a culture of high expectations and support in promoting successful post-school transitions for second-level students is especially important for marginalised students whose parents may not have attended college themselves (Smyth and Banks, 2012b; McCoy et al., 2014). The absence of this 'insider' understanding means that critical choices about subject levels, course options, and institutions may be made with limited or inaccurate information. Moreover, social class patterns in aspiration and educational planning can emerge early in students' school careers, with some differences visible as early as junior cycle. This underscores the need for a whole-school approach to guidance, where informed, proactive support from teachers can expand students' perceived options and foster a culture of high expectations (McCoy et al., 2014).

While these studies point to structural and institutional factors, understanding students' lived experiences is also essential. Quantitative research methods provide a strong framework for identifying and categorising patterns of educational disadvantage in Ireland. However, these approaches often fall short in representing the subjective and lived experiences of students. Contributions from Diane Reay (2018) in the UK have been instrumental in highlighting these personal dimensions within educational inequality research. In Ireland, studies by Smyth, Banks and Calvert (2011) and Smyth and Banks (2012a and 2012b) have similarly incorporated student perspectives, though few have succeeded in capturing the nuanced experiences of students in their final year of secondary education.

Scanlon, Jenkinson, Leahy, Powell and Byrne (2019) investigated the attitudinal barriers that hinder low-income students' progression to higher education (HE). Drawing on the experiences of 70 students and 25 parents across three secondary schools, the study identified four main challenges: low confidence in their ability to transition to HE, territorial

stigma, doubts about academic capability, and financial concerns. Notably, 65% of students aspiring to attend college expressed uncertainty about achieving sufficient CAO points for admission (p. 352). Rather than following a clear and informed path, decision-making around which higher education institution (HEI) to attend often mirrored trends previously observed in UK-based studies on educational disadvantage (Ball, Davies, David & Reay, 2002; Reay, David & Ball, 2005; Reay, 2018).

The cost associated with attending an HEI was also a major factor influencing students' choices. Over 75% of respondents stated that 'the cost of living and studying' was an 'important or very important' consideration in their decision-making. For first-generation college aspirants, the process was further complicated by a lack of familiarity with the administrative procedures involved in applying to and enrolling in HE. Many participants internalised their marginalised position in society, which manifested in a lack of belief in their capacity to succeed through the CAO system. Scanlon et al. (2019) argue for the need to critically reflect on the ways in which students from disadvantaged backgrounds internalise societal judgments and come to believe they are not suited for higher education. This internalisation reflects and reinforces broader structural inequalities and the dominant enrolment patterns in Irish HE. The authors highlight the influence of social inequality, disadvantage, and territorial stigmatisation on these perceptions (p. 356).

This tension between student identity and access to higher education is echoed in Keane's (2009) work, which calls for increased representation of marginalised students in Irish educational research. Keane points to a lack of comprehensive discussion surrounding the academic and social challenges these students face, noting "a paucity of research on the experiences of such students in the Irish context, particularly concerning the academic and relational realms" (p. 85).

Despite the extensive list of barriers, once enrolled at university, students from low socio-economic backgrounds have similar patterns of retention and success as those from other backgrounds (Delaney and Devereux (2020). Delaney and Devereux (2020) analysed data from the Higher Education Authority (HEA) data registers that compile information on students in Irish third level institutions and looked at how well students from different backgrounds and school types fare during their time in higher education. Overall, data

suggests that disadvantaged students do worse in college than their peers however, once controlling for Leaving Certificate points this story changes. When controlling for LC results, students who have a financial grant and students who attended a DEIS school actually achieve higher grades than those who do not have a grant or come from a non-fee-paying secondary school.

This positive finding could be linked to college support programmes such access programmes which target supports towards students from DEIS schools. It also emphasises just how important a role support plays in supporting students to do well while in university. Students who have grants may have higher motivation to study harder in case they lose eligibility for grants if they fail and need to repeat a year (McCoy and Byrne, 2010). But it is also worth considering that DEIS school and grant-eligible students have less opportunity to reach their potential in post primary school and, therefore, perform better in college than one would expect based on Leaving Certificate points (Delaney and Devereux, 2020). One reason for this could be the admissions processes in educational institutions as well as the high-stake focus on terminal exams at leaving certificate level (Smyth and Banks, 2012b, Keane, 2011).

Widening Participation - Policy Context

The global education agenda has placed a strong emphasis on inclusion and equality through the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Among its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Goal 4 specifically advocates for the provision of inclusive, equitable, and high-quality education for all individuals, with an emphasis on lifelong learning. Target 4.5 within this goal underscores the importance of addressing disparities in educational access and outcomes, ensuring that learners from all backgrounds can fully benefit from educational opportunities (UN, 2024).

Within the European context, the turn of the millennium marked a shift in educational policy towards improving access, participation, and equity in higher education. This shift has been supported by both European Commission initiatives and the Bologna Process, launched in 1999 to create a more harmonised and competitive European Higher Education Area. Over time, policy efforts have increasingly recognised the complexity of educational inequality, reflecting this through both strategic guidance and monitoring mechanisms. The Bologna

Follow-up Group and its associated advisory panels have played a key role in advancing the social dimension of higher education, aiming to make systems more inclusive across Europe. Since the renewed interest in the area, it has been widely acknowledged that inequality in higher education is an important yet complex and multi-faceted problem (Piketty, 2021).

This is demonstrated in the series of Bologna Process Implementation Reports, (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice,2020a; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018; European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015, European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2012). The Eurydice report on Equity in School Education in Europe (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2020b) also highlights the evidence around how equity issues are not just a problem at tertiary level but are deep rooted all the way through every aspect of a child's education provision.

Following the Gothenburg Summit in 2017, the European Council noted that that education is one of the key methods for building inclusive and cohesive societies. In 2020, the European Commission adopted an initiative which set out towards achieving the European Education Area by 2025. This initiative defines inclusion as one of its key objectives - to ensure that higher education is accessible to diverse student populations. This has subsequently been followed up by requirements to address equity and inclusion in all main EU project calls.

In January 2022, equity and inclusion was identified as a clear priority by the EU commission in their Strategy for Universities. Following this, in March 2022 the EU commission released the Eurydice report titled 'Towards Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education in Europe'. This report highlights how some education structures and policies tend to perpetuate the exclusion of socially disadvantaged and vulnerable groups and that their participation in higher education remains low across all EU Member States. The ten Principles agreed by EHEA outline guidelines for EU member states to improve the social dimension in higher education, thereby making it more equitable. These principles and guidelines also act as indicators to assess the state of policy attention in European systems to equity and inclusion in higher education.

The report provides a point-based assessment of the social dimension in higher education per country based on the results of the 10 scoreboard indicators on the Principles &

Guidelines. Ireland ranks 24th out of 38 member states scoring 15 points out of a possible 40. This suggests that Ireland has implemented nearly 38% of the policies required to meet the EU commitments. Although much has been done, is clear that there is still much to be improved in Ireland in addressing the social dimension in higher education.

Ireland has a long history of widening participation (WP) and access initiatives, with formal access courses established in the 1990s (McGuire, Collins and Garavan 2003) and policy commitments to equity in higher education evident in earlier decades (Walsh, 2011; Clancy, 1982; Loxley, Seery, & Walsh, 2014; Fleming, Loxley, & Finnegan, 2017). At the national in Ireland, addressing social inequality in higher education has become a central strategic concern in recent years. The National Access Plan (HEA, 2022) identifies students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including those enrolled in DEIS schools, as a key priority group for improving access to and participation in higher education. Ireland have had access on their policy agenda since 2005 when the first National Access Plan for Equity of Access in Ireland was published. The National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 sets goals which outline how the Irish higher education system must continue to develop clear routes of progression and transfer, as well as non-traditional entry routes (DES, 2011, pg. 14). Since then, there have been steady improvements in terms of participation of marginalised groups however, stark inequalities remain. According to the latest figures from the Higher Education Authority (HEA, 2022), only 10% of higher education students are from socio-economically disadvantaged areas.

The current National Access Plan (HEA, 2022) highlights socio-economically disadvantaged students, along with individuals from the Irish Traveller and Roma communities, as among the most underrepresented groups in higher education. It outlines key performance indicators focused on improving access and participation for students from DEIS schools, as well as supporting their progression and completion within the higher education system. The National Access Plan illustrates the need for a whole-of-education approach to equity of access and participation in higher education. This starts with early childhood education and continues for each child through primary and secondary to further and higher education (HEA, 2022). The Plan emphasises the importance of early intervention, creating a sense of belonging in education as well as mapping out pathways that help students to meet their potential, instil a culture of high aspirations and support young people through further and

higher education. The Higher Education Authority have outlined ambitious plans with a target transition rate between school and higher education of 54% compared to the current 42% transition rate for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas (HEA, 2022). Although funding and targets have been set, guidance on how to use these resources effectively remains limited, particularly when it comes to supporting pre-entry pathways and participation for DEIS students.

Widening Participation Interventions

Across the EU, a number of initiatives have attempted to help widen access to higher education for students' low socio-economic backgrounds. Guerin (2014) describes these initiatives as designed to counterbalance the overrepresentation of wealthier students in universities. Most access programmes focus on in-reach provision (such as summer schools); flexible provision (part-time studies, open learning, etc.), or some outreach provision such as campus tours and open days. Some universities focusing on outreach provision have created links between schools and higher education institutions or have provided community-based outreach (Osborne, 2003). These initiatives target students at pre-entry stage (in primary or secondary schools), at entry stage (preparing students for the application process), or at post-entry stage (helping students adapt to university life) (Foong, 2010).

In contrast to these broader examples, this thesis specifically examines the Trinity Access Programmes (TAP) secondary schools outreach programme, with a distinct focus on pre-entry interventions. The study explores how TAP supports students in DEIS schools by building aspirations and pathways to higher education before the application stage. This research contributes to the field by providing an in-depth analysis of a structured, school-based outreach initiative operating within the Irish context.

Within the Irish context, the most recent National Access Plan (HEA, 2022) demonstrates that the Irish government has primarily relied on mechanisms within its immediate control, namely, the setting of targets and the allocation of funding. However, there remains a lack of clear direction on how this funding should be effectively used to drive meaningful change, particularly in enhancing access and participation among students from DEIS schools and supporting them in the crucial pre-entry phase. Although widening participation practitioners are committed to improving equity, they often lack the time and resources

needed to systematically assess and evaluate the impact of their initiatives (Younger et al, 2019).

In Chapter 4, widening participation interventions are examined in detail through a systematic literature review conducted by the author. The chapter presents the evidence base for international pre-entry interventions targeting second-level students and explores the educational outcomes measured in each study. This chapter also represents the first publication included in the integrated thesis. Chapters 5 and 6 also include a detailed literature review as part of each published manuscript. The next chapter outlines the extended methodology of the study, including the research design, the researcher's beliefs and positionality, and a detailed breakdown of the methods used throughout the integrated thesis.

Chapter 3 - Research Methodology

This chapter outlines the overarching methodological approach that has guided this thesis under the overarching research question of the study: *To what extent do school-university widening participation outreach programmes influence the educational aspirations, and post-school progression of marginalised secondary school students, and how are these outcomes shaped by intervention type and contextual factors?*

While the manuscripts presented in Chapters 4 to 6 include descriptions of the methods used in each individual phase, the purpose of this chapter is to supplement those manuscripts by providing additional methodological details that were abbreviated or omitted in the published versions. It also presents a comprehensive overview of the methodology underpinning the qualitative findings discussed in Chapter 7.

The chapter begins with an overview of the research design and methodology used to investigate the impact of school-based widening participation programmes on students from low socio-economic backgrounds. It is organised into several key sections to guide the reader through the methodological foundations of the study. The first section outlines philosophical grounding for the methodological approach taken in this thesis. The second section explores the researcher's positionality, reflecting on their relationship to the study and its context. The third section situates the project within a longitudinal and mixed methods research framework, explaining the rationale for this approach, how it compares to other methods, and why it was deemed most appropriate for this study. The final section discusses the integrated thesis format adopted for this PhD. It explains how the thesis is structured to include three academic papers and one qualitative findings chapter (Chapters 4-7), each of which contributes to addressing the overall research question. The rationale behind choosing this format is discussed, along with a description of how each manuscript aligns with and contributes to the overarching research aim. Finally, while this chapter provides an overarching methodological overview, the individual manuscripts in Chapters 4 to 6 present detailed accounts of the methods used to address each specific research question.

Researcher's Beliefs About Knowledge

Reflexivity is described by Morrison (2002) as a process through which the researcher comes to understand and acknowledge their own position in relation to the research being conducted. The context in which this study is situated is undoubtedly shaped by social, political, cultural, and historical factors. In particular, it is grounded within a country undergoing rapid diversification, and within an education system that increasingly prioritises equality, diversity, and inclusion through specific policy targets and ring-fenced funding (HEA, 2022). Awareness of the ontological and epistemological beliefs that influence a research paradigm, and recognition of their impact on research design and analysis, is regarded as an "acknowledgement of the researcher's belief systems and of the impact a researcher can have on the object of research" (Grogan & Simmons, 2012, p. 37).

A variety of ontological and epistemological positions are available to researchers, ranging from positivism and post-positivism to interpretivism, constructivism, critical theory, and pragmatism. Positivist paradigms, for example, assume an objective reality that can be measured and understood through empirical observation and logical reasoning. Interpretivist and constructivist paradigms, in contrast, suggest that reality is socially constructed and best understood through the subjective meanings people ascribe to their experiences. Critical theorists focus on exposing and challenging power structures embedded in social practices, often adopting a transformative agenda.

Against this backdrop, a subjectivist ontological stance has been adopted for the current study. From this perspective, the social world is understood as distinct from the natural world in that it is personally and humanly constructed. Emphasis is placed on the unique and individual rather than the general or universal, and truth is understood to reside in subjectivity rather than objectivity. In terms of epistemological assumptions, it is recognised that while an objective reality may exist, individual experiences and perspectives can shape how that reality is perceived.

Given the focus of this study on the complex and multi-layered nature of educational disadvantage and outreach interventions, a pragmatist paradigm was deemed the most appropriate. Pragmatism offers a flexible, pluralistic approach that avoids rigid allegiance to a single philosophical tradition. Maarouf (2019) discusses how pragmatism legitimates

mixing quantitative and qualitative methods in one research. Rather than being viewed as entirely distinct or opposing paradigms, quantitative and qualitative methodologies are now understood to exist along a continuum (Maarouf, 2019). A given study may lean more heavily toward one approach than the other, depending on its design and objectives. Positioned centrally on this continuum is the mixed methods approach, which integrates both qualitative and quantitative elements within a single study or a related group of studies (Creswell, 2014; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). Researchers may implement this combination either simultaneously, collecting both types of data at the same time, or sequentially, depending on the aims and structure of the research (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). The sequence of these methods is often guided by the specific research questions and the rationale behind choosing each method (Glogowska, 2011; Molina-Azorin, 2016). Central to this approach is the belief that integrating qualitative and quantitative methods yields a more comprehensive understanding of the research issue than relying on a single methodological tradition alone (Creswell, 2014; Molina-Azorin, 2016). Supporting this, Mitchell (2018) discussed two case studies employing mixed methods and found that combining both approaches facilitated richer data interpretation and a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Accordingly, this study is positioned within the pragmatist paradigm, which accepts that multiple explanations or interpretations of the world are possible. Pragmatism acknowledges that the world is not exclusively quantitative or qualitative and that a single approach on its own will only yield partial understanding of the phenomenon being investigated (Maarouf, 2019).

The pragmatist paradigm supports a practical orientation and favours a mixed or multiple method approach to answer research questions in the most effective and efficient way possible. In alignment with this paradigm, the Trinity Access Programmes (TAP) secondary outreach project aims to improve conditions for students in TAP linked schools so that they can make informed decisions regarding their post-school educational pathways. Furthermore, these improvements are intended to be implemented in ways that are feasible and sustainable (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie & Turner, 2007). These underlying assumptions have therefore influenced all stages of the research process, including the development of research questions, the selection of methods, the choice of a theoretical framework, and the drawing of conclusions.

Researcher's Positionality

My interest in this research topic first emerged during my Bachelor of Education studies in Dublin City University, when I chose an elective titled *Relating to Communities Experiencing Educational Disadvantage*, supervised by Psychology Professor Dr. Paul Downes. This elective was designed for trainee primary school teachers who might eventually work in DEIS schools. During my final year, I worked weekly with a small group of six boys in a primary school located in an economically and educationally disadvantaged community in Dublin. This experience provided valuable insights into educational inequality and sparked a broader interest in psychology and sociology.

After three years of teaching full-time, I pursued a Postgraduate Conversion Course in Psychology while continuing to teach part-time. My academic interests increasingly centred on social inclusion, educational inequality, and developmental psychology. Upon completion of this course, I was drawn to work with Trinity Access Programmes (TAP), whose ethos closely aligned with my interests in education, psychology, sociology and student advocacy.

It is important to acknowledge my own positionality as a PhD candidate and my longstanding relationship with TAP. I began working with TAP in 2019 as a research assistant and later that year became the Coordinator for Research and Impact. In this role, I coordinated data collection for the TAP Secondary Longitudinal Study, established in 2018 (Bray et al., 2022). In 2021, TAP agreed to fund my PhD research in the School of Education at Trinity College Dublin, which investigates the impact of TAP's school-university outreach programmes. Between 2021 and 2023, I continued as part of the TAP research team, coordinating data collection cycles in partnership schools and conducting consultations with school leadership teams. During this period, I was enrolled full-time in the PhD programme while concurrently working as the Coordinator for Research and Impact.

Although I was not directly involved in delivering the outreach programmes under investigation, I worked closely with those who were, many of whom were my colleagues and friends. While TAP funded my PhD fees, they had no ownership or influence over the conceptual design of my research. One could argue that this financial support might introduce bias or an obligation to present only positive findings. However, I have actively worked to mitigate such risks. My academic supervisors are external to TAP, and I have

engaged colleagues both within and outside the university as critical friends and mentors. This ensures the research remains empirically robust, ethical, and objective.

In September 2023, I transitioned to a role as Research Manager with *College Connect*, a PATH 3 widening participation initiative aimed at supporting and empowering individuals from underserved communities to access and succeed in higher education through participatory and peer-led research. This career move required me to transfer to the part-time PhD register while working full-time outside of TCD. Based in Maynooth Access Programmes (MAP), my role involved collaboration with access practitioners across four institutions: Maynooth University, Dublin City University, Dundalk Institute of Technology, and the Technological University of the Shannon - Athlone Campus. In July 2025, I assumed my current position as Research Manager at Maynooth University's Centre for Inclusive Higher Education. It is clear from the career path which I have chosen, that I have developed strong personal and professional commitments to widening participation and addressing systemic educational inequalities.

These experiences inevitably inform my perspective in this research. I bring with me an insider's understanding of university access programmes and the challenges faced by students from underserved or marginalised backgrounds. My belief in the potential of access programmes such as TAP and MAP to positively influence young people's educational journeys underpins my interest in this research. I hypothesise that the TAP outreach model, as discussed in this thesis, can be effective in engaging students and equipping them with the knowledge and opportunities needed to make informed decisions about their futures.

However, this research is not presented in a positivistic or celebratory tone. Rather, it reflects a reflexive and honest exploration of a complex context in which I am both an insider and an outsider. As an insider, I have worked in this field for a number of years and have built professional relationships with staff across TAP-linked schools. I have witnessed the structural and everyday challenges faced by marginalised students and their families who have been. At the same time, I am also an outsider. As a white, middle-class woman and a university-based researcher, I do not share the lived experiences of the young people or communities involved in this study. Students and school personnel were aware of my professional role, and I am mindful that this influenced how I was perceived during interviews and possibly how participants engaged with me. To mitigate bias and enrich the

analysis, I have sought ongoing feedback from colleagues who do not share my positionality, engaging them as critical friends throughout the research process. I have also undertaken extensive reading to challenge my assumptions and deepen my reflexive awareness, ensuring a rigorous and balanced approach to this study. The findings arising from this research have undergone academic peer review. Studies I to III have been accepted for publication, indicating their methodological rigour and reflecting the perceived value of the research in contributing to the field of widening participation and inclusive education.

This dual positioning reflects Aoki's (1996) concept of the hyphen, which captures the fluid, shifting, and sometimes ambiguous space I occupied during this research. The insider-outsider hyphen presents both challenges and opportunities. Kanuha (2000) cautions that insiders may become too close to participants and risk over-identification, while Fay (1996) argues that outsiders, by maintaining a degree of distance, may be better positioned to perceive broader contextual dynamics. Fletcher and Spracklen's (2014) assertion that social identities are not fixed or binary. Insider status is not determined solely by shared background but is shaped by relationships, roles, and the level of reflexivity a researcher brings to the process.

Insider researchers are typically more deeply embedded in their research contexts and, unlike outsiders, are rarely seen as those who "parachute into people's lives... and then vanish" (Gerrard, 1995, p. 59). Despite best intentions, however, this kind of 'parachuting' can still occur, often due to academic timelines and pressures. Drew (2006) colourfully refers to such researchers as 'seagulls', describing them as those who "fly into a community; crap all over everything then leave the community to tidy up the mess" (p. 40). I have actively work to avoid this kind of extractive or detached engagement. From my time as a primary school teacher through to my current role in research and widening participation, I have dedicated every aspect of my career to supporting and advocating for the communities I work with. I am mindful of the power and privilege I hold and aim to use these to amplify, not override, the voices of others. This long-term, values-led commitment helps ensure that my involvement is meaningful, embedded, and accountable. My view is that insider and outsider positions exist on a continuum, as widely discussed in the literature (Boulton, 2000; McKinley Brayboy & Deyhle, 2000; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) and Breen (2007) suggests that

conceptualising positionality in this way allows researchers to draw from the strengths of both positions while remaining aware of their limitations.

In this study, I consider my insider status an advantage. It enabled me to build rapport with participants and helped create an atmosphere of trust and ease during interviews. My familiarity with the outreach context allowed for a more informed and sensitive interpretation of the data, particularly in relation to programme aims and delivery. At the same time, my outsider perspective, shaped by my professional training, age, and socioeconomic background, offered a broader interpretive lens. Having worked directly with underserved young people in participatory and co-constructed programme planning, research, and evaluation processes, I have learned to remain open to perspectives that differ from my own and to continuously adapt my worldview in response to the lived realities and structural barriers that students encounter.

Nonetheless, I fully acknowledge that my positionality may have influenced both data collection and interpretation. As Haw (1996, p. 323) reminds us, “we all speak from a particular standpoint, out of particular experience, a particular history, a particular culture,” and acknowledging this subjectivity does not mean we are incapable of studying contexts beyond our own. Rather, it calls for ongoing reflexivity, transparency, and a commitment to ethical, rigorous research.

TAP Longitudinal Research Study

Trinity Access Programmes (TAP) are partnered with 21 secondary schools across the greater Dublin area in Ireland. These “linked schools” participate in TAP’s secondary school outreach initiatives. Of these, 18 schools have been designated as DEIS (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools) by the Department of Education. DEIS status is assigned to schools located in areas with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage and low rates of progression to higher education. Such schools receive additional state funding and supports aimed at promoting equity and inclusion. The remaining three TAP-linked schools, while not formally designated as DEIS, also experience persistently low progression rates to higher education and are therefore included in TAP’s outreach work.

As outlined in the literature review, DEIS designation is determined by an independent and standardised system that calculates deprivation scores at the level of *Small Areas* (SAs).

These scores are based on multiple indicators, including employment status, levels of education, prevalence of single-parent households, overcrowding, and dependency rates (Trutz & Pratschke, 2017). Small Area mapping was developed jointly by the Ordnance Survey of Ireland (OSI) and the Central Statistics Office (CSO) for the publication of the 2011 Small Area Population Statistics (SAPS).

Within the TAP longitudinal study, all students attending a TAP-linked school were invited to participate. As such, the operationalisation of social class in this research is based on **school-**level characteristics (e.g., DEIS designation) rather than on the individual socio-economic characteristics of students or their families (e.g., parental occupation, income, or education level). This represents a limitation of the dataset, as school-level proxy indicators may not fully capture the diversity of socio-economic backgrounds within schools. These limitations of proxy indicators, and the distinction between measures such as DEIS status versus individual-level socio-economic group classifications, are discussed earlier in the literature review.

The TAP longitudinal study is a major educational initiative in Ireland designed to track student experiences, attitudes, and outcomes across the secondary school years. As part of TAP's schools' outreach programme (Bray et al., 2022; Tangney et al., 2021), students attending TAP-linked schools who had provided both parental and personal consent were invited to participate in TAP longitudinal study, completing a student questionnaire annually at the end of each school year (April–May).

The student questionnaire contains 45 questions and takes approximately 21 minutes to complete. It records demographic information as well as measures of student experiences, attitudes, skills, and educational outcomes. The instruments used include both validated measures from the wider literature and scales developed and validated by the TAP research team. Since 2019, data have been collected each year from all participating students across the TAP-linked schools. A full account of the questionnaire, its measures, and their scoring is available in Tangney et al. (2021, pp. 26–28). The measures used from the student questionnaire for this thesis include those listed in the Table below. The specific measures for each publication are outlined in the materials section of both publications (Study II and Study III).

Table 4: Measures used in thesis for Studies II and III.

Name	Measure
Future Goals and Aspirations (Appleton, Christenson, Kim and Reschly, 2006)	Five-point Likert scale; strongly disagree to strongly agree (1-5). My education will create many future opportunities for me; School is important for achieving my future goals; I plan to continue my education following school; Going to college after school is important; I am hopeful about my future.
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 course (PLC); 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.
Ethnicity (CSO, 2016)	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.
Parental Support (The Economic and Social Research Institute)	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). 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?
Gender	Male/ Female / Prefer not to say
Year group	1st to 6th year
Mother's Education Level	Does your mother have a university degree? (Yes/ No)

Father's Education Level	Does your father have a university degree? (Yes/ No)
School Type	DEIS/ Non-DEIS School (meta data)
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)
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).

In addition to the annual student survey, TAP developed a standardised *post-school progression tracker* to address the absence of centralised post-school progression data in Ireland. Using this tool, guidance counsellors and school staff in TAP-linked schools contacted their former students between October and December 2022 to record their destinations after leaving school. Data is collected on student progression status, QQI levels (https://nfq.qqi.ie/), course provider, course institution and standardised course field using the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) (Eurostat, 2013). Information was gathered through follow-up emails and phone calls, ensuring that progression data were collected systematically across all participating schools.

Other data collected by TAP include a teacher questionnaire and a school management questionnaire for those working in TAP linked schools. However, these datasets were not used in this thesis.

Data used in this thesis

The studies reported in this thesis draw on TAP longitudinal study data collected in 2019 and 2022. Specifically:

- **Study II** uses questionnaire data collected in 2022 across all student year groups (1st–6th year). It also matches 2019 data and 2022 data to specifically investigate the change of students' future goals and aspirations scores over time.
- **Study III** focuses on a subset of the 2022 data, examining final-year (6th-year) students as they approached their Leaving Certificate examinations. It matches the 2022 student questionnaire data with the 2022 student progression tracker data to investigate students plans and post-school progression.
- **Study IV** draws on the 2022 student questionnaire for recruitment purposes, selecting six final-year students (subset of Study III) who subsequently participated in one-to-one interviews in 2024. In this study, the 2022 demographic and questionnaire data were combined with new interview data to explore students' post-school transitions.

This progressive narrowing of focus begins with the full 2022 cohort in Study II, moves to final-year students in Study III, and culminates in a small qualitative sample in Study IV.

Longitudinal Research Approach

Longitudinal research is defined as 'research emphasising the study of change and containing at minimum three repeated observations (although more than three is better) on at least one of the substantive constructs of interest' (Polyhart and Vandenberg, 2010, p.97). The concept of this longitudinal study follows approaches taken by international longitudinal studies of child development. Large scale international studies which investigate young people's development over time include the Millennium Cohort Study in the UK (including Northern Ireland), the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) in Canada, and the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS) in the US. The Growing Up in Ireland study (Williams et. al. 2011) and the Secondary School Longitudinal Study (PPSL) (Smyth, Dunne, Darmody and McCoy, 2008) are two longitudinal projects situated in the Irish context. The Post-primary School Longitudinal Study is particularly relevant as it explored students' decision making about their post-school pathways.

As part of the literature review for this study, the researcher conducted a systematic review of widening participation (WP) programmes that focused on secondary students' educational outcomes, measured quantitatively (see Chapter 4). Findings showed that just four studies used a longitudinal approach to evaluating the impact of their widening participation programme were conducted around the world in the last decade. These studies were based in Australia (Geagea et al., 2019), the United States (Crump et al., 2015), the United Kingdom (Barkat, 2019) and Germany (Peter and Zambre, 2017) but none in Ireland. As highlighted in the discussion section of the systematic literature review, there was variation in the results, some studies showed sustained increases in college expectations overtime (Petre and Zambre, 2017) and increased enrolment over time (Barkat, 2019). Other studies found significant decreases of students' college expectations over time for the control group but significant increases in discussions with others about college for intervention groups (Geagea et al., 2019). Worryingly, one study showed that despite small increases in college enrolment, intervention students had lower retention rates (Hyman, 2020). This analysis of the literature highlighted to the researcher, the need to investigate the impact of these types of intervention over time in order to investigate their true impact. This thesis will be the first study of its kind in Ireland which address this gap in the literature by investigating the longitudinal impact of the TAP secondary WP programme.

Magnussen and colleagues (Magnusson, 2000) suggest that using a longitudinal questionnaire is the optimal vehicle for recording information on change in the population. A longitudinal approach allows for greater analytical investigation of the research questions as well as more nuanced insights than that of a cross-sectional study. Longitudinal questionnaires are optimal in terms of measuring change over time and the long term (or lack of) effects of an intervention (Magnusson, 2000). Longitudinal data supports the possibility of analysis revealing the effect of an intervention over time, changes in attitudes or behaviours, analysis of dynamic relationships as well as better analysis of effects that are immediate, sequential, delayed or latent. Additionally, the longitudinal design allows for the control of unobserved characteristics of the young person and their environments that do not change over time.

The TAP secondary longitudinal project represents a major advance on what has hitherto been available in research into widening participation of groups from low-socio economic

backgrounds in Ireland. This thesis aims to utilise the rich data being collected by TAP since 2019 to investigate the impact of the TAP outreach intervention on students' post-secondary college readiness and progression. This study will extract a unique longitudinal dataset that has not been investigated before. The researcher will use this data to examine the impact of the TAP outreach interventions both cross-sectionally and over time, through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model as well as taking insights from Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital. Specifically, the researcher will investigate the longitudinal impact of students' future goals and educational aspirations, as well as the impact of TAP programmes on post-school progression at various time points.

Mixed-Methods Approach

This thesis adopts a mixed-methods approach to data collection, comprising distinct yet complementary research phases. A mixed-methods design was selected as the most appropriate design for addressing the complex research questions underpinning this study, which seek to understand not only the outcomes of a widening participation outreach programme but also the processes and contexts that shape those outcomes. The rise of mixed-methods research in the 1990s (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998) responded to the limitations of relying on a single methodological approach. A single method alone would not have been sufficient to capture the multidimensional nature of educational aspiration and post-school progression, as the use of differing approaches has the potential to provide a greater depth and breadth of understanding than either could achieve in isolation (Almalki, 2016).

As discussed earlier, this study is informed by the pragmatist paradigm, which supports the use of whichever methods are most appropriate for addressing the research problem (Maarouf, 2019). Pragmatism legitimates the integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches by emphasising practical outcomes and methodological flexibility. Rather than treating quantitative and qualitative research as polar opposites, they are now recognised as existing on a continuum (Creswell, 2014; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004). A mixed-method design is positioned centrally on this spectrum and may emphasise one approach more heavily depending on research aims and context (Johnson & Christensen, 2012; Maarouf, 2019). Crucially, this orientation allows the researcher to sequence or combine methods based on

the logic of the inquiry (Glogowska, 2011; Molina-Azorin, 2016), producing deeper and more nuanced understandings than any single approach could achieve on its own (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004, Creswell, 2014; Mitchell, 2018).

In Phase 1, a systematic literature review was conducted in line with PRISMA guidelines (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) to establish an evidence-informed foundation for the empirical studies that followed. Phase 2 involved quantitative longitudinal analysis using student survey data gathered at multiple time points. This allowed for the identification of trends, patterns, and possible influencing factors in students' aspirations and progression. In Phase 3, qualitative interviews were used to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of students who had previously taken part in the longitudinal survey, offering deeper contextual understanding and insight.

While the thesis as a whole does not claim to follow a mixed-methods design, one component, Study IV, incorporated a mixed-methods approach. This study integrated longitudinal survey responses, post-school progression data, and qualitative interview accounts. In doing so, Study IV combined the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods to explore educational processes and outcomes over time. This integration was particularly suited to understanding not just whether TAP interventions had an effect, but also how and why such effects may have occurred.

The structured nature of quantitative research offers critical strengths to research studies (Jopling, 2019). In this case, it enabled the collection of data from a large and diverse student population, across TAP-linked schools. This broad reach was instrumental in identifying trends, measuring change over time, and exploring potential relationships between participation in outreach activities and student outcomes. Quantitative methods also facilitated the use of longitudinal analysis, allowing for the tracking of aspirations, attitudes, and progression across key educational transitions. This was especially important given the study's interest in both immediate and sustained effects of widening participation interventions. Moreover, policymakers and educational stakeholders often rely on numerical evidence when evaluating programme effectiveness (Jopling, 2019), and so the quantitative findings were vital in producing policy-relevant insights. While quantitative data alone may risk overlooking the complexities of students' lived realities (Scott and Usher, 2011), its rigour and scope provides

an essential empirical foundation for the study (Jopling, 2019). However, these patterns alone do not explain the meanings, mechanisms, or individual contexts behind them.

The subsequent qualitative phase then built upon this quantitative foundation, offering interpretive depth and amplifying the voices behind the trends observed. As Morrow and Crivello (2015) argue, qualitative research can reveal the nuanced experiences and social processes that numbers may obscure. It offers a way to explore individuals' intentions, beliefs, and perceptions elements that are often reduced or overlooked in statistical models (Scott & Usher, 2011). Furthermore, qualitative data can explain why certain relationships appear in quantitative findings, deepening the analysis (Dale, Wathan & Higgins, 2008). In addition to the quantitative longitudinal component, qualitative data were specifically collected to assess the long-term impact of the TAP outreach programme.

Neale and Flowerdew (2003) identify three core approaches to studying change over time in qualitative research. The first is a cross-sectional approach, which infers change by comparing different groups at different stages. For example, one might interview students in junior cycle, senior cycle, and post-school phases to assess how perceptions of TAP evolve. The second is a prospective longitudinal approach, which involves repeated data collection from the same participants over time, such as in the Growing Up in Ireland study. This model allows researchers to follow the transitions of individuals from education into further study or employment. The third approach, which was employed in this thesis, is a retrospective, mixed-method, longitudinal design. This involves engaging participants after the relevant experiences have concluded, enabling them to reflect with the benefit of hindsight. In this study, qualitative interviews were conducted with students who had attended TAP-linked schools, participated in the TAP outreach programme, and completed the TAP longitudinal survey. These interviews occurred two years after the students had left school and invited them to reflect on their post-school journeys and the influence of TAP interventions.

Wenger (1999) highlights the value of combining qualitative and quantitative methods within a longitudinal design allowed for a more informed interpretation of survey data and enabled the exploration of hypotheses generated through quantitative findings. By linking these retrospective qualitative reflections with pre-existing quantitative data, this study aimed to produce a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the longer-term

effects of TAP outreach. This approach aligns with the study's positioning within the pragmatist paradigm, which accepts that multiple interpretations of reality can coexist and that a single approach on its own will only yield partial understanding of the phenomenon being investigated (Maarouf, 2019). Accordingly, combining methods allowed the researcher to explore not just outcomes, but also the meanings and mechanisms underpinning those outcomes. This pragmatic, flexible approach was therefore well-suited to the complex nature of the research questions, providing a fuller account of both what happened and why, in relation to students' educational progression and the role of widening participation interventions over time.

As Lund (2012) suggests, mixed-methods research offers the opportunity for a more holistic and nuanced understanding through the convergence of different forms of data. Converging findings can reinforce the validity of results, while divergence can lead to valuable reflection, hypothesis revision, and new theoretical insights. Mixed-methods approaches are widely considered the gold standard in educational research for their capacity to respond to complex, multi-layered questions. In this study, the emphasis on quantitative research-used in two of the three main phases - was essential for identifying trends over time, capturing large-scale student data, and providing a more robust evidence base to support claims of programme effectiveness. Its structured design and statistical breadth made it possible to draw some conclusions about patterns in student aspirations, and progression across TAP linked schools. The final qualitative phase, while smaller in scale, added valuable depth and context to these findings. Together, both methods contributed to a more comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of TAP's influence on students' educational outcomes.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for this research was granted by the School of Education Ethics Committee at Trinity College Dublin as part of the overarching TAP study. The TAP study's ethics application included protocols for both the collection of primary data and the analysis of secondary data, ensuring that all aspects of the research were conducted in accordance with institutional guidelines and GDPR requirements. The PhD student (author of this thesis) was a named researcher on the project and was granted access to the secondary data to conduct the

analyses reported in Studies II and III, as well as to conduct interviews with students in Study IV.

For Studies II and III, secondary data were provided in line with the approved ethics application and TCD GDPR guidelines. The data were securely stored on password-protected systems accessible only to the research team and were de-identified prior to analysis to ensure participant confidentiality. Although the data were secondary, the original participants (and their parents) had provided informed consent for the collection and future use of their data for research purposes. All data were used solely for the purposes outlined in the ethics application, and care was taken to avoid misrepresentation or overinterpretation of findings. Analyses were conducted in a manner that respected participants' dignity and minimised any potential harm.

For Study IV, primary data were collected by the author through interviews with six students who had participated in the TAP longitudinal study in 2022. Participants were clearly informed that their involvement in the study was entirely voluntary. They were assured that they could withdraw from the study at any point, without needing to provide a reason and without facing any negative consequences. Participants were also reminded that they could choose not to respond to any question if they wished. At both the beginning and end of each interview, the researcher reiterated participants' rights in accordance with GDPR regulations, outlining the measures taken to ensure confidentiality and the anonymisation of all data collected. Particular emphasis was placed on clarifying that participation in the study would have no impact on students' access to educational supports, either present or future. Details of ethical approval, consent forms, and data management systems are outlined in Appendices 1 to 3.

Moving beyond procedural ethics, the researcher was guided by the work of Tolich and Tumilty (2020), who stress the need for ethics to be embedded throughout the research process rather than limited to formal protocols. In addressing the inherent power dynamics between researcher and participant, the researcher also drew on Mertens (2014), who emphasises the importance of considering ethical responsibilities related to reciprocity, power imbalances, and fair representation in research methods. Lenette (2019) further differentiates between routine ethical procedures and the 'ethically important moments' that arise unexpectedly during fieldwork, highlighting the need for ethical reflexivity as an

ongoing aspect of research practice. Despite common methodological challenges, such as time constraints, limited access to participants, procedural demands, and institutional requirements, the researcher maintained a strong commitment to ethical integrity throughout all stages of the research process, including data collection and analysis.

Integrated Thesis

Mason and Merga (2018) outline the benefits and challenges to completing one's PhD through publication. Benefits include dissemination of findings, skills for research, career prospects and motivation. Challenges include thesis cohesion, time pressures as well as publishing journeys. As shown in Figure 7, this Mega Sandwich Model (Mason and Merga, 2018) closely resembles the traditional five-chapter thesis. This model ensures that the doctoral thesis meets the institutional guidelines and includes all of the standard thesis components, including an introduction, literature review, conceptual framework, methodology, results, discussion and conclusion.

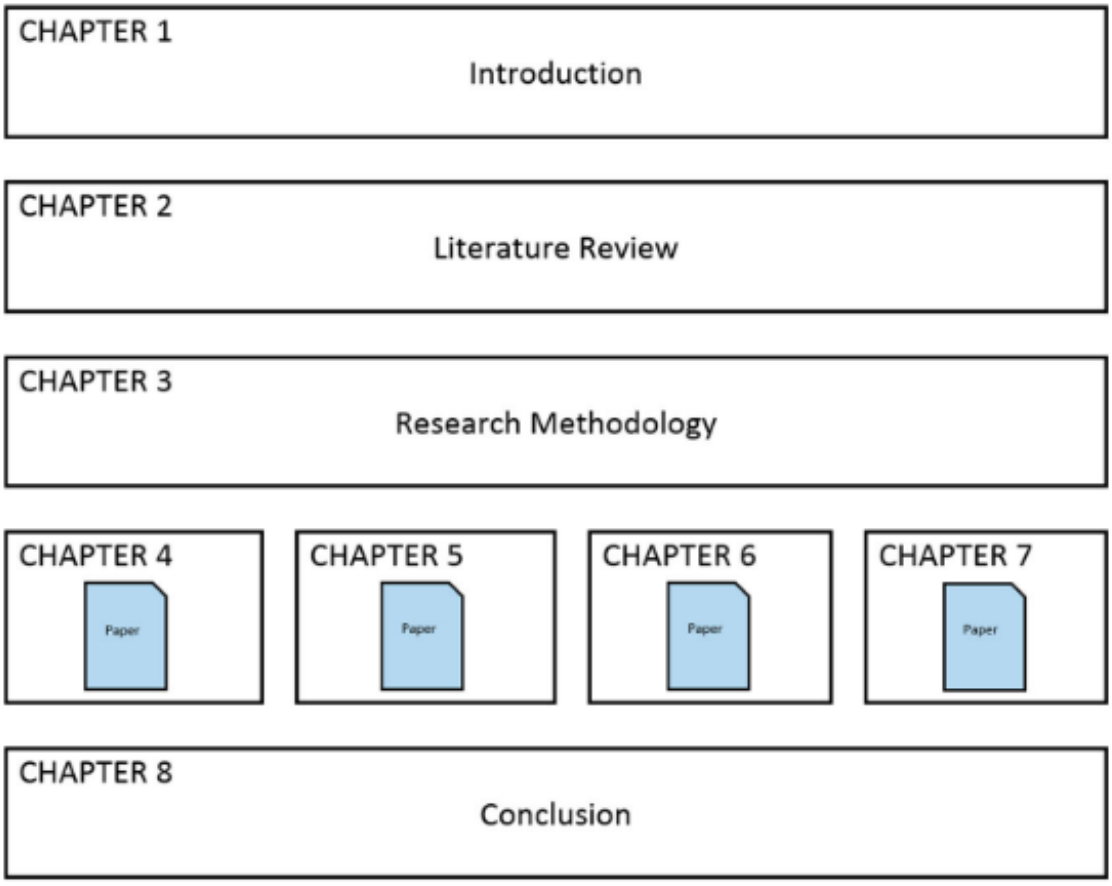

Figure 7: Mega Sandwich Model (Mason and Merga, 2018)

The researcher and her supervisors decided together to utilise the Mega Sandwich Model (Mason and Merga, 2018) to ensure it meets Trinity College's requirements as set out by the Dean of Research and the college calendar. Chapters four to six are structured as three separate studies (or published manuscripts), however together they tell one story. Each chapter has its own literature review, methodology, results, and findings. The seventh chapter details the qualitative findings from the mixed-methods longitudinal chapter. As the requirements for an integrated thesis in the School of Education at Trinity College Dublin specify the inclusion of three published papers, this criterion has been met with the first three published manuscripts (Chapters 4, 5 and 6). Consequently, the qualitative findings were incorporated into the thesis as a standalone chapter rather than being submitted as a journal article at this stage. However, the researcher intends to develop this chapter into a journal article upon completion of the PhD. An overview of the structure of this thesis is highlighted in Figure 8 below.

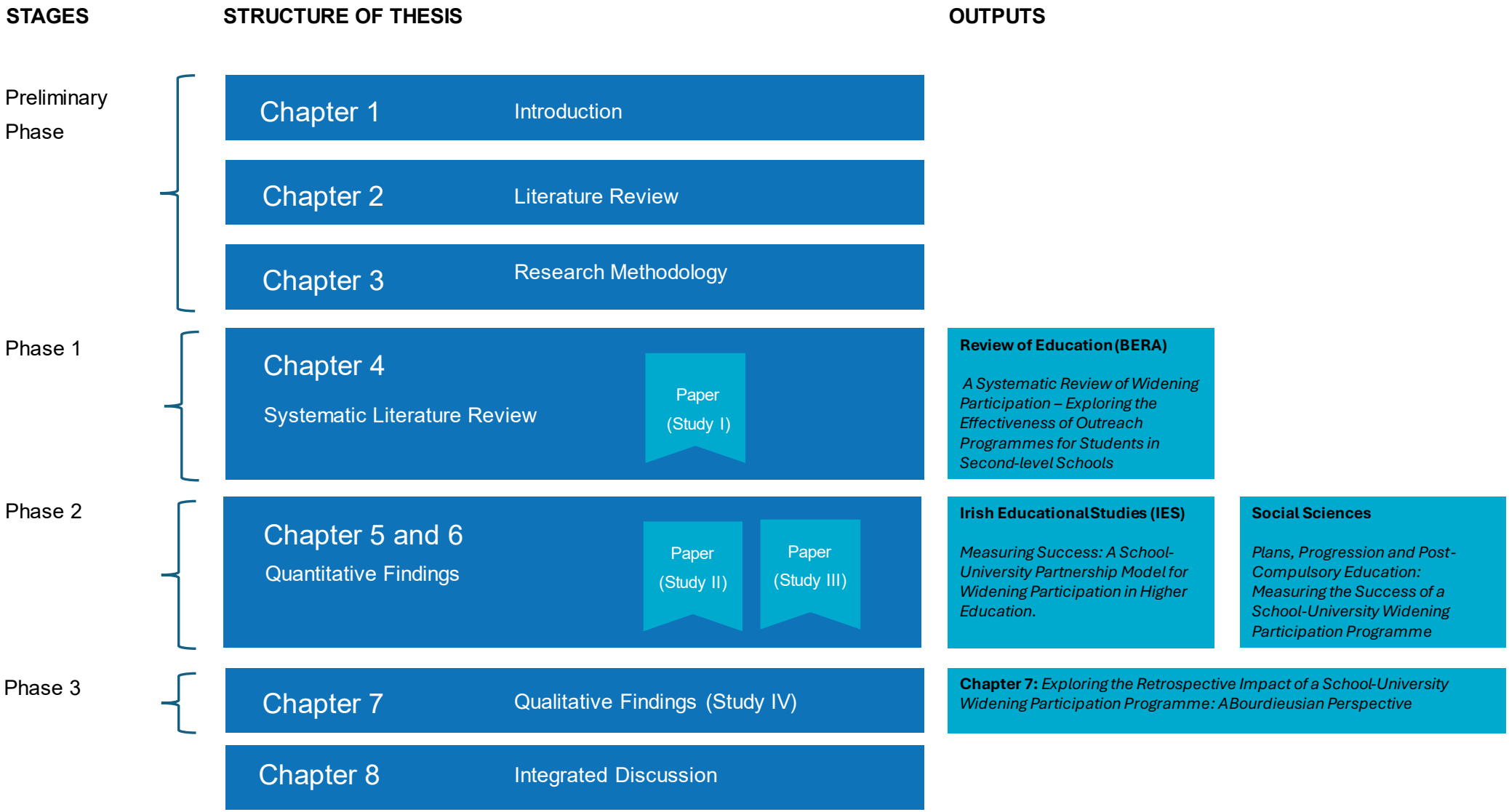

Figure 8: Structure of thesis

The next section will describe the research questions and methodology for each study.

Each chapter has its own sub-set of research questions and methodology which is linked to the overall research questions of the thesis: *To what extent do school-university widening participation outreach programmes influence the educational aspirations and post-school progression of marginalised secondary school students, and how are these outcomes shaped by intervention type and contextual factors?*

All eight chapters contribute to answering this central question, forming a cohesive narrative that connects the individual studies into a unified body of research.

Phase 1 - Systematic Literature Review (Study I)

The first phase of the study is examining the international evidence base on WP outreach programmes with secondary school students. The published manuscript presented in Chapter 4 presents a systematic review of pre-college interventions aimed at improving access to higher education for students facing barriers, particularly those from low socio-economic and under-represented backgrounds. Unlike earlier reviews that focused on narrow subgroups, this review encompasses all disadvantaged students, using updated search criteria to reflect a decade of expanded research. Study 1 is described in Table 4 below and the detailed methodology is given in Chapter 4.

Table 5: Study I - Exploring the Evidence Base

Research Questions	**Methodology**	**Output - Published Manuscript**
RQ1a: What evidence (2012-2021) exists regarding the effectiveness of WP programmes for second-level students from low socio-economic backgrounds? RQ1b: What types of WP interventions have been studied? RQ1c: What is the impact of these interventions on aspirations, readiness, and enrolment?	Systematic Literature Review (PRISMA)	**Review of Education (BERA)** Title: *A Systematic Review of Widening Participation - Exploring the Effectiveness of Outreach Programmes for Students in Second-level Schools*

A comprehensive search was conducted across four major databases, Web of Science, EBSCOhost (including ERIC, PsychInfo, and BEI), AEI, and Scopus, in February 2022. The search strategy was developed iteratively using the Participants Intervention Outcome (PIO) framework and included various synonyms for widening participation and under-served groups (see Chapter 4). Electronic searches were supplemented by hand-searching reference lists and mining relevant systematic reviews.

Eligibility criteria required studies to be published between 2012 and 2022, focus on interventions targeting secondary school students not yet enrolled in higher education, and evaluate outcomes such as enrolment, aspirations, or college readiness. Only quantitative and mixed-method studies were included; purely descriptive or policy-focused works were excluded.

From an initial pool of 1,168 studies imported into Covidence, 137 full texts were screened, with 40 undergoing detailed data extraction. Final inclusion was based on methodological rigor and relevance to the research question, yielding 19 studies for analysis. The selection process involved multiple stages of screening, some of which were double screened for accuracy and consistency, and is documented in a PRISMA flowchart in Chapter 4.

This systematic literature review informed the researcher of the types of interventions used, the ways in which other researchers are investigating impact of these interventions as well as the educational outcomes measured. Furthermore, it highlighted the gaps in the extant literature and research areas that should be further explored. All of this, in turn informed how the researcher designed phase 2 of the study.

Phase 2 - Quantitative Longitudinal Analysis (Studies II and III)

The second phase of this thesis draws on the rich dataset collected by TAP since 2019 to investigate the impact of the TAP outreach intervention on students' post-secondary college readiness and progression. Students from TAP-affiliated schools who had obtained both parental and personal consent were invited to complete a survey each year, typically between April and May, at the end of the school year. This was conducted as part of a large-scale longitudinal educational project in Ireland, known as the TAP schools' outreach programme

(Bray et al., 2022; Tangney et al., 2021). Detailed information about the questionnaire, including its measures and scoring methods, is available in Tangney et al. (2021).

Studies II, III, and IV use data gathered in 2022 from the TAP longitudinal study, with the focus of each study narrowing progressively. Study II examines data from 2022 across all year groups (1st to 6th year), Study III focuses on final-year (6th-year) students just before they completed their Leaving Certificate examinations, and Study IV recruits six of these same students for one-to-one interviews in 2024. In Study IV, the 2022 TAP data is used for recruitment purposes, with students' demographic information matched to the new empirical data collected through the interviews to explore their post-school progression. The funnelling of the data, and how each study represents a subset of the previous one, is illustrated in the diagram below.

Figure 9: Breakdown of How Data is linked in Study's II, II and IV.

An overview of Study II and II and their associated publications are outlined in Table 5 below.

Table 6: Studies II & III - Quantitative Analysis of TAP Impact

Study	**Research Questions**	**Methodology**	**Output - Published Manuscript**
Study II	RQ2a: What influence does TAP outreach have on students' future goals and aspirations? RQ2b: What contextual factors moderate this impact? RQ2c: Are effects on goals/aspirations sustained over time?	Quantitative Longitudinal Study (Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model)	**Irish Educational Studies** Title: *Measuring Success: A School-University Partnership Model for Widening Participation in Higher Education*
Study III	RQ3a: Do students achieve the post-school plans made during final year? RQ3b: Is participation in TAP WP programmes associated with higher likelihood of post-school progression?	Quantitative Longitudinal Study (Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model)	**Social Sciences (Special Issue: Tackling Educational Inequality: Issues and Solutions)** Title: *Plans, Progression and Post-Compulsory Education: Measuring the Success of a School-University Widening Participation Programme*

Study II

Study II investigates the impact of the TAP outreach programmes (Mentoring and Pathways activities) on students' post-secondary education aspirations and future goals. Conducted within the broader TAP schools' outreach initiative, the research draws on a rich, longitudinal dataset collected in 2019 and 2022. Surveys were administered each spring to students in 19 TAP-affiliated secondary schools in the greater Dublin area, schools serving communities with

historically low higher education progression rates. The final sample includes 3,697 students, with data from both DEIS and non-DEIS schools.

Students completed surveys capturing their future goals, college aspirations, demographic details, and participation in TAP outreach activities, such as mentoring and Pathways to College (PTC) programmes. Students were grouped by low (0-2) or high (3-6) engagement in Pathways activities and whether they had a mentor or not. Mentors included teachers, university students, past pupils, or peer mentors. Participation in these activities was voluntary or teacher-nominated.

The study is framed by Bronfenbrenner's Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model, which emphasizes how individual development is shaped by interactions across multiple, nested environmental systems. This lens allows for an exploration of how demographic factors (e.g., gender, ethnicity, maternal education), school context, and socio-political influences interact with outreach interventions to shape educational trajectories.

Quantitative methods were used to analyse the data. Independent samples t-tests and ANOVAs compared student aspiration scores across key demographic and contextual groups. Hierarchical regression assessed the influence of TAP participation on aspirations while controlling for PPCT variables. A longitudinal component tracked changes in student aspirations over time using matched surveys from 2019 and 2022 (N=776), using paired samples t-tests.

Study III

Study III draws on data from 227 final-year (6th year) students in 11 secondary schools in the greater Dublin area, all affiliated with a widening participation programme. These schools serve areas with low higher education progression. Surveys were administered at two time points in 2022, April (pre-exams) and October (six months post-school), as part of a broader longitudinal initiative. In April, 495 6th year students were surveyed; 319 students from 11 schools participated in the October follow-up, with 227 providing complete post-progression data.

The quasi-experimental design evaluates the impact of mentoring and “Pathways” outreach activities on students' post-secondary progression. Outcome variables included students’ self-reported post-school plans (Time 1), self-reported actual post-school progression (Time 2), and whether they followed their plans. Independent variables included mentoring and Pathways engagement; demographic factors (gender, ethnicity, parental education, school type, and parental support) served as covariates.

A post-school progression data collection tool was developed for standardised tracking via school guidance teams. Analyses included descriptive statistics, chi-square tests for associations between interventions and progression, and binomial logistic regression to assess the predictive value of mentoring, Pathways, and demographic factors on progression to post-secondary education.

This mixed-method, cross-sectional and longitudinal analysis provides an investigation of TAP’s effectiveness in supporting students’ post-school progression, using both Bronfenbrenner’s Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model and empirical evidence.

Phase 3 - Qualitative Study (Study IV)

In the third phase of this study, the researcher gathered and analysed primary qualitative data. Six in-depth interviews were conducted with former students from six different TAP-linked secondary schools. All interviews took place two years after the participants had completed secondary school, allowing for reflective insights into their experiences with the TAP outreach programme and their post-school journeys. The qualitative data were analysed using directed content analysis, as outlined by Hsieh and Shannon (2005). This approach allowed the researcher to examine the data through the lens of pre-existing theoretical concepts and research findings, while remaining open to new insights emerging from participants’ narratives. The findings from these interviews were presented as a dedicated qualitative findings chapter (Chapter 7) within this thesis. This chapter is presented as a

traditional findings chapter and therefore details of the methodology for Chapter 7 are outlined below.

Table 7: Study IV - Qualitative Exploration of Retrospective Impact

Research Question	**Methodology**	**Output - Findings Chapter in Integrated Thesis**
RQ4a *How did engagement in TAP-linked school outreach programmes influence students' future aspirations, goals, and post-school pathways?*	Mixed-method, Qualitative 1:1 Interviews Directed Content Analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005)	**Findings Chapter Title:** *Exploring the Retrospective Impact of a School-University Widening Participation Programme: A Bourdieusian Perspective*

Participants

As identified in Phase 2, Study III of the TAP longitudinal research, survey data was available for 229 students who graduated from a TAP-linked school in summer 2022. These students had completed both the TAP final-year school survey and the post-school progression form by December 2022. Of these 229 students, 115 had engaged with either TAP Mentoring or TAP Pathways activities during their time in secondary school.

Among the 229 students, 115 had provided valid email addresses and consented to be contacted by the TAP longitudinal study team after completing school. All 115 were invited via email to participate in a one-to-one interview between October and December 2024. From this outreach, six individuals volunteered to take part in the qualitative phase of the study. Each participated in an in-depth, semi-structured interview lasting between 40 and 60 minutes.

All six participants, Martin, Zak, Harry, Meg, Ali, and Tadhg, completed their Leaving Certificate in 2022 and were offered higher education places through the Central Applications Office (CAO) system. This chapter explores the research question: *How did engagement in TAP-linked school outreach programmes influence students' future aspirations, goals, and post-school pathways?*

Each participant attended a different TAP-linked school, with four of the schools holding DEIS status and two being non-DEIS. However, the non-DEIS schools were located in areas with low rates of progression to higher education and were therefore part of the TAP network. Four of the participants identified as male, one as female, and one preferred not to state their gender. Five of the six students came from families where neither parent had attended university, and one came from a household where both parents had completed higher education. Despite both parents having completed higher education, this participant was included in the study as they had attended a TAP link school and had participated in the TAP outreach activities and longitudinal study.

All participants had taken part in at least three TAP Pathways activities during their final year of secondary school, and five of the six had a TAP mentor. When asked about their post-school plans in their final year, five students expressed an intention to attend university, while one planned to pursue a Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) course. By the time of the interviews, all six were enrolled in higher education. However, for most, this was not the course or institution originally offered through the CAO. Two had transferred to new institutions and courses, and two others had switched programmes within the same institution. Only two participants, Ali and Tadhg, had remained in the original courses they started in 2022.

All 115 students who had provided consent to be contacted post-school were invited to be interviewed. This included students who had taken part in TAP outreach activities and who had progressed on to a variety of pathways including, work, apprenticeships, foundation courses, PLCs, university and those who were not studying or working. While these interviews provide detailed insights into the experiences of young people who engaged with TAP during secondary school, the sample is small and self-selecting. All six participants who volunteered to participate in an interview with the PhD researcher were attending university at the time of interview, and none were in further education, apprenticeships, or employment. As such, the sample reflects a very specific subset of TAP-engaged students, those who successfully transitioned into higher education and were willing to discuss their experiences. This limits the generalisability of the findings, particularly regarding students who may have disengaged from education or chosen non-university pathways. Nonetheless, the narratives presented here offer valuable perspectives that help illuminate and

contextualise trends observed in the broader longitudinal dataset, and they support a deeper, Bourdieusian analysis of access and widening participation in post-secondary education.

Table 3 outlines the participants' demographics at the point just before Leaving Certificate completion in 2022, while Table 4 provides updated information from the time of their post-school progression as recorded in December 2022 and then their interviews in 2024.

Table 8: Studies II & III - Demographics Information on Interviewee Participants from Time Point 1 (April 2022).

Time Point 1 April 2022							
Participant	Gender	School	School's Gender	School Type	Ethnicity	Mother's Education	Father's Education
Participant 1 Martin	Male	School A	Mixed	DEIS	Irish	Did not attend University	Did not attend University
Participant 2 Zak	Male	School B	Mixed	DEIS	Irish	Did not attend University	Did not attend University
Participant 3 Harry	Male	School C	Mixed	DEIS	Irish	Did not attend University	Did not attend University
Participant 4 Meg	Female	School D	Mixed	Non-DEIS	Irish	Did not attend University	Did not attend University
Participant 5 Ali	Prefer not to say	School E	Mixed	DEIS	Irish	Did not attend University	Did not attend University
Participant 6 Tadhg	Male	School F	Boys	Non-DEIS	Irish	Attended University	Attended University

Table 9: Information on Interviewee Participants TAP Engagement, Post-school Plans (April 2022), Post-School Progression (December 2022) and Post-School Progression Follow up (December 2024).

Time Point 1 (April 2022) Secondary Data - TAP longitudinal Data				**Time Point 2 (December 2022)** Secondary Data - TAP longitudinal Data			**Time Point 2 (December 2022)** Primary Data - Qualitative Interviews	
Participant April '22	Mentor Status April '22	Pathways Activities April '22	Post School Plans April '22	Progression Status December '22	Course Level December '22	Course Field December '22	Follow up December '24	Course Student December '24
Participant 1 Martin	Mentor	3 - 6 Activities	University	Accepted CAO Higher Education	Level 8	Business, Administration and Law	Changed Course	Business, Administration and Law
Participant 2 Zak	Mentor	3 - 6 Activities	PLC	Accepted CAO Higher Education	Level 7	Business, Administration and Law	Changed College & Course	Business, Administration and Law
Participant 3 Harry	No Mentor	3 - 6 Activities	University	Accepted CAO Higher Education	Level 8	Business, Administration and Law	Changed College & Course	Business, Administration and Law
Participant 4 Meg	Mentor	3 - 6 Activities	University	Deferred CAO Higher Education	Level 8	Arts and Humanities	Changed College & Course	Education

Participant 5 Ali	Mentor	3 - 6 Activities	University	Accepted CAO Higher Education	Level 8	Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)	Same Course Since Entry	Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)
Participant 6 Tadhg	Mentor	3 - 6 Activities	University	Accepted CAO Higher Education	Level 8	Social Sciences, Journalism and Information	Same Course Since Entry	Social Sciences, Journalism and Information

Methods

One-to-One Interviews

Data were gathered through six one-to-one, semi-structured interviews with students who had previously participated in TAP programmes. Each interview lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, and was conducted within two years of the participant leaving secondary school. All participants had given informed consent, and ethical clearance for the study was obtained.

The interview guide began with open-ended questions exploring students' experiences since leaving school, before moving to targeted questions based on prior TAP quantitative findings. These interviews began with open-ended questions that invited participants to describe their educational journeys since completing secondary school. Follow-up questions focused more explicitly on pre-identified themes from the quantitative TAP study, including students' participation in mentoring and Pathways programmes, the development of educational aspirations, school-level influences on post-school decision-making, and the role of family or community in shaping choices (See Appendix 4 for interview schedule). These topics were selected because they reflected core variables identified in the TAP Schools' longitudinal study as predictive of progression and aspiration, thus aligning with the deductive category application typical of directed content analysis (Mayring, 2001).

Rationale for Using Directed Content Analysis

Qualitative research offers a diverse set of analytic strategies, and the choice of approach must be tailored to the specific goals, context, and epistemological positioning of the study (Knafl & Howard, 1984). In designing the qualitative phase of this research, several analytic approaches were considered, including grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Glaser, 1992; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), discourse analysis (Burman & Parker, 1993), narrative analysis (Murray, 2003; Riessman, 1993) and thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Each of these approaches has distinct strengths, particularly when applied within specific theoretical frameworks. However, they were not the most appropriate fit for the aims of this study.

Grounded theory, for instance, offers a rigorous method for building theory from data (Walker and Myrick, 2006). Yet this study was not designed to develop a new theoretical model. Instead, it aimed to explore patterns already identified in the earlier quantitative

phases, making the inductive and open-ended nature of grounded theory less applicable. Similarly, discourse analysis are highly detailed and language-focused, often used to understand meaning construction in interaction, which was beyond the scope of this study's objectives. Thematic analysis was also considered. It is widely used for identifying and interpreting patterns across qualitative data and is valued for its theoretical flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2006). However, it is largely exploratory and inductive in nature (Boyatzis, 1998; Rice & Ezzy, 1999), and therefore less well-matched to a study that was already informed by prior theory and quantitative findings. Since this research was not beginning from a blank slate, but rather aiming to extend and refine existing understanding, thematic analysis offered less methodological coherence.

For these reasons, content analysis, specifically, directed content analysis was selected. This approach is especially appropriate when previous research or theory exists that can inform the analysis and structure the coding process (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). It allows for a more deductive orientation, using predefined codes drawn from theory or earlier findings, while remaining open to the emergence of new categories that either refine or challenge the initial framework (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999). This balance made directed content analysis particularly well-suited to this study, which sought to explore how participants' experiences aligned with or diverged from trends identified in previous quantitative research in Study's II and III.

Phase 3 (Study IV, Chapter 7) employed a directed content analysis approach to explore how students perceived and experienced the TAP Schools Programmes, with a focus on pathways and mentoring activities, educational aspirations, and post-school pathways. Content analysis is a widely used qualitative research technique, encompassing three main approaches: conventional, summative, and directed (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The directed approach begins with an existing theoretical framework or prior empirical findings that inform the development of initial coding categories (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999; Mayring, 2001). This deductive strategy is particularly valuable when prior quantitative findings are available but lack explanatory depth. In this case, prior longitudinal data from the TAP Schools Programme revealed statistically significant relationships between programme participation and students' aspirations and educational trajectories. However, the mechanisms and meanings behind these patterns required further exploration. The goal

of this analysis was to validate and extend these findings by giving voice to students and understanding how they experienced the TAP initiatives. A directed approach was thus suitable, as it allowed us to frame the analysis with concepts from existing research, while remaining open to emerging themes (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

One acknowledged limitation of directed content analysis is that it may introduce bias, particularly if researchers are overly focused on confirming existing theories (Mayring, 2000). However, this was mitigated through reflexive practices and careful attention to data that did not fit the initial coding scheme. This ensured that the analysis remained open to new insights, even within a theoretically informed structure. A preliminary coding scheme was developed based on findings from Study II and III. Initial codes included categories such as mentoring, aspirations, post-school progression, familial influence, and engagement in TAP activities as well as the key concepts from Bourdieu's theory, cultural, social, and institutional capital; habitus; and field. Thus, the objective of this analysis was not only to validate existing findings but to critically interrogate them through the lens of Bourdieu's theoretical framework. This approach enabled a deeper exploration of how students engaged with TAP's programmes, navigated post-school transitions, and negotiated the cultural and institutional logics of higher education, often structured around dominant forms of capital that systematically exclude or marginalise others.

In conclusion, directed content analysis provided the most appropriate analytic framework for this study. It allowed the researcher to explore how existing theories and findings played out in the lived experiences of participants, while also remaining open to nuances and unexpected patterns. This approach helped to bridge the quantitative and qualitative strands of the study, supporting a more comprehensive understanding of the influence of outreach interventions on students' educational outcomes.

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed through Microsoft Teams. The researcher than reviewed each transcript to ensure accuracy of the transcript as well as de-identifying the participants. The analytic process comprised a series of interrelated stages. Initially, each transcript was read holistically to develop familiarity with the data and to gain an overall sense of each participant's narrative. A preliminary coding scheme, developed from the findings of Studies 2 and 3, was then applied to guide the initial deductive phase of

analysis. These pre-existing codes included findings from the previous studies (Ní Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2025b and Ní Chorcora, Banks and Bray, 2025a). Initial codes included as the following categories; mentoring, pathways, aspirations, post-school progression and parental support.. As coding progressed, additional inductive codes were developed to capture emerging themes such as institutional barriers, course misalignment, school culture, influence of school career guidance and peer influence.. These new codes allowed for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the structural and personal dimensions of student experience.

The coding framework was refined iteratively as relationships and patterns became clearer, and analytic memos were maintained throughout to record reflections, decisions, and interpretive developments, thereby forming part of the audit trail (Appendix E). Once coding was complete, the dataset was interpreted through Bourdieu's theoretical concepts of habitus, capital (cultural, social, and institutional), and field. Rather than functioning as predefined codes, these concepts served as interpretive tools for understanding how students navigated educational contexts and inequalities. For example, students' references to informal or peer networks or teacher relationships were examined as forms of social or institutional capital, while moments of misfit or self-doubt were interpreted through the concept of habitus in tension with unfamiliar or exclusionary educational fields. The analysis also explored how different types of capital interacted, sometimes reinforcing each other, and at other times revealing gaps that institutions failed to bridge. The final analytical framework thus integrated both deductively derived, pre-existing codes and inductively developed, emergent codes, allowing the analysis to remain theoretically informed yet responsive to participants' stories. This hybrid approach enabled a deep exploration of TAP participants' post-school experiences while maintaining coherence with the broader programme of research. In line with best practices in qualitative research, an audit trail was maintained throughout the analysis process, documenting decisions, code refinements, and analytic memos (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) (See Appendix E)Reflexivity was also embedded in the process, with the researcher actively considering their positionality and the potential influence of prior knowledge or theoretical assumptions on the interpretation of data.

This chapter outlined the researcher's beliefs about knowledge and research, as well as their positionality. It provided a rationale for the longitudinal approach adopted and included an extended methodology section to complement the published manuscripts. Additionally, it offered a more detailed account of the methods used to generate the findings presented in Chapter 7. The longitudinal design enabled a comprehensive exploration of the research questions guiding this thesis. By integrating both quantitative and qualitative methods, the study contributed new insights to the field of access and widening participation, particularly in the context of school-university outreach for second-level students. The following chapters present the findings from the full mixed-methods study, along with a discussion of their implications and considerations for future research.

Chapter 4 - A systematic review of widening participation: Exploring the effectiveness of outreach programmes for students in second-level schools.

This chapter presents Study I, a systematic literature review of widening participation outreach programmes aimed at increasing access to higher education for students in second-level schools. This study has been peer-reviewed and published as a standalone journal article, and is now integrated into the thesis as part of the broader research programme. While the article includes its own focused literature review and methodological discussion, this chapter reiterates its central relevance to the thesis and aligns it with the overarching research aim: *to examine the influence of school-university WP outreach programmes on the educational aspirations and post-school progression of marginalised secondary school students, and how these outcomes are shaped by intervention type and contextual factors*.

The systematic review directly addresses the sub-questions of Study I:

- What evidence (2012-2021) exists regarding the effectiveness of WP programmes for second-level students from low socio-economic backgrounds?
- What types of WP interventions have been studied?
- What is the impact of these interventions on aspirations, readiness, and enrolment?

Through the identification and analysis of 19 empirical studies, this chapter maps the landscape of WP outreach interventions over a ten-year period, categorising programmes by type (guidance-based, pedagogical, and multi-dimensional) and summarising their reported outcomes. The review not only highlights the variability and methodological limitations within the existing literature, but also reveals important trends, such as the growing use of school-based and relationally oriented interventions, that are particularly relevant to the Irish WP context and the design of this thesis's empirical studies.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Review of Education BERA

A systematic review of widening participation: Exploring the effectiveness of outreach programmes for students in second-level schools

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Abstract

A major challenge for universities across the globe is to address the lack of diversity within higher education. Widening participation (WP) programmes can vary between in-reach and outreach programmes. Some initiatives focus on either pre-entry stage (primary or secondary schools) or post-entry stage (helping students adapt to university life). This systematic literature review provides an analysis of the effectiveness of widening participation outreach programmes, a topic that is relatively unexplored, particularly at school level education. By examining empirical studies of widening participation interventions, the paper allows for the investigation of the educational outcomes measured in these programmes. A total of 19 studies were included, which analysed quantitative or mixed-method data. The findings indicate a growth in the evidence base for widening participation programmes for second-level students over the last decade. Interventions identified in the literature were categorised by their approach, which included guidance-based interventions, multidimensional interventions or pedagogical interventions. The findings confirm some positive effects for widening participation outreach programmes on a range of outcomes including students' college readiness, educational aspirations and college enrolment. The review argues for consistency in the way in which

educational outcomes are measured, as well as the need for cross-collaboration and sharing of data between schools and universities, to enable more effective measurement of widening participation programmes in future research.

KEYWORDS
higher education, outreach, second-level education, widening participation

Context and implication

Rationale for this study

This study gives an up-to-date synthesis of outreach interventions in secondary schools which aim to widen participation at higher education. A review of its kind has not been conducted in the last decade.

Why the new findings matter

Findings highlight the most effective new interventions, as well as, the challenges in defining success, research design and collecting accurate data across secondary and tertiary educational institutions.

Implications for educational researchers and policy makers

This systematic review provides an overview for widening participation WP practitioners of what types of outreach interventions are out there, offering templates and ideas for introducing these kinds of initiatives in other universities and partnership schools. The paper highlights to policy makers, the need to create policies that enable cross-collaboration and sharing of data between schools and universities. Implications for researchers include discussion around how success is being defined, what outcomes are being measured, the need for longitudinal studies with larger sample sizes as well as the collection of baseline data of participants.

INTRODUCTION

Although higher education participation rates have increased significantly over the last few decades, there is a persistent pattern of inequality of access for low socio-economic status (SES) students. International studies highlight how access to higher education is not evenly distributed across all groups in society, with social class continuing to influence student pathways from secondary school (Reay, 2018; Reay et al., 2005; Hannon, 2020; Hannon et al., 2017; McCoy et al., 2014). Although educational policies at secondary and tertiary levels of education aim to address disadvantage in school, and broaden participation in higher education, research shows that strong patterns of inequality remain (Guerin, 2014; HEA [Higher Education Authority], 2022). Much of the literature around widening participation identifies individuals within the target groups as 'disadvantaged', 'under-represented' and/or 'non-traditional'. This type of language, although well intentioned for targets and funding,

suggests that students and their families are the problem, rather than problematic societal structures and systemic issues that have likely resulted in the student being unable to attend a higher education institution. Furthermore, this type of language blinds us to the differences in circumstances of members of the group and it denies the group the right to name themselves (Williams, 2020). The authors of this paper recognise that there are barriers that prevent groups from participating in higher education and are thus marginalised. To ensure all appropriate papers were included in the systematic review, all various vocabulary was included in the searches; however, from here on, the target group will be referred to as students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This is by no means a homogeneous group (as is discussed later in the paper) however—it is specific in naming those which widening participation programmes target internationally.

Research on students from low-income or disadvantaged backgrounds indicates that educational inequity exists at the post-secondary level with students more likely to face barriers in both attending and graduating college (Burney & Beilke, 2008) compared with their more affluent peers (Engle, 2011). Barriers to educational progression often stem from earlier educational experiences that have left parents and students marginalised, leading to lower academic achievement (Chowdry et al., 2013; Keane, 2016; Smyth et al., 2014), less parental support, difficult student-teacher relationships, as well as higher rates of early school leaving and negative perceptions of higher education (Banks & Smyth, 2021; McCoy et al., 2014). Furthermore, financial issues, lack of information and inadequate provision of guidance are all cited as barriers to educational progression for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Hoxby & Turner, 2013; McCoy et al., 2014; Smyth & Banks, 2012). Widening participation outreach programmes at second-level aim to support low-income students in tackling these barriers, thereby promoting progression to further and higher education.

Access, enabling or widening participation programmes have been introduced by many universities in recent years to reduce existing stratified race and class structures, and to bridge the knowledge gap that can exist for marginalised students. A major challenge for universities across the globe, is to address this lack of diversity and to implement programmes that encourage and support access for groups that have lower participation rates in higher education. Widening participation (WP) programmes aim to increase the progression rates of the students to higher education and to support them once in college. The model for WP programmes can vary, with pre-entry supports based in second-level schools instead of universities (Fleming & Gallagher, 2003). This kind of outreach provision often consists of partnerships between schools and higher education institutions or community-based outreach (Osborne, 2003).

There have been several notable systematic reviews on the topic of widening participation in recent years. Contreras (2011), for example, examined 40 different interventions and noted that interventions with multiple components were found to have positive influences on students' educational outcomes due to the student being continuously exposed to the intervention in different ways. She argues that programmes serving target groups should attempt to include such things as financial aid workshops, extracurricular support and mentorship (Contreras, 2011). More recently, Renbarger and Long (2019) investigated WP interventions for low-income students; however, only those interventions that targeted students who were considered academically gifted were included in the inclusion criteria. Their review indicated that WP programmes such as a summer intervention, advanced coursework, financial aid, college information and a programme that provides year-round supports can be effective in supporting low-income, gifted students to access college. See et al. (2012) reviewed evidence of effective college access strategies and found several approaches to be of particular benefit, including: financial incentives and assistance, personal and academic mentoring, and ‘black box’ interventions that contain a variety of different components. Stemming from See et al.'s (2012) review, Younger et al. (2019) stress the need for more robust experimental designs when attempting to measure the effectiveness of widening participation

programmes. They suggest further research should be undertaken in countries outside of the United States to explore this gap in the literature.

This paper seeks to build upon this earlier work by See et al. (2012) by examining the empirical evidence available on the effectiveness of widening participation outreach programmes between the years 2012 and 2021 and explore whether research has progressed in this area. This review also seeks to include interventions that target all low-income students in secondary school and not just those who are academically gifted. Finally, the review aims to identify the educational outcomes measured that researchers are using to define an intervention's success. This systematic review addresses the following research questions:

1. What evidence (between 2012 and 2021) is available in relation to the effectiveness of widening participation programmes for second-level students from lower socio-economic backgrounds?
2. What types of widening participation interventions are most commonly researched in the last decade?
3. What impact do these intervention types have on increasing students' educational aspirations, college readiness and/or college enrolment?

RATIONALE

Although much of the research on widening participation to higher education to date has been at college level, there is a gap in the literature about the impact of WP interventions at second-level education. This systematic review aims to develop the evidence base for university access strategies by identifying effective second-level interventions that have been evaluated in the since 2012. This paper assists in addressing that knowledge gap by systematically gathering, reviewing and synthesising the most recent research on the effectiveness of programmes to improve college readiness and enrolment for low socio-economic populations. In so doing, it provides guidance for policy makers and practitioners who are implementing college access programmes and identifies important gaps in the scientific evidence base that warrant further research.

METHODOLOGY

In comparison to previous reviews (Contreras, 2011; Renbarger & Long, 2019) that have investigated WP outreach for low socio-economic students who were gifted, this study captures all studies that are trying to target any students who experience barriers to progression to higher education because of socio-economic disadvantage. Younger et al. (2019) also conducted a systematic review of the literature; however, their searches were conducted in 2012 and 2013. The number of relevant papers has increased significantly in the decade since then, with the growing interest and importance given to widening participation by policy makers around the world. For example, when running the same search string (outlined below) in Web of Science for 2002–2012, just over 200 results are found. When running searching for the same criteria between 2012 and 2022 this number quadruples to nearly 900, highlighting the need for a more up-to-date analysis of the literature. Title, abstract and keywords were searched for relevant terms (see Table 2). In addition to the empirical studies identified through the electronic database searches, any relevant systematic reviews that were returned were mined for literature that met the inclusion criteria. This was to ensure that relevant publications that had not been identified by the search strategy would be included. The electronic searches were also supplemented with hand searching and searching of reference lists of included papers.

TABLE 1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Participants	Young people who are in second-level education/middle or high school.	Intervention is aimed at undergraduates or for any other programme post second-level/high school.
	Disadvantaged, minority or under-represented groups with regards to race/ethnicity or socio-economic status.	Sole focus is on primary school students, mature students[a] or students with a disability.
Interventions	In-school outreach, after-school outreach or summer school interventions	Interventions which are post-secondary school/high school completion.
		Policy-level interventions where differential outcomes for disadvantaged or under-represented groups were not the specified aim.
		Dual-enrolment interventions as the sole focus of the study
Outcomes	HE (Higher Education) enrolment or participation	Outcomes that were not directly aimed at widening participation, e.g., increased interest in choosing a STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) subject in school, aspiring to have a career in STEM.
	HE applications or indicative behaviour	
	Self-reported aspirations or intentions	Sole focus of study is on indirect outcomes, such as well-being, attainment, school attendance.
	Measure of college-readiness, e.g., 'college knowledge'	
Study designs	Quantitative or mixed-methods studies	Purely qualitative studies
	Published between January 2012 and February 2022	Published before 2012

[a]Mature students in this instance refer to students aged over 21 at the start of their higher education studies.

Eligibility criteria

Inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 1) were established prior to beginning the search process. The Participants Intervention Outcome (PIO) framework was used to allow researchers to explore the keywords needed to search for papers relevant to the research question (Petticrew & Roberts, 2008). This framework facilitates the identification of relevant information and search terms as shown in Table 2.

Key literature was searched to investigate all the different words that are used in papers to describe widening participation and second-level interventions. For the sake of this paper, the word 'college' refers to higher or tertiary education, university or studying an undergraduate bachelor's degree. When discussing the target population of widening participation, we focus on students coming from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This includes many different cohorts of students, such as people of different races and ethnicities, those with disabilities, various family backgrounds or those with experience of the care or justice system. The literature unfortunately often includes a lot of deficit language when describing these groups (under-represented, disadvantaged, non-traditional). The authors recognise that this language may be considered harmful but for the purpose of the systematic literature review, these keywords were also used for searches. This paper discusses the use of this

TABLE 2 Databases and search strategies.

Database	Date of searches	Date range	Number of hits	Search string
EBSCO: British Education Index; APA Psych Info; ERIC.	26 February 2022	1 January 2012–26 February 2022	220	AB ('higher education' OR HE OR 'post compulsory' OR college OR university OR 'school-university' or 'post-secondary') AND AB (participation OR access OR admission OR enrolment OR aspiration* OR expectation*) AND AB (outreach OR summer school* OR widen* access OR widen* participation OR 'access programme' OR intervention) AND AB ('achievement gap' OR low income OR minority OR 'socio economic status' OR SES OR underrepresented OR inequalit* OR disadvantage* OR depriv*) AND AB (systematic review OR 'comparative analysis' OR 'research review' OR meta analy* OR 'effect size' OR mixed-method* OR RCT (Randomised Controlled Trial) OR quasi experiment* OR control OR allocat* OR randomised controlled trial OR quantitative OR statistic*)
Australian Educational Index (AEI)	26 February 2022	1 January 2012–26 February 2022	45	ab('higher education' OR HE OR 'post compulsory' OR college OR university OR 'school-university' OR 'post-secondary') AND ab(participation OR access OR admission OR enrolment OR aspiration* OR expectation*) AND ab(outreach OR summer school* OR widen* access OR widen* participation OR 'access programme' OR intervention OR 'access program') AND ab('achievement gap' OR low income OR minority OR 'socio economic status' OR SES OR underrepresented OR inequalit* OR disadvantage* OR depriv*) AND ab(systematic review OR 'comparative analysis' OR 'research review' OR meta analy* OR 'effect size' OR mixed-method* OR RCT OR quasi experiment* OR control OR allocat* OR randomised controlled trial OR quantitative OR statistic*) AND yr (2012–2020)
Web of Science	26 February 2022	1 January 2012–26 February 2022	898	Higher education OR HE OR 'post compulsory' OR college OR university OR 'school-university' or 'post-secondary' (Abstract) and participation OR access OR admission OR enrolment OR aspiration* OR expectation* (Abstract) and outreach OR summer school* OR widen* access OR widen* participation OR 'access programme' OR intervention (Abstract) and achievement gap OR low income OR minority OR 'socio economic status' OR SES OR underrepresented OR inequalit* OR disadvantage* OR depriv* (Abstract) and systematic review OR 'comparative analysis' OR 'research review' OR meta analy* OR 'effect size' OR mixed-method* OR RCT OR quasi experiment* OR control OR allocat* OR randomised controlled trial OR quantitative OR statistic* (Abstract) and 2022 or 2021 or 2020 or 2019 or 2018 or 2017 or 2016 or 2015 or 2014 or 2013 or 2012 (Publication Years) and English (Languages)
Scopus	26 February 2022	1 January 2012–26 February 2022	1	AB ('higher education' OR HE OR 'post compulsory' OR college OR university OR 'school-university' or 'post-secondary') AND AB (participation OR access OR admission OR enrolment OR aspiration* OR expectation*) AND AB (outreach OR summer school* OR widen* access OR widen* participation OR 'access programme' OR intervention) AND AB ('achievement gap' OR low income OR minority OR 'socio economic status' OR SES OR underrepresented OR inequalit* OR disadvantage* OR depriv*) AND AB (systematic review OR 'comparative analysis' OR 'research review' OR meta analy* OR 'effect size' OR mixed-method* OR RCT OR quasi experiment* OR control OR allocat* OR randomised controlled trial OR quantitative OR statistic*)

type of language further in the discussion section of the paper. In an attempt to ensure all relevant studies were captured, all various vocabulary (mentioned above) was used in the search strategy (Table 2).

Initially, it was hoped to screen all types of research designs including quantitative, qualitative and mixed-method designs. Pilot testing of the search strings was conducted within the key databases but the number of results increased dramatically when including qualitative studies. Due to time constraints and other research commitments of the authors it was not possible to screen all the qualifying studies for this study. For example, when including qualitative studies in search strings in the Web of Science database, the number of hits increased by 500 articles. A decision was then made to focus on quantitative and mixed-method studies solely as the research questions focused on investigating quantitative variables such as college application and enrolment rates. The exclusion of qualitative studies is noted as a limitation to this paper and is discussed later in the paper.

Information sources

For this review, relevant interventions are defined as pre-college interventions that explicitly identify increasing college readiness and/or college enrolment as a primary goal of the programme. In total, four databases were searched: Web of Science, EBSCOhost, Australian Educational Index (AEI) and Scopus (see Table 2). Within the EBSCO database, Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), PsychInfo and the British Educational Index (BEI) were searched. Records were stored in Endnote before transferring to Covidence (www.covidence.org) for screening.

Search strategy

An electronic search strategy was devised, tested and developed in an iterative process of trial and improvement. Keywords, generated by the researchers based on their understanding of the research questions, were used to develop a series of test searches that were trialled in various databases with the aim of maximising the scope of the review (Table 2). Systematic searches were conducted during February 2022 for studies that focused on reporting quantitative or mixed-method analysis of pre-college interventions aimed at improving access to higher education. The electronic searches were supplemented with hand searching of reference lists of included papers.

Data items

Reports, journal articles, dissertations and theses were included in the final 19 studies selected. All studies had to meet all elements of inclusion criteria. Only studies published between 2012 and 2021, and those with interventions aimed at post-primary school (approximately 12–18 years old) students who had not yet been accepted into a college, were selected. Criteria included outreach interventions that explicitly aimed to increase HE participation at undergraduate level for low socio-economic or marginalised groups. Outreach could take place in school or out of school, after school or on a college campus, as long as it was targeting pre-college, post-primary school students. There was no minimum or maximum length of intervention included in the criteria. Some studies were as short as 20 min and others spanned several years. For the study to be included, it had to be attempting to measure the impact of the intervention mentioned. Overview, policy or review papers were

excluded if they were not directly attempting to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. Outcome measures in included studies had to focus on HE enrolment, participation or applications, or on student aspirations, intentions or college readiness. College readiness included a range of outcomes including academic achievement, school attendance, career and college self-efficacy and alignment as well as attitudes towards school, unemployment risk perception and misconceptions about HE. Where authors were unsure whether a particular measure could be categorised under 'college readiness', a discussion was had among the three authors until a unanimous decision was made. This review focused on studies that used quantitative methods, including those using mixed methods.

Selection process

Studies ($N = 1168$) were imported into Covidence, a software tool that allows for storing, screening and documenting the systematic review process. Covidence also identified duplicate studies automatically and flagged them to the reader for investigation. Twenty per cent of the included titles and abstracts were double screened to determine whether they met the inclusion criteria, with the remainder screened by the lead author alone. Studies that clearly did not meet the inclusion criteria (as set out in Table 1) were rejected at this stage, with those that required more in-depth examination (e.g., if the abstract did not make the study design sufficiently clear) retained.

Full texts of the remaining studies and reports ($N = 137$) were obtained and screened by the lead author and 40% of this sample was double screened for consistency. Following full text screening (second stage), a third screening (data extraction) was conducted ($N = 40$). During this stage, the review team made judgements on whether there was sufficient data available in evaluating the intervention, the relevance of the educational outcomes, and the overall relevance to the research questions. Systematic reviews, policy or review papers were excluded as they were descriptive and not directly using data to measure the impact of an outreach intervention. Judgements were made by the authors based on the criteria listed in Table 2. All doubt or disagreements were resolved in discussion between the three authors on the review team. Based on this process, the articles were either confirmed or excluded by the authors, resulting in a total of 19 studies included for analysis. Figure 1 illustrates these steps through a Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) flowchart (Page et al., 2021).

FINDINGS

From the 19 studies found, 10 were studies conducted in the United States, 3 were conducted in Australia, 1 in Chile and 5 in Europe between the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy. Studies varied in terms of the intervention type, educational outcomes measured, length and research design (see Appendix A for the full breakdown). The length of the intervention varied from a 20-min presentation to summer schools, to whole school interventions spanning years. There were also a range of research designs chosen to evaluate these types of outreach initiatives. These included randomised control trials, quasi-experiment designs, a social return on investment study, a study using a theory of change design, longitudinal studies and a retrospective study.

Of the 19 studies, there was wide variation in how the programmes were measured and what educational outcomes were used to evaluate them. Eight studies used college enrolment as a measure of success of the outreach intervention, while four used college applications, and one study used applications for student aid. A total of six studies investigated

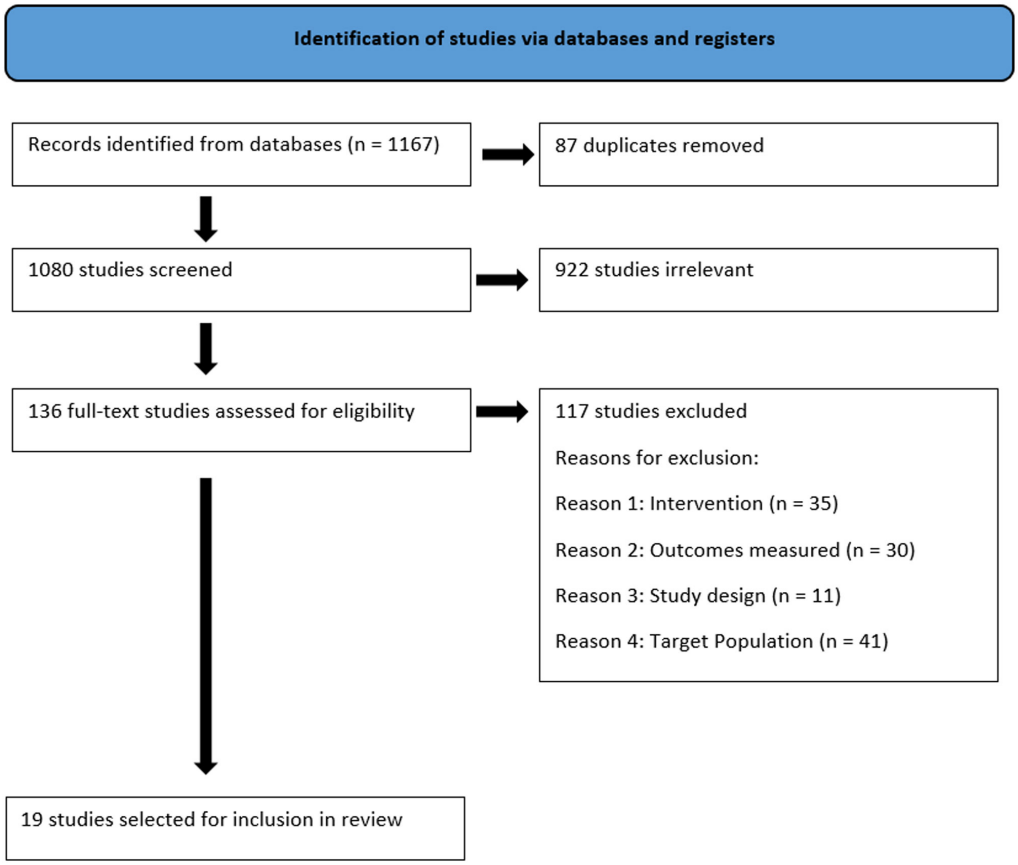

FIGURE 1 PRISMA flowchart of systematic review process.

whether there were changes in students' intentions or aspirations to go to college post intervention and two used teachers' or parents' expectations of students as a way of measuring impact. Five studies used students' grades as a proxy for success and one study used students' school attendance.

These educational outcomes were classified into two different groups; hard outcomes (e.g., college enrolment, college applications, grades) and soft outcomes (e.g., college readiness such as self-perceived aspirations and goals, college going self-efficacy). Of the studies that looked to measure soft outcomes, six of them investigated the impact on educational aspirations or intentions. Other measures, included college going and career self-efficacy, career and aspirations alignment, misconceptions about college as well as students' risk perception of unemployment. There were mixed results in terms of the impact of the interventions on the various measures of college readiness. Findings from Hamel (2015) showed increases in students' career alignment and college-going self-efficacy post intervention; however, there was no impact on students' educational aspirations and expectations. It is worth noting that there were just eight students in the control group for Hamel's (2015) study, which may have made it more difficult to reject the null hypothesis and make any meaningful assumptions about the impact of the programme. In one study (Barone et al., 2017), the intervention was effective in correcting misperceptions about college but this did not lead to increased intentions to enrol in college. Abbiati and colleagues (Abbiati et al., 2018) examined the same data and found that after students corrected their misperceptions about the cost and profitability of college, it made low-income students shift their intentions from weak (less profitable) study fields to

vocational programmes which were of lower financial cost, and thus there was less risk involved in the decision. Previous research has shown that due to financial constraints students from low-income backgrounds may be more risk adverse and have higher extrinsic motivation when picking college courses and careers (Connor et al., 2001; McCoy et al., 2010; Reay et al., 2005). Interestingly, another study (Geagea et al., 2019), showed no change in students' college expectations over time but expectations decreased for the control group over time. This finding is consistent with previous research suggesting a relative difficulty for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds to maintain high aspirations over time (Gore et al., 2015). This may point to possible reasons why other interventions may not be resulting in increased aspirations when in fact maintaining aspirations over time is a positive finding in itself.

To gain a sense of the types of school-based WP approaches used, interventions were classified based on intervention type. Cohen and Lefebvre (2005) describe classification as a process in which ideas are recognised, differentiated and understood. The system of classification should be dynamic, remain recognisable and relevant over time. Bray and Tangney (2013) highlight how categories should also be generalisable and provide a basis for the explanation of an emerging argument. Three key intervention types were classified from the literature identified: guidance interventions; pedagogical interventions; and multi-dimensional interventions. These intervention types were classified systematically by the review team and assigned categories. Frequencies of each category were then counted as well as frequencies of educational outcomes measured within each intervention type.

Guidance interventions

There were eight studies in which the intervention focused on elements of traditional guidance counselling or providing information about college and careers to students in post-primary schools. Five of these interventions investigated the impact of traditional guidance approaches using a guidance counsellor or holding information talks or support with college applications (Abbiati et al., 2018; Barone et al., 2017; Bettinger & Evans, 2019; Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Peter & Zambre, 2017). The other three studies investigated modern initiatives such as online websites, games or light-touch interventions to allow students to access information about college and careers (Corwin & Maruco, 2018; Reichardt & McClelland, 2018; Avery et al., 2021; Berger et al., 2019; Hyman, 2020). This paper defines light-touch interventions in this instance as interventions that involve momentary contact (students receiving a letter in the post, a text-messaging campaign, a once off 20-min presentation, or a website which gives students automated feedback). Two of the studies listed discussed the same intervention, which investigated a guidance counselling intervention in Italian schools that focused on correcting students' misperceptions of the profitability of higher education (Abbiati et al., 2018; Barone et al., 2017). All eight studies showed some positive effect from the intervention; however, four out of the eight studies had mixed results (Abbiati et al., 2018; Barone et al., 2017; Bettinger & Evans, 2019; Corwin & Maruco, 2018; Hyman, 2020). Although all the studies sought to measure the impact of guidance interventions, they varied in the types of educational outcomes being examined. Five studies assessed the impact of their intervention by analysing college enrolment data (Avery et al., 2021; Bettinger & Evans, 2019; Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Hyman, 2020), and two investigated other hard outcomes such as college application rates (Hoxby & Turner, 2013; Reichardt & McClelland, 2018), academic records and graduate rates (Hoxby & Turner, 2013). Two of the articles which were based on the same study focused on correcting students' misperceptions of the profitability of higher education (Abbiati et al., 2018; Barone et al., 2017). Studies also investigated outcomes of college and career readiness such as college intentions and unemployment risk perception (Peter & Zambre, 2017), as well as alignment of career choices and college courses needed (Berger et al., 2019).

Pedagogical interventions

There were four interventions classified as *pedagogical* identified in the literature. These consisted of initiatives undertaken to improve students' experience of teaching and learning and/or to close the attainment gap for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. These types of interventions included activities such as an intensive tutoring programme (Treviño et al., 2014), a whole-school pedagogical intervention (Ramseth, 2018), and discipline-specific initiatives (Geagea et al., 2019; Crump et al., 2015) that gave students the opportunity to explore specific subject areas. A range of educational outcomes were assessed to measure the impact of the pedagogical interventions. Hard outcomes included academic achievement (Treviño et al., 2014), GPA (Ramseth, 2018) or college enrolment (Crump et al., 2015). Soft outcomes included attitudes towards school and education (Ramseth, 2018). Other soft outcomes investigated college expectations and frequency of discussions with parents and teachers regarding college (Geagea et al., 2019) and science-related experience (Crump et al., 2015). There were mixed results for these types of interventions with some seeing no change post intervention (Geagea et al., 2019; Treviño et al., 2014) and others resulting in positive increases in college enrolment (Crump et al., 2015) and GPA (Ramseth, 2018).

Multidimensional interventions

The third intervention type identified was categorised as multidimensional interventions or simply initiatives that have a range of different components. A total of six interventions were categorised as multidimensional. These included teaching and learning activities, tutoring, guidance counselling, mentoring, financial advice and support, college familiarisation, and parent and community workshops, conferences and events. Some of these multidimensional interventions were run as summer schools (Barkat, 2019; Hamel, 2015; Kaul et al., 2016) and others were conducted in school (Zacharias et al., 2018) or after school (Avery, 2013) or varied between the two (Ravulo et al., 2020).

Multidimensional interventions seem to show particular promise. All interventions reported positive outcomes for students' hard and soft outcomes. There were some studies that investigated the impact the intervention had on college enrolment, academic achievement (Avery, 2013; Barkat, 2019) and college application rates (Avery, 2013; Zacharias et al., 2018). Other outcomes measured included college going and career self-efficacy (Hamel, 2015) and plans—a retrospective measure that asked participants to judge the influence the intervention had on their college enrolment, higher education preparation and career options (Kaul et al., 2016). Ravulo and colleagues (Ravulo et al., 2020) evaluated the social value of four different widening participation programmes in Australia using a Social Return on Investment (SROI) approach. Interestingly, in the Zacharias study (2018), the programme was only seen to have an impact when schools were highly engaged in the school-university partnership. This suggests that whole-school or enduring approaches to WP may be particularly effective.

DISCUSSION

Overall, there are very few articles that investigate WP programmes at second level which increase college access for low-income students. Given the recent growth in policies and funding for widening participation programmes, it is surprising that the systematic search of the literature only returned 19 studies, relating to 18 interventions. Nonetheless, the rigour of the search strategy allows for a high level of confidence that all relevant quantitative and

mixed-method research was included in the review. All studies reported somewhat favourable results for the different types of interventions but there was a wide range of variety in terms of which outcomes were measured and how each study defined success. As well as summarising the relevant evidence available in the last 10 years, this review has highlighted the difficulty of evaluating widening participation in terms of study designs, sample size, access to data, and how we define success within widening participation programmes.

Types of widening participation outreach interventions

The interventions reviewed in this study were categorised as guidance interventions, multidimensional interventions or pedagogical interventions. Half of the studies identified were guidance-based interventions and the findings show positive results across all these kinds of initiatives. These studies tend to focus on bridging the gap in knowledge about college, raising aspirations and giving students information around college applications and financial aid. These types of interventions are particularly important in promoting successful post-school transitions for low-income students whose parents may not have attended college themselves (McCoy et al., 2014; Smyth & Banks, 2012). Although the eight studies in this category share a guidance focus, they vary in their approach, format and length. Some interventions include face-to-face guidance within the school year (Berger et al., 2019), others are lighter-touch, involving a 20-min presentation to students about college (Peter & Zambre, 2017), or sending them a motivating letter with a web link to information about college (Hyman, 2020). Avery et al. (2021) investigated the impact of an adaptation of a national text-messaging campaign to remind students about, and support them with, key steps in the college search, application process and transition to college. The intervention was adapted to a school-based version where they received messages from their high school counsellors every 2 weeks. In contrast to the original intervention, which had no effect, the school-based intervention had significant impact on college going steps and enrolment for lower performing students (Avery et al., 2021). It is worthwhile to note that this intervention showed positive impact only when conducted in the school itself, which suggests that elements of personal connection and relationships are important when rolling out an intervention of this kind. This is consistent with other research in the area, which suggests that building relationships with students who may be experiencing educational disadvantage can be particularly beneficial (Banks & Smyth, 2021; Bray et al., 2021).

Several studies classified as pedagogical interventions were identified in this review, meaning that specific teaching and learning strategies were employed to support widening participation in higher education. These pedagogical interventions differ from the guidance-based interventions in that they place more emphasis on closing achievement gaps, engaging students in learning and/or allowing students to explore subject areas in which low-income students traditionally do not enrol. These types of interventions were found to have mixed results. Some showed positive increases in students' GPA and attendance (Ramseth, 2018) and likelihood to enrol in a college (Crump et al., 2015), while other studies found no change post intervention (Geagea et al., 2019; Treviño et al., 2014). However, despite these studies being classified as pedagogical interventions, the level of variation in terms of the design and outcomes measured means that a valid comparison cannot be made between them.

Multidimensional interventions appear to have the most potential. Results from these interventions showed increases in college aspirations, expectations, college application rates and enrolments. These holistic interventions may be of particular benefit to students as they try to overcome a range of college barriers including awareness, aspirations, affordability and achievement. Despite their promise, it is difficult to disentangle which elements of the intervention are particularly effective and which are not. An action research approach to

these types of interventions may be suitable, as research practitioners can then tailor the intervention to best suit the needs of their students.

It appears that studies which are more specific only seem to have an influence on specific outcomes and fail to increase both hard and soft outcomes. Widening participation programmes have been criticised in the past for increasing students' aspirations but not giving the young people the skills necessary to realise these aspirations and goals (Harrison & Waller, 2018; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Multidimensional programmes take a holistic approach to widening participation, thus catering for the many factors influencing young peoples' decision making about and enrolment in college. This aligns with previous research by Younger et al. (2019). Pedagogical and guidance interventions can still be beneficial to students when specific outcomes are desired. In particular, when targeting specific disciplines and subject areas. Often, these types of interventions may be easier to implement as they can involve less resources and be implemented relatively quickly and at scale.

Educational outcomes measured

Future research should include data on the types of students who are enrolling in 2- or 4-year courses because of these interventions. If the guidance intervention is increasing enrolments to 2-year colleges of students who were never expected to go to college, this is a greatly beneficial intervention as many students may need to complete a 2-year course as a steppingstone into college. Similarly, if the multidimensional intervention is increasing the capability of those who would have already gone onto some sort of further education (or 2-year course), thereby supporting their enrolment in a 4-year college course, this information would be extremely beneficial for higher education institutions and policy makers. Interventions need to ensure they are supporting all low-income students to reach their full potential whether that is progressing to a 2-year further education course, developing students' capability to enrol in a 4-year degree or supporting students to attend more selective universities. WP interventions may need to be tailored to specific target groups. It is likely that differing supports would be best suited to those who may not intend to go to college, but who could be supported to continue in some post-secondary education, and those who, with appropriate support, may be able to continue to higher education. In order to further interrogate the most suitable interventions for these groups of students, baseline information of participants needs to be collected to identify who should be targeted for particular interventions and at what stage in their schooling should they be targeted.

Furthermore, future research should ensure to collect detailed and specific demographic information. Much of the literature uses vague terms when referring to target groups such as ‘under-represented minority’. As noted above, disadvantaged, under-represented and marginalised groups can encompass many different types of people. This type of language is not only considered harmful, but it also blinds us to the differences in circumstances of members of the group (Williams, 2020). For example, some papers report ‘disadvantaged’ as being a part of any racial/ethnic group besides white while ‘under-represented’ may not be all racial/ethnic groups because certain subjects report Asians as having a high representation. (Note: ‘Asian’ as a category is problematic because this aggregate term does not account for how North Asia differs from East Asian vs. the Middle East in terms of representation.) Many papers do not disaggregate and so it is difficult to know what types of interventions work for different people or whether a one-size fits all approach can be utilised. For example, these papers suggest that students from a lower SES background benefit from traditional guidance programmes. However, if this student is a refugee, they may have limited English and will not benefit from this programme unless the guidance counsellor can speak their home language, or a translator is provided. Alternatively, an intervention such

as the computer game, which allows students to explore college life where less language is required to participate (Corwin & Maruco, 2018), may be more beneficial to the student. These distinctions are important if widening participation programmes aim to support specific marginalised groups and need to be strategic with their resources. It is also important to note these demographics so that one can identify which groups are being served and which are being ignored.

It is noteworthy that none of the studies looked at both aspirations and enrolment. In terms of accessing higher education, both outcomes often go hand in hand and educational aspirations have been shown to be important in predicting the final post-school destinations of young people (Johnston et al., 2014). Harrison and Waller (2018) have also highlighted the need for WP programmes to move away from raising aspirations and focus on raising students' expectations, which is more focused on students' 'possible selves' than the aspirational 'like to be' (Harrison & Waller, 2018; Markus & Nurius, 1986). It would be useful to analyse the longitudinal impact of these interventions and to differentiate between student aspirations and expectations to see whether either measure translate into higher college enrolments over time. It is important for research to explore various outcome measures as different outcomes are important for students in different ways, whether that be attainment, skills development, informed choice or enrolment in higher education. Future research should focus on how these hard and soft outcomes relate to and interplay with each other and which interventions promote which outcomes and why.

Limitations and areas for development

Availability of data was highlighted in some studies as a challenge in measuring the effectiveness of post-primary widening participation programmes. Administrative enrolment data was often not accessible and so progression outcomes for students could not be measured. 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 widening participation programmes to tailor their activities to ensure maximum impact. Many policies around the globe are putting more of a focus on and funding towards WP programmes (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2022); however, a huge emphasis needs to also be placed on researching the effectiveness of these programmes and why certain programmes are more effective than others. Policy should focus on enabling cross-collaboration across different sectors within the education system to allow centralised sharing of data. We need to make evaluating these programmes easier for researchers, not more difficult.

Studies varied in terms of their designs, interventions, measurements and results. From the 19 studies discussed, 10 were conducted in the United States, 3 in Australia, 1 in Chile and 5 in Europe between the United Kingdom, Germany and Italy (two Italian papers which discussed the same study). We reiterate See's point from their review in 2012 which calls for more research in the area, particularly outside of the USA. Each country and even individual states within countries have cultural and educational differences as well as having different policies and systems in place that make it challenging to compare interventions, methods of measuring educational outcomes and results. What works in a study in one country, may not work in another, and so evaluations may lack generalisability. Researchers must adapt the methodologies used in WP evaluation to build their own robust evidence base that is context specific. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that findings in all studies were positive or somewhat positive. It is important that research of failure is also published in order to avoid repetition and waste of resources.

Barnes et al. (2009) assert that sustained university–community relationships must be grounded in meaningful research partnerships. Outreach interventions are often practitioner led, or else organised by siloed access or WP departments within universities. Internal collaboration is needed within universities to utilise the expertise of research academics as well as on-the-ground experience of WP and school practitioners. Furthermore, more detailed information on interventions and resources would be welcomed. Links to relevant webpages that describe the intervention or provide open access resources, would be of great benefit to both researchers and practitioners. This would enable practitioners to implement effective interventions in a timely manner as well as form WP communities of practice around the world. This would also support researchers to replicate interventions in different contexts and countries.

Sample size was both a strength and a limitation across the 19 studies that were included in this analysis. Samples sizes ranged from less than 50 participants in either intervention or control group (Abbiati et al., 2018; Barone et al., 2017; Hamel, 2015) to sample sizes of over 10,000 participants (Avery et al., 2021; Bettinger & Evans, 2019; Hyman, 2020). These sample sizes must be considered when interpreting the efficacy of the results in the numerous studies. It is noteworthy that just four studies evaluated the longitudinal impact of their WP intervention (Barkat, 2019; Crump et al., 2015; Geagea et al., 2019; Peter & Zambre, 2017). Of those longitudinal studies, there was variation in the results, some studies showed sustained increases in college expectations over time (Peter & Zambre, 2017) and increased enrolment over time (Barkat, 2019). Other studies found significant decreases of students' college expectations over time for the control group but significant increases in discussions with others about college for intervention groups (Geagea et al., 2019). More worryingly, one study showed that despite small increases in college enrolment, intervention students had lower retention rates (Hyman, 2020). This information clearly highlights the need for longitudinal studies to investigate these types of interventions over time to reveal their true impact on students' educational outcomes. It is crucial that future research focuses on the longitudinal evaluation of larger-scale projects with strong sample sizes so that policy makers can make informed decisions about WP programmes.

This review focused on those groups who are under-represented at college due to low socioeconomic status. Although this captures many different cohorts of students, some groups were omitted from the study, such as those with a disability, mature students or students of specific ethnic groups who did not fall in the lower SES category. The main limitation to this review is that restrictions in the inclusion criteria of the review may have led to potentially useful studies being omitted. Title, abstract and keywords were searched for relevant terms. However, if relevant terms were only mentioned in the body of the paper, they may have been missed. In addition, although qualitative studies were not within the parameters of this study, they could provide potentially useful and important insights into the evaluation of students' self-reported college readiness or aspirations and should be explored further. However, this systematic review makes an original contribution to the WP literature in terms of both policy and practice. By synthesising the quantitative and mixed-methods literature over the last 10 years on this relatively niche topic, it allows future researchers, practitioners and policy makers to use the findings to inform WP research, interventions, evaluation, strategies and policy going forward.

Implications for practitioners, policy makers and researchers

This systematic review provides an overview of the types of outreach interventions that have been researched, which WP practitioners can review. These intervention types offer templates, ideas and starting points for introducing or adapting these kinds of initiatives in other universities and partner schools. Findings indicate that while the traditional interventions (such as guidance counselling) remain effective, cross-collaborations between disciplines

are creating innovative new interventions with great potential. An example of this being computer games that allow young people to explore college life. Furthermore, this paper highlights the benefit of providing multidimensional interventions in which students benefit from a wide variety of initiatives, which together can have a powerful impact on both college readiness and enrolment.

The 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. Only when these data-sharing barriers are removed will we start to see the true impact of these programmes over time. The paper also highlights to policy makers that although there are some light-touch, low-cost interventions which can be of some benefit, to have a lasting impact on students' participation and retention rates at university, investment is needed in multidimensional interventions. Thankfully, many policies worldwide are putting more of a focus on and funding towards WP programmes; however, in the last decade just 19 studies were found to be evaluating such programmes. Funding also needs to be assigned for the evaluation of these programmes in order to investigate what works and if it works, why it works and who is it benefitting the most.

There are many implications noted in the paper for future researchers. Although many positive educational outcomes were identified within the interventions, there is variance in how interventions are being measured and therefore how success is defined. Outreach interventions are often practitioner led, or else organised by siloed access or widening participation departments within universities. Internal collaboration is needed within universities to utilise the expertise of research academics as well as the experience of WP and school practitioners on the ground. The review highlights the need for longitudinal studies with larger sample sizes as well as the collection of baseline data of participants. The collection of this data will allow researchers to evaluate which interventions are particularly beneficial for specific types of students, thus enabling practitioners to be strategic and use targeted interventions. Research on the success factors for interventions can lead to replication by others. Research of failure can avoid repetition and waste of resources. All of these lead to more and better-informed interventions to support widening participation in higher education.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Data derived from public domain resources. The data that supports the findings of this study are available in the methodology section of this article.

ETHICS STATEMENT
Ethics approval was not required because this study retrieved and synthesized data from already published studies.

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APPENDIX A

A.1 | Findings of systematic review

Study	Design	Participants	Intervention	Outcome(s) measured	Results	Country
1. Information barriers, social inequality, and plans for higher education~evidence from a field experiment (Barone et al., 2017)	Randomised control trial	31 final year high school students received intervention and 31 students in control group	Guidance counselling intervention which aimed to correct student misperceptions on the profitability of HE	Misconceptions about college Plans to enrol in college	Intervention was effective in correcting misperceptions but did not increase intentions to enrol in college	Italy
2. Information barriers and social stratification in higher education~evidence from a field experiment (Abbiati et al., 2018)	Randomised control trial	31 final year high school students received intervention and 31 students in control group	Guidance counselling intervention which aimed to correct student misperceptions on the profitability of HE	Misconceptions about college Plans to enrol in college	Low-SES students shifted their intentions from weak study fields to vocational programmes and high SES students shifted towards more rewarding college study fields	Italy
3. Immediate feedback improves career decision self-efficacy and aspirational alignment (Berger et al., 2019)	Quasi-experimental, non-equivalent groups design	211 teenagers living in disadvantaged areas	Automated feedback on the alignment of their career and education aspirations (light-touch intervention)	Aspiration alignment between career and education aspirations, Career decision self-efficacy	Improved alignment capability in the short term	Australia
4. College guidance for all~A randomised experiment in pre-college advising (Bettinger & Evans, 2019)	School-level randomised control trial	40,000 high school students (120 high schools)	Whole-school model—college advisor working full-time in school	College enrolment	Increased two-year enrolment for low-income students (new enrolments as opposed to moving from four year to two year)	USA
5. Creative arts outreach initiatives in schools~Effects on college expectations and discussions about college with important socialisers (Geagea et al., 2019)	Longitudinal study, Matched control group	176 students from 8 high schools (intervention group = 88, control group = 88)	Creative arts outreach initiatives: theatre workshops, screen and sound production, media frenzy, games art and design (ranged from 1 week to 5 months)	College aspirations expectations and discussions with parents, teachers and friends about college	Significant decreases of college expectations over time for control group students. No change for intervention students. Significant increases in discussions with others about college for intervention group	Australia

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Study	Design	Participants	Intervention	Outcome(s) measured	Results	Country
6. The Stanford Medical Youth Science Program~Educational and science-related outcomes (Crump et al., 2015)	Longitudinal study, Matched control group	96 low-income high school students participated in the intervention 192 made up the comparison group (those who applied but were not selected to participate)	Biomedical related summer residential programme (5 weeks)	College enrolment Science related experience one to four years later	Intervention group more likely to enter college. More likely to have more science experience after 1 year but this evens out after 2–4 years	USA
7. Can light-touch college-going interventions make a difference~Evidence from a statewide experiment in Michigan (Hyman, 2020)	Randomised control trial	49,156 high achieving high school students (24,578 treatment group)	Light-touch intervention—letter posted out to high achieving students encouraging them to consider college and providing them with web address of a college information site	College enrolment Persistence through college	Zero impact among all students but low-income students experience a small increase in probability that they enrol in college driven by increases at four-year institutions. However, students from intervention persist at a lower rate than the inframarginal student	USA
8. Career camp~Elevating expectations for college-going and career self-efficacy in urban middle school students (Hamel, 2015)	Matched control group	52 middle school students (8 students in control group)	Intensive career summer camp – 6 days of camp activities, two nights/3-day bus tour of Kansas college campuses and educational facilities (Career and college going focus, on college campus, STEM and computer technology activities)	College going and career self-efficacy Educational aspirations and expectations	Intervention had effect on college going self-efficacy	USA

(Continues)

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Study	Design	Participants	Intervention	Outcome(s) measured	Results	Country
9. Narrowing achievement gaps~An examination of advancement via individual determination (AVID)~grade eight (Ramseth, 2018)	Randomised control trial Mixed methods	29 intervention group 29 control group	One year study Enable positive learning culture and instructional strategies that modify the learning experience for students who traditionally have been 'left behind' AVID intervention running across USA—Avid.org/data	Attitude towards school and self School attendance College aspirations	Higher GPA grades (small increases)	USA
10. Intended college enrolment and educational inequality~Do students lack information? (Peter & Zambre, 2017)	Randomised control trial	1578 students—27 schools—8 treatment schools. Pre and post students and valid answers = 842 students who were due to complete their Abitur (LC) the following year.	Students given information on benefits and different funding possibilities for college education. 20-min, in-class presentation	Intended college enrolment Unemployment risk if going to college	Increases intended college enrolment 2–3 months and 1 year after intervention (for students from non-academic backgrounds)	Germany
11. Beyond the test score - A mixed-methods analysis of a college access intervention in Chile (Treviño et al., 2014)	Mixed methods Randomised control trial	High achieving students from disadvantage backgrounds	Modelled on Texas admissions programme—intensive tutoring programme in maths, language and personal management followed by second selection and two-year specialised curriculum programme in sciences and humanities (some offered scholarship)	Academic achievement—also some qualitative interviews	Academic achievement—looks to close the achievement gap at college for those from disadvantaged background. Despite engaging in the intervention still a significant achievement gap	Chile

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Study	Design	Participants	Intervention	Outcome(s) measured	Results	Country
12. Digital messaging to improve college enrolment and success (Avery et al., 2021)	Concurrent clustered randomised control trials with randomisation at school level	National sample—once a month—students in over 700 US high schools that primarily serve large shares of low-income students. Texas sample (20,000 students in 72 public high schools). School based version—every 2 weeks from their high school counsellors	Text messaging campaigns to remind students about and support them with key steps in the college search, application, selection and transition process	GPA, SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) scores, college enrolments, federal student aid completion counts at school level	In contrast to the national version of the intervention, which tended to produce null effects, the school-based intervention yielded positive and significant impacts on several college-going steps and on college enrolment for certain subgroups	USA
13. Evaluating the impact of the Academic Enrichment Programme (AEP) on widening access to selective universities~Application of the Theory of Change framework (Barkat, 2019)	Theory of Change (ToC) approach Mixed methods, longitudinal design spanning six cohorts	Join at end of year 12 for residential and study skills in year 13	Week-long residential, one-to-one e-mentoring from undergraduates and two study skills session	Students' academic aspirations, motivation, attainment, and progression to selective universities	The results suggest that the ToC programme was largely verified. The AEP seems to promote academic attainment, with AEP students outperforming national and regional benchmarks. The AEP also appears to increase entry rates to Russell Group universities for disadvantaged students; however, the effect seems to be greater when combined with alternative offers	UK

(Continues)

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Study	Design	Participants	Intervention	Outcome(s) measured	Results	Country
14. Evaluation of the college possible programme~Results from a randomised controlled trial (Avery, 2013)	Randomised control trial	238 students, 138 treatment group	Two-year after-school curriculum to high school juniors and seniors including SAT and ACT (American College Testing) test preparation services, college admissions and financial aid consulting, and guidance in the transition to college	ACT performance, college enrolment	Significantly increased both applications and enrolment to both 4-year colleges and selective 4-year colleges; but find little evidence of any effect of the programme on ACT performance or college enrolment overall	USA
15. Expanding college opportunities for high achieving, low-income students (Hoxby & Turner, 2013)	Randomised control trial	3000 students High achieving, low-income students	Semi-customised information on the application process and colleges' net costs. The interventions also provide students with no-paperwork application fee waivers.	Student college application behaviour, college admissions and enrolment	Students enrol in colleges that have stronger academic records, higher graduation rates, and more generous resources compared to similar target group who had not participated in intervention. Their first-year grades are as good as the control students who went to less selective universities	USA
16. Project promise: A long-term follow-up of low-income gifted students who participated in a summer enrichment programme (Kaul et al., 2016)	Retrospective survey	89 low-income gifted students who participated in a summer enrichment programme for 3 or more years	Summer enrichment programme Including exposure of college's campus, enriching course content, mentoring, and socialising with peers of similar abilities	Students' impressions regarding social, emotional, motivational, academic, career, and generational benefits of participation	Respondents suggested that participation also influenced their decision to attend higher education, prepared them for higher education, and broadened their career options	USA

APPENDIX A (Continued)

Study	Design	Participants	Intervention	Outcome(s) measured	Results	Country
17. Navigating the tension between scale and school context in digital college guidance (Corwin & Maruco, 2018)	RCT and comparative case studies	58 schools serving low SES students across 20 school districts	Online, game-based college access intervention—players roleplay a college applicant over the course of 1 week	FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid) and California Dream Act applications; college applications; college enrolment.	The FAFSA/CADA application rate increased in both the treatment and control schools. However, it increased more in the treatment schools than in the control schools (Results from Reichardt & McClelland, 2018)	USA
18. Social value and its impact through widening participation~A review of four programmes working with primary, secondary & higher education students (Ravulo et al., 2020)	Social return on investment (SROI)	Over 100 schools—targeted year groups between 5 and 12	Campus tours, in school workshops, preparatory programmes, parent workshop, community events and Chase the Dream Conference	Social return on investment analyses	This is verified by the SROI ratio, which is represented as a return, for every dollar invested—the combined four programmes equated to an average return of $5.78 for every $1 invested	Australia
19. Widening regional and remote participation: interrogating the impact of outreach programmes across Queensland (Zacharias et al., 2018)	School level match control trial Mixed methods	2678 observations across 408 secondary schools in Queensland	On campus and in-school activities	Application rates to college	Positive and statistically significant influence on application rates to college in highly engaged schools	Australia

Importantly, the findings of Study I laid the foundation for Studies II and III, which explore a specific school-university WP programme in greater depth. The review's identification of key gaps, such as the scarcity of longitudinal research and the limited integration of both aspirations and enrolment as outcome measures, strongly informed the conceptual, methodological, and analytical decisions made in the subsequent studies.

By integrating this published paper into the thesis, Chapter 4 provides a critical evidence base that strengthens the rationale for the original empirical work that follows, while also contributing to wider international understandings of what works, for whom, and under what conditions in the field of widening participation.

Reference:

Ní Chorcora, E., Bray, A., & Banks, J. (2023). A systematic review of widening participation: Exploring the effectiveness of outreach programmes for students in second-level schools. *Review of Education*, *11*(2), e3406.

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Chapter 5 - Measuring Success: A School-University Partnership Model for Widening Participation in Higher Education.

This chapter presents Study II, a journal article that has been published and is now integrated into this thesis. It aligns closely with the overall research question that guides this body of work, which investigates how school-university widening participation outreach programmes influence the educational aspirations and post-school progression of students from unserved communities. Specifically, this study addresses the sub-questions of Study II, which examine the impact of WP interventions on students' future goals and aspirations, the contextual factors that moderate this impact, and whether these effects are sustained over time. Drawing on longitudinal data collected in 2019 and 2022 from a large sample of second-level students in Irish schools located in areas with low progression to higher education, this study applies Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as an analytical framework. The study focuses on two key strands of the WP initiative: mentoring and pathways activities. accounting for a range of background characteristics*.

Although the article includes its own literature review, methodology, and analysis, this chapter forms a core part of the thesis by building on the findings of the systematic review in Chapter 4. It responds to the gaps identified in the existing literature, particularly the limited number of large-scale and longitudinal evaluations in the field. In doing so, Study II contributes original empirical evidence to the understanding of WP interventions in the Irish context and lays the groundwork for the final empirical chapter, Study III, which investigates actual post-school enrolment outcomes among the same cohort of students.

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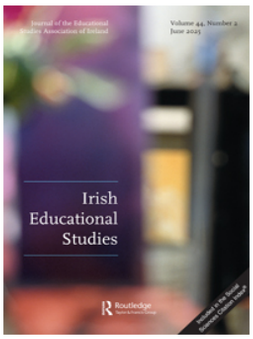
*Please note that on page 12 of this paper, there is an error in the text. It incorrectly states that males had higher scores than females. The correct result is that males (M = 3.94, SD = 0.72) had **lower** scores than females (M = 4.08, SD = 0.68) on this measure, a statistically significant difference, $M = -0.135$, 95% CI [−0.18, −0.08], $t(3544) = -5.71$, $p < .001$ (see Table 2). This error has been brought to the attention of the publishers.



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Measuring success: a school-university partnership model for widening participation in higher education

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Measuring success: a school-university partnership model for widening participation in higher education

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the impact of a widening participation outreach intervention on the *future goals and aspirations* of Irish second-level students attending schools in areas experiencing educational disadvantage. The paper uses data gathered in 2019 and 2022, from an Irish, large-scale, longitudinal study ($N = 3697$) of widening participation with second-level schools ($N = 19$) located within areas where progression to higher education is low. The paper utilises Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model to assess the influence of the outreach programmes on students' future goals and aspirations. Findings show that even when controlling for a variety of individual characteristics, participating in a school-university outreach programme was associated with students having higher future goals and aspirations. In particular, students who engaged in a mentoring programme and multiple college information activities were significantly more likely to have higher scores.

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Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that inequality in higher education is an important yet complex and multi-faceted problem (Piketty 2021). Research involving students from lower socio-economic backgrounds clearly indicates that educational inequity exists at post-secondary level, with students more likely to face barriers in both accessing and progressing through higher education, compared with their more affluent peers (Burney and Beilke 2008; Engle 2011). However, barriers to educational progression often stem from earlier contextual and educational experiences that can leave parents and students marginalised. Even when controlling for attainment, social class continues to predict psycho-social and academic attainment at second (Crawford and Greaves 2015) and third level (Bathmaker et al. 2016; Walkerdine 2021). Barriers to education frequently stem from earlier life experiences that have marginalized both parents and students. These challenges may include financial difficulties, a lack of accessible information, inadequate guidance, and limited access to mentors who share similar backgrounds or experiences (Sanderson and Spacey, 2020; Hoxby & Turner, 201, 3; Smyth and Banks 2012; McCoy et al. 2014). Consequences of this kind of disenfranchisement have been

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shown to contribute to lower academic achievement, low levels of parental support, difficult student-teacher relationships, high rates of early school leaving, and negative perceptions of higher education (Bray et al. 2021; Byrne and Smyth 2010; Chowdry et al. 2013; Keane 2016).

Across the EU and Ireland, various initiatives have sought to expand access to higher education for students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Guerin 2014; Keane 2013). Guerin (2014) describes these initiatives as efforts to counterbalance the overrepresentation of wealthier students in universities. They target students at different stages: pre-entry (in primary or secondary school), entry (preparing students for the application process academically or by providing information and guidance), and post-entry (supporting students in adapting to university life personally, academically, and socially) (Ferrier, Heagney, and Foong Lee 2010). Some initiatives focus on community-based outreach, while others establish links between schools and higher education institutions (such as this study) (Osborne 2003). In their systematic review of widening participation (WP) outreach programmes with secondary school students, Ní Chorcora, Bray, and Banks (2023) highlighted the need for studies with larger sample sizes, longitudinal studies, and more detail on the demographics of participants in order to assess the impact of the programmes across different groups over time. The data used in this paper is from an Irish, large-scale, longitudinal study of WP with second-level schools who are linked with Trinity Access Programmes (TAP), Trinity College Dublin (which is described in detail by Tangney and colleagues (2021) and Bray, Tangney et al. (2021)). This paper examines the extent to which students' *future goals and aspirations* are influenced by contextual variables (gender, ethnicity, school-type, parental education, etc). It explores whether and how external interventions provided by the WP programme have an impact once such contextual influences are considered. More specifically, the paper addresses the following overarching and subsidiary research questions:

- What influence does participation in the Trinity Access Programme schools outreach programme impact on participating second-level students' *future goals and aspirations*?
- Are there contextual factors that influence the extent to which student *future goals and aspirations* are impacted by the outreach programme?
- Are students' levels of *future goals and aspirations* sustained over their time in secondary school?

By examining these questions, this study aims to deepen our understanding of the potential impact of WP outreach programmes such as Trinity Access Programme schools outreach programme particularly when taking into consideration some of the many contextual factors at play. Ultimately, we hope to provide information to support policymakers and practitioners in making decisions about targeted outreach programmes as well as to guide research and policy and drive change in the area of widening participation.

Policy context

Universal recognition of the issue of educational disadvantage is evident within the international policy context. The United Nations (UN) sustainable development goal number

four (SDG4) aims to 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all' (UN 2024). Specifically, target 4.5 focuses on the fact that all individuals should have equal opportunity to enjoy education of high quality, achieve at equal levels and enjoy equal benefits from education. In Europe, since the turn of the twenty-first century, more emphasis has been placed on the areas of access, widening participation and inclusion in higher education by policy makers, academics and the public in general. Equity in education has been given its place at the policy table through initiatives from the European Commission as well as those driven by the Bologna Process. Since the early twenty-first century, the Since the early twenty-first century, the European Commission and the Bologna Process have played a key role in promoting equity, inclusion, and widening participation in higher education. The Bologna Process, launched in 1999, aims to create a more compatible and competitive European higher education system, with recent efforts focusing on social inclusion through the Bologna Follow-up Group (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2022). Despite progress, the 2022 Eurydice report highlights ongoing structural barriers to participation for disadvantaged groups, with Ireland ranking 24th out of 38 member states in implementing EU equity policies, signalling the need for further improvement (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2022).

The significant underrepresentation of people from low socio-economic backgrounds in higher education in Ireland has been placed squarely at the front of the Irish government's higher education agenda. The National Access Plan outlines students from low socio-economic areas and those attending *DEIS* schools as a priority for access to and participation in higher education (HEA 2022). The Irish government introduced the *Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools* (DEIS) scheme in 2015 to address educational disadvantage. It operates as a policy of positive discrimination, providing additional funding to schools with a high proportion of students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds (Fenwick, Kinsella, and Harford 2022, p. 515).

Schools are identified for DEIS support using a deprivation index (Haase and Pratschke 2017), which calculates scores based on factors like employment status, education levels, single-parent households, overcrowding, and dependency rates. This index relies on Small Area (SA) mapping developed by the Ordnance Survey of Ireland (OSI) and the Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2016). Schools with lower deprivation scores receive extra funding and resources which aims to help break cycles of disadvantage (DES 2005; Weir and Kavanagh 2018).

The most recent data from the Higher Education Authority, notes that just 10% of students in higher education come from disadvantaged backgrounds (HEA 2022). Furthermore, only 1% of Travellers have a third-level qualification compared to 55% of the general population. The latest National Access Plan (2022-2028) identifies students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged as well as members of the Irish Traveller and Roma communities as some of the main groups that are marginalised in higher education. Some of the key performance indicators highlighted by the National Access Plan include access and participation for students attending a DEIS school as well as progression and completion among this priority group. The evidence-based plan emphasises the importance of early intervention, creating a sense of belonging in education as well as instilling a culture of high aspirations in schools (HEA 2023).

Factors influencing student progression

This paper interrogates the development of goals and aspirations among second level students attending schools in areas experiencing high levels of educational disadvantage. In this section, factors influencing student progression are explored.

Future goals and aspirations

The idea of raising aspirations with a view to increasing progression to further and higher education is commonly used within widening access and participation policy and research (Guerin 2014; HEA 2023; Sanderson and Spacey 2020), however there are some conflicting findings and opinions around educational aspirations. Guerin (2014) mentions in her review of EU policy in the area that, although the evidence varies and appears weak, the assumption that students and their parents from poorer backgrounds have lower aspirations may be incorrect. Research in the UK indicates that many students from poorer backgrounds do have high aspirations and do want to go to university but are less likely to attend university and more likely to instead to go on to obtain managerial or skilled jobs (Goodman and Gregg 2010; Kintrea, St Clair, and Houston 2011). This could be explained by a disconnect between aspirations (what we hope for) and expectations (what we think will happen). Harrison and Waller (2018) challenge the discourses of aspiration and the provision of 'aspiration-raising' activities to promote higher education. Instead, the authors use the lens of 'possible selves' (Markus and Nurius 1986). This theory differentiates between what students would like-to-be and their probable future selves, the latter being grounded in expectations rather than merely aspirations. Khattab (2015) estimates that 25% of young people have high aspirations but low expectations, and that these discrepancies are most prevalent among lower socioeconomic groups (Boxer et al. 2011).

In Ireland, research shows social class differences in relation to aspirations to attend higher education are evident as early as junior cycle years (~13 years old) (Smyth et al. 2006, 2008). More recent Growing up in Ireland findings have shown that having high aspirations and goals are important for achieving academic resilience (even when levels of maths and literacy are controlled for) (Kong 2020). Other studies in Ireland have shown that schools, teachers and guidance counsellors that promote a culture of high expectations and support in promoting successful post-school transitions for second-level students are especially important for marginalised students (Smyth and Banks 2012; Smyth et al. 2014).

It is vital that researchers and practitioners highlight that lower HE participation rates or lower aspirations of students is a result of major structural inequalities as opposed to any personal failing of the individual (Campbell and McKendrick 2017). There are real risks and concerns associated with attending higher education, and these issues need to be addressed to allow students to make an informed choice about post-school education. Baker and colleagues (2014) suggest that students may aspire to go to university but may have realistic expectations about the challenges they face, but little guidance or a lack of role models to help them to overcome those challenges (Baker et al. 2014). The WP intervention being investigated in this paper looks to support students by providing that guidance and student mentoring.

Fraysier, Rechly, and Appleton's study (2020) investigated a variety of student engagement measures and their influence on students' postsecondary enrolment. Findings indicated that secondary school student engagement does predict postsecondary enrolment and persistence above and beyond academic and behavioural variables. Furthermore, as is consistent with research among secondary students, the *Future Goals and Aspirations Scale* of the Student Engagement Instrument (Appleton et al. 2006) was the strongest engagement predictor. This instrument (*Future Goals and Aspirations Scale:* Appleton et al. 2006) was used as part of the survey conducted with adolescents in this research paper. This paper investigates the extent to which the WP outreach programme has an influence on students' future goals and aspirations over and above a series of other characteristics in line with Bronfenbrenner's Process, Person, Context and Time (PPCT) framework, which is described below. The measure assesses students' self-reported ideas about their educational future. It incorporates students' attitudes towards their education, their future goals, as well as their intentions and plans to continue their education after secondary school (see materials section for details of measure).

Parental education

Research has shown that education level is strongly predicted by maternal education, with those whose mother had obtained a third level degree significantly more likely to gain a third level degree themselves (Smyth and McCoy 2009). Longitudinal findings that looked at data from over 5000 young people in Ireland over ten years found that there were high levels of HE participation (86%) among those whose parents had high levels of education themselves, compared with those who had the lowest educational level (48%) (O'Mahony et al. 2022). Research has shown that over time the influence of parent's educational status decreases, however, the impact of the mother's education status on young people's educational attainment is substantive (Korupp, Ganzeboom, and Van Der Lippe 2002). This may be related to the value that is placed on education in the home, as well as the kinds of conversations that may occur in homes in which a parent has attended university and where it is not seen as something alien (Smyth and Banks 2012).

Gender and Ethnicity

In Ireland, research has shown that HE participation rates for males in disadvantaged areas are lower than those of females from similar contexts (HEA 2022). Similarly, longitudinal research in the United Kingdom (UK), showed that females were significantly more likely to attend university than their male peers, although males are more likely to attend selective or prestigious institutions (Crawford and Greaves 2015).

In the UK, participation 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 (Crawford and Greaves 2015). Even after accounting for socio economic background and prior attainment, students from all ethnic minority groups are, on average, more likely to go to university than their White British peers. Crawford and Greaves (2015) discuss how aspirations may play a role in the remaining differences in university participation by

ethnic background however, they did not have the data at their disposal. This study aims to investigate differences according to gender and ethnicity within the Irish context, and to explore the interplay between these variables and students' *future goals and aspirations*.

Widening participation interventions

Across the EU, various initiatives have been implemented in an attempt to help increase access to higher education for students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Guerin (2014) describes these initiatives as being designed to counterbalance the overrepresentation of wealthier students in universities. Some universities focusing on outreach provision have created links between schools and higher education institutions or have provided community-based outreach (Osborne 2003). Outreach interventions can include guidance, mentoring, financial supports, multi-dimensional activities, and providing college information, advice and guidance (IAG) (Ní Chorcora, Bray, and Banks 2023; Robinson and Salvestrini 2020; See et al. 2012; Torgerson et al. 2014).

A systematic review of widening participation outreach programmes for second level students found that 'multi-dimensional' activities were particularly beneficial for students, resulting in positive impacts on students' college readiness and progression to college (Ní Chorcora, Bray, and Banks 2023). The systematic review explored literature published in the last decade. However, despite increased funding for widening participation programmes in recent years (European Commission/ EACEA/ Eurydice 2022; HEA 2022), the review identified just 19 studies that quantitatively evaluated the impact of such programmes, five of which were conducted in Europe (Italy, Germany and the UK); none were conducted in Ireland. Furthermore, the systematic review highlighted the need for studies with larger sample sizes, longitudinal studies, and more detail on the demographics of participants in order to assess the impact of the programmes across different groups over time (Ní Chorcora, Bray, and Banks 2023).

This study aims to address this gap by investigating the impact of two aspects of a multi-dimensional project that is trying to support students in areas that are traditionally underrepresented in higher education, within a system that does not work for them.

WP outreach programme and context

The TAP schools outreach programme aims to support secondary students by informing them about college courses, providing college taster days, guidance, campus tours, and mentoring programmes (Tangney et al. 2021). The outreach programmes engage directly with secondary school students (in Ireland secondary school runs from 1st to 6th year, with students aged ~12-18), as well as indirectly with students through their schools and teachers. These programmes take place either on the College campus, in school or in the local community. The WP programme's approach consists of three core practices: Pathways activities, Mentoring and Leadership in Learning. A detailed overview of the outreach interventions and overall research project can be found in Tangney and colleagues (2021) and Bray, Hannon, and Tangney (2022). This study looks at the impact of two of the core practices – mentoring and pathways activities – and explores whether and how they influence students' *future goals and aspirations*, particularly when accounting for contextual factors as outlined above.

Pathways activities

Pathways activities are an outreach initiative aimed at supporting students' exploration of post-secondary options by providing them with information, advice and guidance (IAG). Research suggests that IAG activities can be particularly effective as WP initiatives (Hannon, Faas, and O'Sullivan 2017; TASO 2020). Campbell and McKendrick (2017) suggest that sustained interventions were perceived to be impactful by participants as they increased awareness of university life. Robinson and Salvestrini's review (2020) also found that tailored IAG which starts early in secondary school can be particularly effective.

Pathways activities include, for example, projects relating to college/courses choices, mock college applications, subject area taster programmes, college campus visits, careers fairs, talks by professionals, and workplace visits. Within the TAP schools outreach programme, students from 1st to 6th year are provided with opportunities to engage in activities that promote college-going. These activities aim to promote college in an inclusive way so that students from diverse backgrounds are encouraged to consider college as an option for them.

Mentoring

The Mentoring core practice 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 aims to provide 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 for widening participation (Reilly 2024; Robinson and Salvestrini 2020; Torgerson et al. 2014).

The mentors in this study were either teachers, past pupils, university students or older pupils in the school mentoring younger pupils. This paper investigates whether having a mentor has any impact on students' future goals and educational aspirations.

Methodology

Context and participants

TAP aims to support students to enhance their cultural and social capital through various pathways and mentoring outreach activities, the overall aim of which is to equip students with the essential knowledge and skills they require to make informed decisions about their progression from school into further and higher education.

Schools in Ireland that are identified as catering largely for students from low socio-economic status (SES) backgrounds (lower deprivation scores) are allocated additional funding and resources to support them in breaking down barriers and eradicating inter-generational disadvantage (DES 2015; Weir and Kavanagh 2018). Schools that are allocated this funding become part of the Delivering Equality of opportunity In Schools (DEIS) schools' scheme (DES 2005). This study uses data generated from 3697 students from 19 secondary schools in the greater Dublin area in Ireland that are linked to the TAP widening participation programme. While not all of the schools

have official DEIS status, all of them have been identified as having catchment areas where progression to higher education is low. The DEIS (N = 2266) and non-DEIS (N = 1431) 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 (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 in 2022. A unique, longitudinal perspective is added by exploring change over time in the *future goals and educational aspirations* variable, with a subset of these students for whom data were also collected in 2019. Ethical approval was granted by School of Education, Trinity College Dublin.

Materials

This study uses students' self-reported *future goals and aspirations* as the dependent or outcome variable. Measurement of participation in the outreach interventions (mentoring and Pathways activities) are the independent variables. A series of other demographic variables are used as contextual independent variables. A breakdown of each measure and their values are listed below (Table 1).

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 in the last school year (if any). Not all students in the school

Table 1. Materials.

Name	Measure	Variable
Future Goals and Educational aspirations (Appleton et al. 2006)	Five-point Likert scale; strongly disagree to strongly agree (1-5). My education will create many future opportunities for me; School is important for achieving my future goals; I plan to continue my education following school; Going to college after school is important; I am hopeful about my future.	Dependent
Ethnicity (CSO 2016)	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
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
Gender	Male/ Female / Prefer not to say	Independent
Year group	1st to 6th year	Independent
Mother's Education Level	Does your mother have a university degree? (Yes/ No)	Independent
School Type	DEIS/ Non-DEIS School	Independent
Mentoring Programme	In the last academic year, did you take part in a mentoring programme? (Yes/ No)	Independent
Pathways Activities	In the last academic year, did you participate in any of the following pathways 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

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. To identify students who had been exposed to prolonged and consistent interactions, a new variable was created that differentiated between students who had done three or more Pathways ativities and those who had done less than three activities, in the last school year.

In order to provide some contextual data, students were asked to provide information relating to ethnicity, parental support, and mothers' education. 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.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development

Many researchers studying underrepresentation in higher education focus on consequences resulting from a single setting in which the student interacts (e.g. home, school). However, less attention is given to the nested network of interactions between multiple environments that play a role in underrepresentation in tertiary education. To frame this research in such a way as to make sense of the myriad influences that interact within the context of any individual, this study makes use of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Theory of Development.

Bronfenbrenner's theory provides a broad ecological model that allows researchers to make sense of other theories within sociology, psychology and education. Bronfenbrenner's model recognises that, in reality, children do not exist in compartmentalised worlds for ease of research. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bio-ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 2005; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) illustrates how the developing child is embedded within a series of environmental systems and societal structures that interact with each other and with the child to influence development (Shaffer and Kipp 2014). Neal and Neal (2013) have argued that the idea of nested systems in the earlier version of Bronfenbrenner's theory (1979) places too much emphasis on the individual, however this paper is based on Bronfenbrenner's more recent work (Bronfenbrenner 2005; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) that focuses more on proximal processes and the interinfluence between systems. This theory takes into account the proximal processes in a young person's environment as well as the structural inequalities within society that are beyond the control of the individual themselves.

The holistic perspective provided by this ecological model, with its focus on proximal processes influencing developmental outcomes, as well as the environment(s) and social structures in which development occurs, offers a powerful theoretical lens for understanding how students from low SES households make decisions about college and evaluating whether widening participation programmes can support students in making these decisions. In this way, Bronfenbrenner's ecological model focuses on the environmental systems within development, which enables researchers to consider many different factors (Hayes, O'Toole, and Halpenny 2022).

Bronfenbrenner's theory also describes how young people are nested in multiple environments through a larger ecology consisting of the *person*, *place*, *context*, and *time* (PPCT model). The young person interacts with their school (place), which is

influenced by their parents' educational involvement and school university partnerships (context) and ultimately by dominant ideologies and political environment (time) (Tudge et al. 2009; Tudge et al. 2009). The PPCT model reflects Bronfenbrenner's paradigms of the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem (Tudge et al. 2009).

Operationalising bronfenbrenner's model

Tudge and colleagues (2009) have highlighted the importance of fully utilising and operationalising all aspects of the bioecological model when conducting research. This study uses Bronfenbrenner's updated theories (Bronfenbrenner 2005; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) by utilising the PPCT model to account for the many levels of influence a young persons' environment and interactions has on their educational *future goals and educational aspirations*. Operationalisation of the PPCT model for this study is outlined in Table 2.

By using Bronfenbrenner's model as an evaluative lens for the TAP outreach project, this study focuses on the student at the centre. Bronfenbrenner's theory describes how young people are nested in multiple environments (micro, meso, exo, macro, chronosystems) through a larger ecology consisting of the person, place, context, and time (PPCT). For the purposes of this study, the post-primary student has personal characteristics such as gender and ethnicity (person) and they interact with widening participation programmes (processes) within the school (place). Other societal and contextual variables such as parental level of education, school university partnerships, cultural norms and values (context) can also have an impact on students as well as dominant ideologies, political environments and personal and historical time (time).

Using the PPCT model, this study considers the young person themselves; not just their demographics but their perception of themselves in relation to education and university, as conceptualised through their *future goals and educational aspirations*. When considering the context, it is important to explore what it is about the environment (school, home) that enables or inhibits educational *future goals and educational aspirations*. This analysis therefore explores demographic factors that influence these constructs (PPCT variables), as well as what it is about the TAP outreach initiatives (proximal processes) that help students to progress (if at all).

Consideration of time (personal and historical) is a highly important, aspect of Bronfenbrenner's model. This study investigates whether a student's year group (personal time) influences their self-reported *future goals and educational aspirations* by

Table 2. Operationalising Bronfenbrenner's Model.

PPCT Model	Ecosystem	Variables
Person	Microsystem – the individual	Gender, ethnicity, self-reported *future goals and educational aspirations*
Context	Meso, Exo and Macrosystems.	Mother's education level, DEIS/ Non-DEIS School, parental support.
Time	Chronosystem: Personal and historical time.	Year group, 2019–2022 (pre and post Covid pandemic).
Proximal Processes:	Micro and mesosystems	Engagement with mentoring programme, engagement with pathways activities, parental support with education.

comparing mean scores across year groups (1st – 6th). A particular strength of this research is provided by a longitudinal perspective (historical time) on the development of these constructs, as data were collected from a sample of students in 2019 (pre-covid pandemic) and again in 2022 (post-pandemic). This study therefore provides a unique view on the extent to which *future goals and educational aspirations* are sustained over time (Table 2).

Data analysis

Students' mean scores on the *future goals and educational aspirations* measure were compared between groups related to the Person, Place, Context, and Time variables (Table 1). These included comparing scores by gender and ethnicity (Person), school type (Place), mothers' education level (Context), and year group (Personal Time). In order to achieve this, two types of statistical tests were used. Independent samples *t*-tests were conducted where the independent variables were binary (Gender, School type and mother's education level), and a one-way ANOVA was conducted to look at group differences between year groups and ethnicities. Games Howell post-hoc analyses were used to investigate group differences as variances between group were not equal (See Table 2).

The proximal processes that were investigated were represented by variables relating to students' self-reported engagement with a mentoring programme and their involvement with pathways activities as part of the TAP widening participation programme. A multiple hierarchical regression was conducted, which investigated the influence of these proximal processes on students' *future goals and educational aspirations*, while controlling for the PPCT variables.

In order to investigate the development of *goals and educational aspirations* over time using a longitudinal sample, *goals and educational aspirations* was investigated using a paired samples t-test. Student surveys collected at the end of the school year in 2019 were matched with student survey data collected at the same time of year in 2022. The total number of matched surveys was 776.

Results

This section of the paper will present the results of the analyses described in the previous section. Firstly, between group differences will be explored in relation to students' *future goals and educational aspirations*. The influence of the PPCT variables on *future goals and educational aspirations* as well as the impact of the proximal processes of Pathways activities and mentoring, while controlling for the PPCT variables, will then be presented. Finally, a longitudinal view of a sample of students' *future goals and educational aspirations* scores will be discussed.

Between group comparisons according to PPCT variables

This section highlights any between group differences that emerged through the initial analyses. It aims to answer RQ 1: Are there group differences between students' *future goals and aspirations*?

Person (Gender and ethnicity)

An independent-samples t-test was run to determine if there were differences between males and females in relation to their *future goals and educational aspirations*. There were no outliers in the data, as assessed by inspection of a boxplot. Engagement scores for each level of gender were normally distributed, as assessed by Shapiro-Wilk's test ($p > .05$), and there was homogeneity of variances, as assessed by Levene's test for equality of variances ($p < 0.5$). Males (M = 3.94, SD = 0.72) had higher scores on this measure than females (M = 4.08, SD = 0.68) a statistically significant difference, M = −0.135, 95% CI [−0.18, – 0.08], t(3544) = −5.71, $p < .001$ (Table 2).

Differences of future goals and educational aspirations scores were also compared by ethnicity of students who completed the survey. Data were normally distributed for each group, as assessed by boxplot and Shapiro – Wilk test ($p > .05$), respectively. Homogeneity of variances was violated, as assessed by Levene's Test of Homogeneity of Variance ($p < .05$), therefore a one-way Welch ANOVA was conducted to determine any differences in scores between ethnic groups. Statistically significant differences were also noted in *future goals and educational aspirations* scores in relation to ethnicity groups (Welch's F(6, 4.746) = 304.803, $p < .001$). Games-Howell post hoc analysis revealed that students who reported being from Indian/Pakistani or Bangladeshi backgrounds had significantly higher scores (on both measures) than all other ethnicity groups except for the Asian/Asian Irish group. Those who reported being White or White Irish had significantly lower *future goals and educational aspirations* scores than those who reported being Black or black Irish, Asian or Asian Irish, or Indian or Pakistani or Bangladeshi Irish. Students who reported being from the Traveller or Roma community had significantly lower scores for *future goals and educational aspirations* than all other ethnic groups (Table 3).

Place (School)

There was no significant difference between scores of students from DEIS or Non-DEIS schools in this sample (Table 2).

Context (Mother's education)

Students whose mother had completed a university degree had statistically significantly higher scores than those whose mother had not (Table 2).

Time (Year group)

One way ANOVA tests were run to investigate group differences between year groups and ethnicities. Games-Howell post hoc analysis revealed that students in their first year in secondary school had significantly higher *goals and educational aspirations* scores then their peers in 5th or 6th year. Similarly, students in their 2nd or 4th year had significantly higher scores than those in 6th year (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 3. Future goals and educational aspirations scores – independent samples t-tests.

Variable	M	Std. Deviation	*t* value	Significance
Gender (Person)				
Male	3.94	.725	−5.71	<.001*
Female (ref)	4.08	.684		
School (Place)				
DEIS	4.01	.72	.09	.921
Non-DEIS	4.01	.68		
Mother's Education (Context)				
Completed University	4.11	0.69	−7.25	<.001*
Did not complete university	3.93	0.73		

Influence of PPCT variables and proximal processes on student outcomes

This section aims to answer RQ2: *Are there contextual factors that influence the extent to which student future goals and educational aspirations and post-school plans are impacted by the outreach programme?*

Future goals and educational aspirations model

A hierarchical multiple regression was conducted to determine the level of influence of the PPCT variables of Person (gender, ethnicity), Place (school type), Context (mothers' education level and parental educational support) and Time (year group) on students' *future goals and educational aspirations*, and to determine whether the addition of the proximal process variables – participation in the mentoring programme and pathways activities – improved the predictive power of the model (Table 4).

The full model of gender, year group, ethnicity, school type, parental support, mother's education, having a mentor and engaging in three or more pathways activities to predict *future goals and educational aspirations* scores (Model 3) was statistically

Table 4. Future goals and educational aspirations scores – one way ANOVA test.

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Number of cases
Ethnicity (Person)			
White/ White Irish	3.98	0.71	N = 2469
Irish Traveller/ Roma community	3.40	0.92	N = 37
Black/ Black Irish/ African Irish	4.13	0.70	N = 273
Asian/ Asian Irish	4.20	0.65	N = 122
Indian/ Pakistani/ Bangladeshi/ Irish	4.45	0.51	N = 100
Other	4.02	0.72	N = 398
Year group (Time)			
1st Year	4.08	.70	N = 745
2nd year	4.03	.68	N = 876
3rd year	4.02	.71	N = 649
4th year	4.06	.68	N = 430
5th year	3.93	.72	N = 469
5th year LCA*	3.71	.81	N = 29
6th year	3.89	.73	N = 466
6th year LCA*	3.62	.88	N = 33

*Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) is a pre-vocational programme which prepares students for adult and working life. Students with the Leaving Certificate Applied cannot gain direct entry through the Central Applications Office (CAO) system to the universities or institutes of technology. Students can however gain access to further education and training courses (FET). Many FET courses lead to either a level 5 or level 6 award. In some cases, you can progress with this award to a third level course in a higher education institution such as an institute of technology or a university (www.citizensinformation.ie).

significant, $R^2 = .125$, $F(8, 2807) = 22.287$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = .125$. The addition of parental support and mother's education to the prediction of *future goals and educational aspirations* scores (Model 2) led to a statistically significant increase in R^2 of .085, $F(2, 2809) = 133.893$, $p < .001$, indicating that these Context variables have a significant impact even when controlling for the Person, Place and Time variables of gender, year group, ethnicity, and school type. The addition of mentoring and engagement with pathways activities to the prediction of *future goals and educational aspirations* (Model 3) also led to a statistically significant increase in R^2 of .019, $F(2, 2807) = 30.358$, $p < .001$. This suggests that, even when controlling for all the PPCT variables in the model, student engagement with these proximal processes has a statistically significantly positive impact on their *future goals and educational aspirations*.

Educational aspirations and goals – change over time?

This section looks to address RQ 3: Are students' levels of *future goals and educational aspirations* sustained over their time in secondary school?

A total of 776 students took the survey in both 2019 and 2022. A paired samples t-test was conducted to compare students' *future goals and educational aspirations* scores over the two time points. There was a significant decrease in students' *future goals and educational aspirations* scores over time $t(775) = 12.303$, $p < .001$, $d = .44$.

Discussion

In Ireland, the latest National Access Plan 2022- 2028 (NAP) (HEA 2022) emphasises the importance of early intervention, creating a sense of belonging in education, and instilling a culture of high educational aspirations in schools (HEA 2022). Findings from this research show that, even when controlling for the PPCT variables of gender, ethnicity, year group, parental support, mothers' level of education and school status, participating in the TAP widening participation outreach programme practices of pathways and mentoring was associated with higher educational *future goals and educational aspirations* scores for secondary school students. Previous research has shown that *future goals and educational aspirations* is a strong predictor of postsecondary enrolment (Appleton et al. 2006). This aligns with previous research that has found that mentoring and IAG activities are particularly impactful for students from marginalised backgrounds (Ní Chorcora, Bray, and Banks 2023; Robinson and Salvestrini 2020; Torgerson et al. 2014). This provides robust evidence for the need for sustained in-school models of mentoring and IAG activities. The results also indicate that the impact of such interventions could be increased through increased partnership with parents, and by developing tailored and culturally sensitive mentoring and IAG activities for those who are most effected by educational disadvantage e.g. those from Roma and Traveller communities.

Gender and ethnicity (Person)

The study investigated group differences within students' *future goals and educational aspirations*. Findings suggest that gender has a significant influence on a young persons' *future goals and educational aspirations* scores, with females scoring higher

this measure. This aligns with international research (Stahl 2012) and recent Irish research that shows that entry rates from males in disadvantaged areas are lower than that of females from similar contexts (HEA 2022). Future research should investigate the factors that contribute to lower *goals and educational aspirations* of males from disadvantaged areas and what early interventions are needed.

This study also investigated the influence of a young persons' exosystem and their ethnic and cultural background on goals and educational aspirations scores. In line with findings from the UK on HE participation (Crawford and Greaves 2015), all ethnic minorities (with the exception of those from the Traveller or Roma community) had significantly higher goals and educational aspirations scores than their White or White Irish peers.

Results showed that those who identified being from the traveller or Roma community had significantly lower goals and educational aspirations scores than all other ethnicity groups. Derrington (2007) identified several push and pull factors that impact on educational engagement including cultural dissonance and a high level of social exclusion. In the UK, Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2024) argue that public education systems have been designed for students who do not come from Gypsy, Roma or Traveller backgrounds (GRT) and that these institutions have been systematically and structurally othering GRT. However, their article describes an outreach project that was designed as a collective effort among academics, GRT representatives, teachers, and outreach professionals. The project involved guided small group discussions, individual journey maps, targeted outreach for GRT students, provision of resources on GRT culture and history for the school, and a celebration and learning day where community members and education professionals came together. Similar interventions for young Travellers and Roma students are taking place in Ireland in recent years through specific Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) funding that is being made available from the Higher Education Authority (HEA), which specifically names Travellers and those from the Roma community as a priority target group (HEA 2022; HEA 2023)., However, sustainable funding is needed for these types of programmes to continue as well as the ongoing evaluation of the impact of such programmes. These types of interventions could help support students from the Traveller and Roma communities in accessing higher education by providing additional resources, cultural awareness, and community support. However, the authors also recognise the need to avoid producing an 'expected' mobility pathway for learners and to recognise the specific cultures, histories, and experiences shaping such possibilities. With the recent publication of the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024 −2030 and Implementation Plan it is hoped that dedicated resources will become available to action these plans to support young people from the Traveller and Roma communities in Ireland.

Family and school influences (Context)

The link between the level of parental education and young peoples' goals and educational aspirations is well established (Dickson, Gregg, and Robinson 2016; Lundborg, Nilsson, and Rooth 2014; Sewell and Shah 1968). When looking at the context of the young person's mesosystem and the interactions between their family and their families' relationships with education, findings from this study showed that students whose

mother had completed a university degree were significantly more likely to have higher goals and educational aspirations scores. Parental involvement in a young persons' education was also significantly associated with goals and educational aspirations scores within the hierarchical regression model. These findings reflect some of the literature in the field, which highlights the intergenerational nature of educational disadvantage (Byrne and McCoy 2017; Lynch and O' Riordan 1998; Reay 2017), however, the fact that parental support can also have a profound impact suggests that intergenerational educational disadvantage can be tackled in collaboration with parents where that is possible (Harackiewicz et al. 2012; Harackiewicz and Priniski 2018; Rosenzweig and Wigfield 2016). Strayhorn (2010) suggests that by partnering with parents, encouraging them to be actively involved in their child's education, and promoting their participation in school events, WP outreach programmes can support families and students. It may be that WP outreach programmes should engage and co-create activities with parents as well as exploring the potential difficulties that may exist (e.g. work schedules, caring duties, parental distrust of schools). By acknowledging these challenges, we would be better placed to work together to find solutions using new and innovative strategies.

In this study, both designated DEIS and non-DEIS schools were included. However, it is important to acknowledge that the context of the non-DEIS cohort in this sample is firmly rooted in areas that have traditionally low progression to tertiary education. Any participating non-DEIS schools are also located within areas where progression to higher education is low, and it is for this reason that they are linked with TAP's outreach programmes. This is not normally the case for the majority of non-DEIS schools which are located in medium to high socio-economic areas. educational aspirationsResults in this study indicate that within this sample of schools, school type did not have any significant influence on students' goals and educational aspirations. While it might come as no surprise to outreach practitioners that there were no differences between these groups, it does point to the issue that many young people in non-DEIS schools are experiencing educational disadvantage and may therefore be even more at risk of 'falling through the cracks.' As they are not targeted by the DEIS scheme, they do not receive additional supports.

Despite its benefits, the DEIS scheme has limitations (Fleming and Harford 2023; Singleton 2025). A key issue is the scheme's reliance on students' addresses for deprivation scores, which may exclude some children in homelessness, temporary accommodation, or Direct Provision (Trutz and Pratschke 2017; Children's Rights Alliance 2020). Additionally, Pavee Point National Traveller and Roma Centre (2024) highlights that area-based DEIS classification overlooks some disadvantaged Traveller and non-Traveller families who do not live in designated areas. As a result, their children attend schools that do not qualify for DEIS, leaving them without essential resources.

In their recent review of the DEIS scheme, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) highlights the need to continue refining and validating the indicators of social disadvantage underpinning the targeting of DEIS resources. It is clear that educational disadvantage is not confined to schools officially designated as DEIS, and that many students in non-DEIS schools also require support. The review also notes that non-DEIS schools often lack the resources to provide additional supports for disadvantaged students, with many relying on teachers or parents volunteering their time to fill these gaps (DES 2023; OECD 2024). Further support and resourcing for these students is necessary.

Year group (Time)

Time, in this study, is conceived of in two ways: firstly, using a 'point in time' analysis on the full student sample, which investigated differences in mean scores between year groups; and secondly, through the investigation of a longitudinal sub-sample of 776 students who had taken the survey in April/ May 2019 and again in April/ May 2022. This combination of longitudinal and 'point in time' analysis highlights both the importance of personal time of the young person over three years but also historical time as the students moved up in year groups while also navigating their education through the Covid-19 pandemic.

Students in their first year in secondary school (age 12/13) had significantly higher *future goals and educational aspirations* scores then their peers in 5th or 6th year (ages 16-19). Similarly, students in their 2nd or 4th year had significantly higher scores than those in 6th year. Although these findings do not come from the longitudinal data set, they do indicate that the *goals and educational aspirations* scores may decrease as students' progress through school, particularly as they move into their final two exam focused years.

In order to investigate this further, paired sample t-tests were used to explore changes over time. This analysis revealed significant decreases in *goals and educational aspirations* scores over these students' journey through their schooling, strengthening the hypothesis raised by the 'point in time' analysis.

There are many possible and plausible reasons for this decrease in *goals and educational aspirations* scores. As students grow older and progress into senior cycle year groups they may be faced with challenges of reality, including the cost of living and providing for themselves and their families. Previous longitudinal research in Ireland has explored students' decision making about their post-school pathways (Smyth, Banks, and Calvert 2011). Findings showed that young people highlighted the importance of intrinsic motivation for progressing to further or higher education – wanting to study a subject they were interested in, personal fulfilment and being able to get an interesting job. However, young people who had attended DEIS schools were more likely to have extrinsic motivation – an income and a secure job, suggesting greater risk aversion among this group (Reay, David, and Ball 2005).

Another potential reason for this decrease in *goals and educational aspirations* may be that young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds have more realistic expectations about the challenges they face but little guidance or a lack of role models to help them to overcome those challenges (Baker et al. 2014). Yet again we must demand that we cannot view this as a personal failing of the young person rather, it is a result of structural inequalities (Campbell and McKendrick 2017). Young peoples' perceptions of the risk associated with attending university are based upon real concerns which need to be addressed for an informed choice to be made (Sanderson and Spacey 2020).

Furthermore, Kintrea, St Clair, and Houston (2015) highlight how, even within designated disadvantaged areas in Britain, there can be significant differences between patterns of goals and educational aspirations and how they change over time in different locations. Their paper suggests that understanding how goals and educational aspirations are formed requires a nuanced approach to the nexus of class, ethnicity, and institutional

influences within local areas. This decrease of future goals and educational aspirations over time raises important questions about the structural and social factors shaping young people's educational trajectories. Further research is needed to explore the underlying causes and, crucially, to identify targeted interventions that can better support young people during this pivotal stage of their education.

However, despite the decrease in *future goals and educational aspirations* scores over time, the findings presented in this paper highlights the positive influence that school-university partnerships can have on students' educational outcomes even when accounting for the variety of influencing factors in the young persons' life. Considering WP through the lens of ecological systems such as Bronfenbrenner's model highlights the influence of a complex interplay of contextual elements on a young person's future goals and educational aspirations. Findings from this paper help to highlight the intersectionality within disadvantaged communities and therefore the importance of meaningful WP and university action plans to address these issues. This research provides an evidence-based example of what works in terms of raising *future goals and educational aspirations* for secondary school students in communities experiencing educational disadvantage.

Strengths and limitations

In their systematic review of widening participation programmes (Ní Chorcora, Bray, and Banks 2023), highlight the need for longitudinal studies with large sample sizes as well as the collection of baseline data of participants. This is necessary to support the evaluation of interventions and to identify what aspects might be particularly beneficial for specific types of students, and why. This type of analysis supports WP practitioners to be strategic in their use of targeted interventions. It is a strength of the research presented in this paper that it begins to tackle these issues through its evaluation of TAP's outreach programme.

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, those 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. In the absence of randomisation, using a matched comparator group can offer a reasonable estimate of the intervention's impact.

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 allows us to compare students within schools and environments according to who has (or has not) participated in the WP initiatives, and even according to their level of participation. By utilising a large dataset and the PPCT model, this paper controls

for many variables within the individual's environment in order answer the research question and account for as many other factors as possible within both groups. Attainment data was not available for these students, and it must be noted that not being able to account for this in our model was a limitation given the link between attainment and progression. However, the other variables in the PPCT model which include gender, ethnicity, parental education, school type, and year group ensure that as much variability is accounted for as possible making this a novel and useful paper given the powerful underpinning dataset.

On the other hand, the impact of the programme may be under-reported due to the spillover effect that may have occurred: if some members of peer groups participated, and others did not, those that did not still may reap the benefits from engaging in conversations with their peers, thus promoting social capital amongst friend groups (Vander-Weele et al. 2013). Research is also currently being conducted to follow this cohort of young people into the post-school period to explore whether their *future goals and educational aspirations* match their post-school destinations.

The items that make up the variable of *Ethnicity* were drawn from the Irish Census form. However, there may be scope for some increased granularity within the categories provided. This is particularly pertinent in relation to the White/White Irish category, which was by far the most populous, but also, for the large proportion of students that selected 'other' as their ethnicity. Although this is in line with the results of the Irish census data (CSO 2016), it suggests that we need a more accurate measure of ethnicity that enables all groups to feel included.

Implication for practitioners, policy makers and researchers

Overall, this paper provides evidence-based insights into effective strategies for raising future goals and educational aspirations among secondary school students experiencing educational disadvantage, offering valuable guidance for policy makers in shaping educational access policies and programmes in Ireland. Findings from this paper with over 3000 students, give a strong justification for a model of practice that works in terms of school-university widening participation partnerships and one which could potentially be scaled to other universities and schools. The paper highlights the intersectional nature of educational disadvantage and although many of the models can be used for all students, they may need to be targeted to specific priority groups such as those from Traveller or Roma communities. Further longitudinal studies are needed to evaluate the outcomes and impact of widening participation programmes and their influence on post-secondary education.

Finally, policy makers should also consider the finding that there was a decline in future goals and educational aspirations as students progress through school, particularly in their final exam-focused years. The authors stress that this is not due to a personal failing of the young person rather, it is a result of structural inequalities (Campbell and McKendrick 2017). Young peoples' perceptions of the risk associated with attending university are based upon real concerns which need to be addressed for an informed choice to be made (Sanderson and Spacey 2020). Policy makers must address the challenges and realities students face, including financial concerns, and providing support and guidance to maintain their educational aspirations and a holistic approach to tackling the risks associated with entering higher education.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Chapter 6 - Plans, Progression and Post-Compulsory Education: Measuring the Success of a School-University Widening Participation Programme in Ireland.

This chapter presents Study III, a peer-reviewed journal article that has been published and is now integrated into the thesis. As with the previous empirical chapters, this study is closely aligned with the overarching research question, which explores the influence of TAP's school-university widening participation outreach programmes on the educational aspirations and post-school progression of marginalised secondary school students. Specifically, Study III investigates whether students achieve the post-school plans formulated during their final year and whether participation in WP programmes is associated with greater likelihood of educational progression.

Building on Study II, which examined the impact of WP outreach on students' future goals and aspirations while still in school, this chapter extends the focus to what happens after students leave the secondary system. By tracking a cohort of students six months after completing the Leaving Certificate, Study III addresses whether raised aspirations translate into realised outcomes and explores the structural, familial and programmatic factors that influence this transition.

While the article includes its own contextual framing, methodology, and analysis, its inclusion here supports the thesis's central argument: that effective WP outreach must not only raise students' aspirations, but also provide the structures and supports necessary to help them navigate the complex pathways beyond compulsory education.

Together with the findings from Chapter 5, this study helps to build a more complete understanding of how aspirations are shaped and whether they are ultimately fulfilled. While the article includes its own contextual framing, methodology, and analysis, its inclusion here supports the thesis's central argument: that effective WP outreach must not only raise students' aspirations, but also provide the structures and supports necessary to help them navigate the complex pathways beyond compulsory education.

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Article

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 Chorcora 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 Chorcora 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, $\varphi = 0.289$, $p < 0.001$.

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 $p < 0.05$ (Tabanchnick 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 Chorcora 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 Chorcora 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 Chorcora 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 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 Chorcora 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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Chapter 7 - Exploring the Retrospective Impact of a Widening Participation Programme: A Bourdieusian Perspective

This chapter presents original empirical findings that examine the retrospective impact of a TAPs WP initiative through the lens of Bourdieu's theoretical framework, with particular focus on the concepts of capital, habitus, and field. Unlike previous chapters, this is not a published journal article. Instead, it is a standalone findings chapter written specifically for inclusion in this thesis. It offers a more interpretive and reflective analysis that complements the earlier quantitative studies by drawing on qualitative data.

Building on the outcomes explored in Study II (aspirations) and Study III (post-school progression), this chapter shifts the focus toward students' stories and experiences. By turning the deficit lens upside down, the chapter challenges the notion that students from underserved backgrounds are simply 'lacking' in capital. Instead, it interrogates how educational systems and institutions are structured to privilege dominant forms of capital while marginalising others. In doing so, it draws attention to the often-invisible rules and expectations of higher education that serve to maintain inequality. This analysis questions not students' readiness for higher education, but the readiness of higher education institutions to support diverse learners. As educators and policymakers, we must ask: how can we ensure that we support all students, not just those whose forms of capital are viewed as more valuable and who are therefore more likely to fit into the existing system?

The Trinity Access Programme (TAP) widening participation schools programme and related pre-college initiatives played a significant role in shaping students' educational trajectories, particularly for those from underserved backgrounds. This chapter explores the educational journeys of six students from six different TAP-linked schools: Martin, Zak, Harry, Meg, Ali, and Tadhg. Each of these students engaged with TAP programmes to varying degrees and progressed to some form of post-secondary education. All six participated in multiple "Pathways" activities, and five reported in their sixth-year surveys that they had had a mentor.

Of the six, only Tadhg and Ali progressed directly to university after completing their Leaving Certificate and were still enrolled in the same courses, at DCU and TUD respectively, at the time of their interviews. Martin initially began a Level 8 Law programme within the Arts and Humanities faculty at DCU. However, he later realised it would not qualify him to become a barrister, so he transferred to a pure Law course at DCU after his first year.

Meg entered a level 8 TCD Arts and Humanities course, however, found that the college and course wasn't for her, this led her to dropping out of college within four weeks of starting so as not to lose out on her SUSI grant. She then deferred her CAO place, worked for a year and started a course in Education in Marino College of Education the following September.

Harry began a Level 8 course at DCU but found it wasn't the right fit. He subsequently transferred to a different course at the National College of Ireland (NCI), restarting in Year 1. Zak entered a Level 7 course at NCI after his Leaving Certificate but struggled with the transition and dropped out after six months due to personal reasons. He returned the following academic year to pursue a different Level 7 course, later progressing to a Level 8 course, which he had just started at the time of the interview. Both Tadhg and Meg were the only two out of six who attended a non-DEIS school, however their schools are located in areas where progression to higher education is low and therefore why they are linked to TAP. Tadhg was the only participant interviewed who reported that both his parents had attended university as mature students which is interesting in light of findings discussed later in this chapter.

This chapter examines these students' post-secondary trajectories and how they have navigated the two years since leaving school. Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of *capital*, *habitus*, and *field*, the findings illustrate how students actively drew on their own available familial and social capital, however limited or fragmented, alongside the support provided by TAP. The programme served as a crucial supplementary source of institutional, cultural, and social capital, offering resources and networks often inaccessible through students' schools or family environments. Together, these forms of capital shaped their educational decisions, transitions, and resilience in the face of challenges.

Ultimately, this chapter aims to disentangle how Bourdieusian theory can illuminate the hidden hierarchies and systemic barriers embedded within the education system. While the

students' experiences highlight the transformative potential of widening participation programmes like TAP, they also reveal the limitations of such interventions when operating in isolation. This analysis underscores that widening participation initiatives, though vital, are not enough on their own. If we are to meaningfully address inequality in higher education, these efforts must be embedded within broader, systemic and structural changes that reimagine how education is accessed, experienced, and valued.

The Influence of Familial Capital in Educational Pathways

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of familial capital, as a component of social capital embedded in the family, helps illuminate how students' educational trajectories are shaped not only by formal schooling but also by the cultural resources, values, and forms of support available within the home. The findings from this study suggest that while many participants came from families with limited direct experience of higher education, parental involvement, particularly from mothers of the students interviewed, played a key role in fostering educational aspiration and perseverance.

Some participants identified their mothers as central figures in their schooling, describing them as actively engaged in their academic development and emotionally supportive throughout. One student explained:

"Oh yeah, yeah, definitely. My mom. My mom. Definitely… She was always the one. Made sure I like when I was a kid, I had my homework done. Everything."

For some participants, being a first-generation college student was not only a personal milestone but also a source of motivation rooted in familial pride and legacy. While these families may have lacked institutional cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), they provided emotional and symbolic support that helped students frame education as a form of upward mobility:

"I was the first person from my family to be born in Ireland and also one of the first people in my family to even have a Leaving Cert… It was more like an accomplishment."

The findings also illustrate how parental involvement extends beyond academic assistance to include active participation in the college exploration process. One participant described

their mother accompanying them to college campuses, signalling a shared investment in their educational journey:

"I went into Marino with my mom. And I loved it. Like, I thought the campus was lovely."

Conversely, students also reflected on the challenges faced by peers whose parents' lacked familiarity with the higher education system. One participant recounted how a friend's parents struggled with necessary documentation for access schemes like HEAR or SUSI:

"Her parents didn't know. They were like, 'What do you mean I need that? What are all these forms?' And they had not got a clue."

Such examples reflect what Reay, David and Ball (2005) term *institutional habitus*, the way in which institutional norms interact with students' own habitus and available capital. For students whose families lack experience with educational bureaucracy, the navigation of college applications becomes a site of stress and exclusion.

Still, many participants acknowledged that their own familial capital was shaped by accumulated experience. In one case, the mother's employment within a school and the educational journey of an older sibling allowed the family to better support the student's transition to college:

"I was quite lucky that my mum works in the school and my sister went through it before me. But… helping someone fill it out… there's a lot in it."

In several cases, older siblings acted as vital sources of institutionalised cultural capital, translating college access processes into more understandable terms. As Reay (2000) notes, siblings often become key transmitters of educational knowledge within working-class families, compensating for the absence of parental familiarity with the system. One student highlighted how her older sister's advice helped her avoid a financial pitfall during a period of uncertainty in college:

"I only knew that because of my sister and she was like, you be careful, 'cause one of her friends dropped out later and didn't get it again. But I know, like in my course now, so many had to leave the course last year and dropped out. And they're all paying full fees. Like, they're all paying the full 5-6 grand because they dropped out too late. So like, I was

really lucky that I knew that, no one had told me that. I had to kind of find that out myself."

This experience reveals a critical gap in institutional communication, as neither school teachers, guidance counsellors, nor the college had made this high-stakes information accessible. For many of her peers, lacking this knowledge had serious financial implications that ultimately jeopardised their ability to return to higher education, an example of how unequal access to institutional knowledge reproduces disadvantage, even after students reach university.

Encouragement, rather than coercion, also emerged as a key theme. Many parents, despite lacking formal qualifications, instilled a sense of responsibility and motivation to pursue education. As one participant described:

"My mom is very education-driven… Not that she ever forced it on us… But she was like, 'Education is very important.'"

This form of embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) shaped students' aspirations by cultivating a disposition toward education as a means of self-betterment. These findings align with the previous findings froms this longitudinal study (Study III; Ní Chorcora, Banks and Bray, 2025a) while parental educational attainment was not a strong predictor of student progression, parental involvement and encouragement were significantly associated with higher aspirations and actual transition into further and higher education.

Among the six participants interviewed, five had parents who had not attended university. Nevertheless, all but one reported receiving strong encouragement from their families to engage with and succeed in school. This supports Reay's (1998) argument that working-class parental involvement, though often overlooked in institutional discourse, is deeply invested, even if expressed in ways that are not always recognised or valued by schools and universities. From a policy standpoint, these findings point to the need for more accessible and parent-inclusive outreach strategies. Schools and colleges can help bridge this gap by providing accessible information about the college application process and actively encouraging parental involvement, particularly in communities where formal educational capital may be limited. Strengthening school-family partnerships can serve as a powerful

tool in broadening access and promoting equity in higher education (Strayhorn, 2010; Qualter, 2024).

Navigating Higher Education Through Social Capital

A recurring theme across participant narratives was the pivotal role of social capital, the networks of relationships and resources embedded within them, in navigating the complexities of the higher education system. For many students from working-class backgrounds, who lacked access to familial or institutional knowledge about higher education, peers and informal networks served as essential sources of support and guidance.

In Bourdieu's terms, these students often lacked the *embodied* and *institutionalised cultural capital* typically passed down through family structures, such as familiarity with the "rules of the game" in higher education (Bourdieu, 1986). In this absence, *social capital*, connections to others who possess such knowledge, played a supportive role. One participant, reflecting on his early experience of college, stated:

"I was just so lost after leaving school and if it wasn't for my friend, I'd probably still be lost right now."

This friend had already navigated the system and provided crucial guidance when the participant dropped out of his initial college course:

"When I dropped out of NCI, I was even more lost because I didn't know how to progress. But it was my friend who talked me through what to do and how to go through... from dropping out in college, going into a new college and then progressing up the levels."

This form of peer-based guidance becomes particularly significant when institutional or familial structures are not equipped to provide it. The same participant noted how he now acts as a source of information and encouragement for his younger brother and others in his community, thereby extending the reach of social capital across generations:

"A lot of people don't really understand the idea of college. I find myself talking to my brother and about his friends, and they don't really get what college is about and they don't understand how it really functions."

This mirrors Bourdieu's argument that capital, whether economic, social, or cultural, is unequally distributed and that the reproduction of inequality occurs not only through the educational system but also through access to networks that can demystify it.

Participants also highlighted how peer and community networks outside of formal schooling were more effective than teachers in making college seem accessible. Several noted that while teachers followed a uniform educational trajectory (e.g., undergraduate, master's, teaching), hearing from students who had taken alternative or more recent pathways provided more relatable and practical insight:

"It's better than learning from teachers or lecturers because they did it years and years ago... Like one of my friends had to apply for a PLC as a backup and had to go in and ask how to do it, because no one had explained."

"People need to hear from those who've gone through it recently... like someone who did a PLC or applied through the backdoor routes. Not just teachers who did the same path 20 years ago."

Such comments underscore the limits of institutional guidance and reveal how peer networks serve not only to transmit practical knowledge but also to validate less traditional or more circuitous educational pathways. These informal exchanges make visible the diversity of routes into higher education that are often absent from the school's official discourse.

Institutional Habitus of Schools and the Influence of School-University Partnerships

Students' accounts revealed that the institutional culture of their schools significantly shaped how they viewed post-secondary education, with a strong emphasis in many schools on traditional university routes, particularly prestigious institutions such as Trinity College

Dublin (TCD), University College Dublin (UCD), and Technological University Dublin (TUD). While some schools actively encouraged alternative routes like Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) programmes or apprenticeships, others presented a narrow vision of success that equated higher education with high-points university entry.

"There was so much emphasis put on going to college during our fifth and sixth year. A lot of people ended up going and picking something they didn't really know much about, then dropping out… and that's almost worse than taking a year out to figure things out."

This "college-bound" ethos, while well-intentioned, created a hierarchy of options that marginalised non-university pathways. Several students recalled how their schools focused primarily on elite institutions:

"I remember being talked to a lot about college, about Trinity, about UCD, about all the big universities... I don't remember knowing about Youthreach or other options, mostly just apprenticeships and the bigger colleges."

In contrast, other students shared more inclusive experiences, particularly in schools that emphasised PLCs as legitimate stepping stones to university or employment:

"My school focused a lot on PLCs, which helped students understand how they could eventually progress to a university course. Not all schools do that."

These accounts reveal a lack of consistency across schools regarding how educational pathways are framed. Some participants compared their own school experiences with those of siblings or peers in private or fee-paying schools, highlighting stark contrasts:

"In my school, PLCs were encouraged a lot, but in my friend's private school, university was the only option they really talked about. Not just university, but high-points courses. It was a completely different mindset."

Without equitable access to broad and balanced guidance, students were often left to rely on personal networks to learn about alternatives. This placed students from non-traditional backgrounds at a disadvantage, particularly when institutional support was lacking or heavily skewed toward a singular trajectory.

The Influence of University Access Programmes

While the Trinity Access Programme and university outreach schemes provided invaluable opportunities, some students noted that these partnerships sometimes created an over-reliance on or over-identification with a single institution (TCD). One student, who had TCD as their first choice on their CAO but didn't get a place shared:

"At the time of me sitting my Leaving Cert, I was very focused on, like, Trinity or nothing. And that was maybe because of my time in those programmes. The first time I went to DCU was after I got in, my first day, my first lecture."

Another participant shared:

"I never knew about NCI until I ended up in my field. I'd never heard of them mentioned once in school. When I go back and people ask me where I am, they don't even know it exists."

Such accounts suggest that while university partnerships can successfully raise aspirations, they may also inadvertently narrow students' field of vision. A more inclusive model would ensure exposure to a diverse range of institutions and pathways, rather than reinforcing prestige hierarchies.

"It doesn't have to be Trinity, TUD, or UCD. There are thousands of options out there."

Institutional Habitus and Unequal Expectations Within the School

The findings strongly reflect Bourdieu's (1986) notion of *institutional habitus*, where the values, assumptions, and practices embedded within the school reflect and reproduce dominant cultural and academic norms. In particular, participant narratives suggest that the level of support offered by teachers and guidance counsellors was often shaped by students' perceived academic potential.

One student, who had consistently performed well in school, described how he was encouraged to pursue university due to meeting the expectations of the school's academic culture:

"So like that was it, it was almost like nearly expected that, you know, if you were doing well… they were kind of more inclined to encourage me to go that way."

In contrast, his peer, despite having aspirations for higher education, was met with minimal guidance:

"He didn't (go to college) because he faced resistance with, like, let's say, the guidance counsellor, the teachers, they didn't really help him as much… He maybe needed more help because he wasn't as academically inclined… but they gave him less help."

This contrast highlights how institutional habitus can function as a gatekeeping mechanism, directing resources and encouragement toward students who already align with dominant expectations of academic success, rather than challenging inequality and supporting those most marginalised in society. As students approached critical decision points, such as the CAO application process, this uneven support became even more pronounced:

"Certain people who… were doing all right, not top of the class, but… probably didn't get the full attention they needed. Whereas like me, I was going that direction anyway and I was given the attention because I was seen as going in that direction."

Through this lens, institutional habitus operates not only through what is provided but also through what is withheld. Students who might benefit most from personalised support and broader guidance are often those who receive the least, reinforcing a self-fulfilling cycle of limited opportunity.

Shaping Aspirations: Cultural Capital and Exposure

Many participants identified financial barriers as a key constraint on their educational development, particularly in relation to accessing private academic support such as grinds. TAP's provision of free, subject-specific tutoring in sixth year was described as transformative:

"The free grinds were so important. I wouldn't have had the money to afford them otherwise. They really helped me keep up with subjects I found difficult."

From a Bourdieusian perspective, these academic supports can be understood as a form of institutionalised cultural capital that helps students accumulate the knowledge and skills

necessary to perform well within the educational field. Access to this support, enabled by financial capital provided through TAP, not only enhanced students' academic capital but also helped to level the playing field with their more affluent peers, who according to the literature, often avail of similar private resources (McCoy and Byrne, 2024). Without such interventions, students lacking access to these forms of support remain structurally disadvantaged and less equipped to compete on equal footing in the academic system.

Exposure to new subjects and extracurricular activities, especially those linked to university settings, played a significant role in reshaping students' aspirations. In line with Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, these experiences often challenged students' pre-existing perceptions of what was possible or appropriate for "someone like them."

For example, a student recounted how participation in Trinity's "Phil Week" introduced them to debating, a form of cultural capital not available in their school, which led to a new sense of possibility:

"We didn't have debating in my school... so getting exposed to that, I was like, oh, this is really fun... The college students running it suggested that law might be a good fit, and that's what led me to explore it further."

The student went on to engage more deeply with legal studies through *Pathways to Law* programme in their 5th and 6th years, where exposure to different areas of law solidified their decision to study it at university:

"I remember we had calls about criminal law one week and then maybe family law another, you know, different things like that every month. Yeah, it really piqued my interest. That was kind of when the decision was set in stone. I was like, yeah, I want to go to college."

Similarly, other students pointed to pre-college programmes as the catalyst for their career choices. One student described how the Bridge to College Pathways programme in coding sparked their interest in computer science, ultimately leading them to pursue it at university:

"It was where I really fell in love with coding at the time, so it was where I decided I wanted to go into computer science in the future, which is why I ended up in it."

Another student recounted how their participation in *CoderDojo* in 2nd year and *Bridge to College* in Transition Year provided their first real exposure to programming which later influenced their senior cycle subject choices.

"I had no extracurriculars, so I decided to check it out. That's when I realised coding was fun. From there, I decided to take computer science as a Leaving Cert subject and later put it on my CAO application."

These experiences not only influenced students' subject choices in school but also helped them develop confidence in their career paths. This shift in aspiration illustrates how participation in university-led programmes can realign students' *dispositions* by embedding new possibilities within their habitus. These moments of exposure act as "conversion points" where cultural capital from outside the school setting becomes internalised and reorients future goals.

Visits to college campuses and direct engagement with university students were particularly effective in shifting perceptions of higher education from abstract or intimidating to concrete and achievable. These experiences contributed to a reconfiguration of the students' *habitus*, enabling them to "see themselves" in spaces that may have once have felt out of reach further demystifying higher education.

"Going to Trinity for workshops and tours made it feel less intimidating. I could see myself there, which really helped with my decision to apply."

Such transformations are not merely symbolic; they represent the accumulation of *embodied cultural capital*, the confidence, language, and familiarity needed to participate fully in the field of higher education.

Despite these benefits, students also identified limitations in current provision, particularly in relation to course selection. The structure of secondary education often left students struggling to visualise what certain university courses actually entailed. One participant advocated for more immersive, subject-specific experiences:

"It's really hard to visualise what courses actually involve when you're only studying core subjects in secondary school. More bridge programmes, where you can spend a few weeks trying different subjects, would be incredibly valuable."

This feedback points to the need for widening participation efforts to extend beyond aspiration-raising, toward *field navigation*, helping students make informed, meaningful choices through ongoing and experiential engagement with higher education.

Two different students also discussed how peer networks formed through TAP linked schools programmes provided access to like-minded individuals and alternative forms of social capital that were not present in their secondary school environments. For one student who enrolled in the Pathways to Law programme during their fifth and sixth years of school, connecting with peers who shared similar interests helped strengthen their aspiration to study law.

"Because my school was small enough, you wouldn't necessarily have someone who would be interested in that subject area… Seeing other students who were interested in it as well really helped."

Seeing others from similar backgrounds succeed also functioned as a symbolic form of capital, one that made higher education seem attainable and legitimate:

"When you hear from people who were in your position just a few years ago, it's like, oh, okay, this actually makes sense. You see the steps they took, and it makes it easier to imagine yourself doing the same."

Through a Bourdieusian lens, these findings highlight how social capital can act as a critical lever for working-class students, enabling them to access and navigate an educational field that is often structured by and for those with inherited cultural capital. In the absence of institutional or familial knowledge, peer networks serve not only as emotional support systems but as key transmitters of information, strategy, and belonging.

The Role of Guidance in Navigating Higher Education

Access to higher education is not only about academic attainment but also about the capacity to navigate institutional structures. From a Bordieuan perspective, guidance counselling plays a vital role in mediating access to the forms of *institutional capital* necessary for successfully transitioning from secondary school to university. Separate to the specific TAP programmes, the findings indicate that for students from working-class or underrepresented backgrounds, the school guidance counsellor was often the most

important gatekeeper of this knowledge, interpreting and transmitting the implicit rules of the educational *field*.

Students consistently underscored the importance of career guidance in helping them understand complex application systems, such as the CAO, SUSI grants, and targeted access schemes like HEAR and DARE. In Bourdieu's terms, this support enabled them to convert their *aspirational dispositions* into meaningful strategies for social mobility within a field they were unfamiliar with. As one student noted:

"The career guidance was very good there. Especially in 5th and 6th year, we had meetings, we were asked what we wanted to do, where we were going, if we were going to college… Having someone there to guide you rather than just leaving you to figure it out alone was the biggest help."

This guidance was not simply informational; it also shaped the students' *habitus*, helping them to see themselves as potential participants in higher education. Several students emphasized the importance of personalised support, particularly for those whose families lacked experience with post-secondary education, arguing that one-to-one sessions were crucial for fostering a sense of visibility and purpose:

"One-to-one is really important. It's really important that students feel seen, that they're not just like a piece of sand in a bucket. And I think like a lot of a lot of students, especially in (Name of School) found like that, they didn't really know where they were going. That they're just kind of like flying through the wind and seeing where it left them."

However, this personalised approach was not consistently available. Many students described overstretched resources, limited time, and a prioritisation of personal well-being over future planning, which created disparities in how much institutional capital they could acquire. These inequalities in school resources reflect broader structural imbalances in the education system and the unequal distribution of capital among schools. One student highlighted the sheer scale of unmet need:

"Our guidance counsellor was very overstretched. We could have done with more supports, more check-ins. There were about 1,000 students in the school, it's very hard to keep track of that many people."

Another added:

"She was only part-time. One day she was in, the next she wasn't. She wouldn't have time to meet everyone, so depending on just one person wasn't great."

While access to general information was common, students often lacked the deeper, field-specific knowledge required to make informed decisions about course selection and future pathways, what Bourdieu might term the *embodied cultural capital* of higher education. This mismatch sometimes led to poor course fit, dropping out, or confusion over funding rules:

"We were told about HEAR, DARE, and SUSI grants, but nobody explained that if you drop out later than four weeks into college, you lose your SUSI funding. More individual guidance would have helped."

Even when supports were in place, systemic and bureaucratic challenges persisted. One student described the frustration of navigating documentation issues in the HEAR/DARE process, highlighting how even minor disruptions in institutional processes can disproportionately impact students unfamiliar with the system:

"The school counsellor was really helpful with explaining HEAR and DARE, but unfortunately, I had issues with my documentation, so I wasn't accepted. It was disappointing that there wasn't an opportunity to amend it."

These structural gaps were most keenly felt in DEIS schools, where material limitations constrained the quality and consistency of guidance, despite the goodwill and commitment of staff. As one student reflected:

"I think all the teachers and staff really cared about us, and that was encouraging. But as a DEIS school, there was a lot to be desired in terms of facilities and direct supports. I was very lucky that the system worked for me and I was able to get through it."

This quote captures a central tension in Bourdieu's work: while individuals may develop resilience and determination (*habitus*), these traits alone are not enough to overcome the structural inequalities embedded in the educational system. The field of higher education remains stratified and difficult to navigate without sufficient access to *institutional and cultural capital*. Schools play a vital role in providing that capital, but only when adequately resourced to do so.

Overall, these findings underscore the need for more equitable and consistent career guidance provision in schools. For students unfamiliar with the field of higher education, such support is not supplementary but essential to bridging the gap between aspiration and attainment. In Bourdieusian terms, it is through guidance that students begin to "play the game" of higher education, learning its rules, acquiring its tools, and imagining themselves as legitimate players within it.

Mentoring and Bourdieu's Concept of Capital

The findings from the interviews suggest that the mentoring experience within the Trinity Access Programme (TAP) was not fully captured by the longitudinal survey. Many students did not distinguish between formal mentoring programmes and the informal support they received from teachers, guidance counsellors, or family members. This lack of clarity about the nature of mentoring likely contributed to the survey results, where students reported having a "staff in school" mentor. However, the interview discussions revealed that these were often informal, rather than part of a formal, structured programme.

This discrepancy between formal and informal mentoring can be analysed through Pierre Bourdieu's lens of *capital* and *habitus*. In Bourdieu's framework, *social capital* refers to the resources one gains from their networks and relationships, while *habitus* describes the internalised dispositions and behaviours shaped by one's social conditions. Mentoring, particularly informal mentoring, plays a key role in shaping students' *social capital*, influencing their access to knowledge, networks, and educational opportunities. However, as many students in this study primarily experienced mentoring through informal interactions, they may not have been able to fully leverage the benefits of a formalised mentoring system that could offer more structured support.

Although five of the six students interviewed reported participation in a formal mentoring programme in the sixth-year longitudinal survey, the interviews revealed that none had actually engaged in such a programme. Instead, they referred to informal mentoring relationships, indicating that the survey question had been misinterpreted by majority of students surveyed. Instead, they often referred to general encouragement and advice from teachers and guidance counsellors as mentoring. One student reflected on the role their computer science teacher played, noting:

"I would say my computer science teacher was a massive mentor. He was an incredible help. Like, really, really. Always, always really attentive. If I had any questions about personal projects, he'd be there to try to help me with it."

This mentorship, while informal, was crucial in building the student's c*apital*, the knowledge, skills, and competencies related to their field of study. The personal attention they received helped them develop both technical and personal skills, which could have a lasting impact on their academic progression.

Another participant described a teacher who was influential in fostering motivation and persistence, not specifically about progressing to college but in maintaining focus on general academic and personal goals. As the student shared:

"I feel like a lot of the times when you're looking at role models for kind of progressing and stuff like that, I had a teacher, he was my geography and English teacher, and he was a real big part of not necessarily specifically going on to college, but just being focused in general. He was always really reassuring to all the students, you know. One of the things he always said was that you can get anywhere you want. It'll only cost you time."

The reassurance from this teacher helped reinforce the student's *habitus*, shaping their dispositions toward resilience, hard work, and academic achievement. These informal mentoring relationships, while supportive, may not have had the structured nature required to guide students systematically through the higher education process.

"I think consistency is a big thing, you know, because I vaguely remember there definitely was something for us when we were in first year, but it wasn't kept up."

Another student, reflecting on their role as a mentor for younger students, emphasised how their experiences did not contribute to their own academic progression, highlighting that mentoring, in this case, was a reciprocal exchange rather than a direct tool for navigating their academic journey:

"So me and one of my friends, we had all been given a class in 1st year and every Tuesday morning we would go and check in on them and see how they were doing, if they

needed any help with exams and stuff. That was right after COVID as well, so those first years kind of had a tough time getting to know each other."

For this student, mentoring was valuable in developing their own skills and reinforcing their *cultural capital*, in this case, the ability to communicate academic challenges, but it did not directly impact their own college decision-making process.

Mentoring emerged as a nuanced and somewhat inconsistent element of widening participation (WP) practice across Studies I-III. While both the systematic literature review (Study I) and quantitative findings from Study II indicated that mentoring positively influenced students' aspirations and future goals, Study III found no statistically significant relationship between mentoring and actual post-secondary progression. This aligns with UK-based evidence from HEAT data (TASO, 2021), which also reported mixed outcomes regarding mentoring's effectiveness in supporting higher education entry.

These discrepancies highlight the need for further research to explore why mentoring may help raise aspirations but does not always translate into enrolment. Longitudinal tracking of students beyond school would be valuable in assessing whether early exposure to WP initiatives leads to lasting participation in higher education.

Insights from Study IV provide additional depth: although 2022 survey responses indicated that students had engaged in mentoring, interviews conducted in 2024 revealed that participants often described informal support from teachers or guidance counsellors rather than formal mentoring programmes. This disconnect suggests potential ambiguity in how mentoring is defined in survey instruments, emphasising the importance of clearer distinctions in data collection. Future studies should differentiate explicitly between informal guidance and structured mentoring initiatives to more accurately evaluate their respective impacts.

Conclusion

The six interviews explored in this chapter offer powerful insights into the experiences of students who "made it through" the system, but they also raise important questions about those we do not hear from: the students who didn't. Even among those who participated,

the post-school journey was rarely straightforward. Four out of the six students changed their course and/or institution within the first year, often doing so without structured support. Once students left the orbit of TAP's pre-college programme, the responsibility for navigating complex higher education systems shifted entirely onto the institutions themselves, many of which were not adequately equipped to support non-traditional entrants. However, it is also important to recognise that non-progression to higher education, or decisions to change course or institution, should not automatically be viewed as 'problems' or 'failures'. For some young people, these actions may represent informed and purposeful choices that align better with their personal, financial, or career aspirations. In this sense, progression into further education, training, or employment can equally constitute a positive and successful outcome. Understanding these pathways in a non-deficit way invites a broader conversation about how young people conceptualise the value and purpose of higher education today, particularly in relation to alternative routes such as further education colleges or Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) programmes. As the role of higher education continues to evolve, success should be framed not solely by entry or persistence within HE, but by the extent to which individuals find meaningful and sustainable pathways that reflect their goals and circumstances.

Students' reflections called for practical changes: pre-entry taster courses, opportunities for student shadowing, and reforms to grant policies that penalise course-switching. These are not just tweaks to the existing model, they are signals that our systems must be more flexible, empathetic, and structurally aware. TAP's programmes clearly helped students build institutional, cultural, social, and academic capital. But as this chapter has shown, those resources alone cannot overcome a system that was never fully designed to support them in the first place.

This chapter sought to turn the deficit lens upside down. Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of *capital*, *habitus*, and *field*, it has reframed students not as lacking, but as navigating educational fields that often fail to recognise or accommodate their forms of capital. Where earlier work in this study used Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model to map the influence of individual and environmental factors, Bourdieu's framework in this chapter has enabled a deeper interrogation of how structures, expectations, and institutional logics intersect with

student agency. It has helped “connect the dots” and foreground the lived realities behind statistical success.

While the TAP widening participation programme played a pivotal role in expanding access, these findings suggest that widening participation cannot end at the point of entry. Structural inequities in higher education persist post-entry, and unless they are addressed, they risk undermining the very goals such programmes set out to achieve. Mentoring, targeted supports, and tailored interventions all matter, but they must be embedded within broader systemic reform. We must begin to ask not how students can fit into existing educational structures, but how those structures can adapt to meet students where they are. Only then can we move from inclusion as access, to inclusion as transformation. The next chapter discusses the key findings from this integrated thesis including a detailed discussion on the findings from this chapter as well as implications for researchers, practitioners and policy makers.

Chapter 8 - Integrated Discussion

This final chapter offers an integrated discussion of the research programme and its overall contribution to the field of widening participation (WP). The thesis is based on an integrated study composed of four interrelated studies (Studies I-IV), three of which are published papers:

- **Study I**: *A systematic review of widening participation: Exploring the effectiveness of outreach programmes for students in second-level schools (Ní Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023)*
- **Study II**: *Measuring success: A school-university partnership model for widening participation in higher education (Ní Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2025)*
- **Study III**: *Plans, Progression and Post-Compulsory Education: Measuring the Success of a School-University Widening Participation Programme in Ireland (Ní Chorcora, Banks and Bray, 2025)*
- **Study IV**: *Exploring the Retrospective Impact of a Widening Participation Programme: A Bourdieusian Perspective*

Each of these empirical studies addresses specific sub-questions, while collectively contributing to the overarching research question:
To what extent do school-university widening participation outreach programmes influence the educational aspirations and post-school progression of marginalised secondary school students, and how are these outcomes shaped by intervention type and contextual factors?

This chapter synthesises the findings across Studies I-IV, reflecting on the patterns, contradictions, and insights that emerge when considered as a cohesive body of work. A more detailed discussion of Study IV is presented, as a detailed discussion were not covered in the previous findings chapter. Following the synthesis, the chapter evaluates the research design and methodology, with particular attention to the value and challenges of conducting longitudinal, multi and mixed-method WP research It also reflects on the theoretical and conceptual frameworks guiding the research, especially the complementary application of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Bourdieu's sociological concepts. The

chapter concludes by outlining the broader implications for practice, policy, and future research. In doing so, it positions the thesis as a timely and original contribution to the access and equity field, offering new insights into how WP interventions can be more effectively designed and implemented to support marginalised students throughout their educational journeys.

Overview of Studies and Key Findings

Study I: A systematic review of widening participation: Exploring the effectiveness of outreach programmes for students in second-level schools (Ní Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2023).

Table 10: Overview of research questions for Study I

Overall Thesis Research Question	Sub Research Questions (Study I)
To what extent do school-university widening participation outreach programmes influence the educational aspirations and post-school progression of marginalised secondary school students, and how are these outcomes shaped by intervention type and contextual factors?	RQ1a: What evidence (2012-2021) exists regarding the effectiveness of WP programmes for second-level students from low socio-economic backgrounds? RQ1b: What types of WP interventions have been studied? RQ1c: What is the impact of these interventions on aspirations, readiness, and enrolment?

Study I presented a systematic review of the literature on widening participation (WP) programmes aimed at increasing college access for low-income secondary school students. Despite the growing policy interest and increased funding for outreach in this area, the review revealed a strikingly limited body of research: only 19 studies, representing 18 unique interventions, met the inclusion criteria over the past ten years (2012 - 2022). This

scarcity highlights a significant gap in the evidence base concerning the effectiveness of WP initiatives at the school level.

While all studies in the systematic literature review (Study I) reported somewhat favourable outcomes, there was considerable variation in the types of interventions, the outcomes measured, and how success was defined. This variation poses challenges for synthesising results across studies and points to broader methodological issues in the field, including inconsistency in study design, limited sample sizes, restricted access to outcome data, and unclear criteria for evaluating programme effectiveness.

Half of the identified studies in the literature review focused on guidance-based interventions, which aimed to raise aspirations and provide students with information on college applications and financial aid. Despite the shared guidance focus, these interventions differed significantly in delivery method and intensity, from brief presentations (Peter & Zambre, 2017) to personalised text-message campaigns (Avery et al., 2021) and in-school counselling sessions (Berger, 2019). Notably, Avery et al. (2021) found that a school-based adaptation of a national campaign significantly improved college-related behaviours and enrolment for lower-performing students. In contrast to the original intervention, which had no effect, the school-based intervention had significant impact on college going steps and enrolment for lower performing students (Avery et al., 2021). It is worth noting that this intervention showed positive impact, only when conducted in the school itself which suggests that elements of personal connection and relationships are important when rolling out an intervention of this kind. This finding is echoed by broader research suggesting that relational approaches can be particularly impactful for students experiencing educational disadvantage (Banks & Smyth, 2021; Bray et al., 2021).

Several studies were categorised as pedagogical interventions, focusing on closing academic achievement gaps and engaging students in learning. These interventions yielded mixed outcomes. While some showed improvements in GPA, attendance, and college enrolment (e.g. Ramseth, 2018; Crump et al., 2015), others found no measurable impact (e.g. Geagea et al., 2019; Trevino et al., 2014). However, due to significant variation in design and outcome measures, it is difficult to draw valid comparisons or firm conclusions from these studies.

Finally, the review identified a small number of multi-dimensional interventions, which addressed multiple barriers to college access, such as awareness, aspirations, affordability, and achievement, through more holistic approaches. These interventions showed the greatest promise, with reported increases in aspirations, expectations, application rates, and enrolments. However, their complexity makes it difficult to determine which specific components drive success.

The findings of the systematic review have significantly influenced the design and focus of the subsequent studies within this research programme. A key insight from the review was the limited number of longitudinal evaluations available and the mixed results they reported. For example, while some studies observed sustained improvements in college expectations and enrolment over time (e.g., Peter & Zambre, 2017; Barkat, 2019), others highlighted less promising outcomes. Geagea et al. (2019) found that while college-related discussions increased among intervention groups, students' expectations declined in control groups. More concerning were findings from Hyman (2020), which showed that although college enrolments increased slightly, retention rates among intervention participants were lower. These results collectively emphasise the need for longitudinal research to fully understand the longer-term impact of widening participation (WP) interventions on students' educational pathways.

This review underscored a critical gap in the existing literature: no studies simultaneously examined both educational aspirations and actual enrolment outcomes. This is particularly important because aspirations and enrolment are often interlinked and together provide a fuller picture of students' educational trajectories. Previous research has shown that aspirations are a strong predictor of young people's post-school destinations (Johnston, Lee, Shah, Shields & Spinks, 2014), and separating these two outcomes limits our understanding of how WP interventions influence both the intention and the action of pursuing higher education.

The findings identified in the systematic review directly informed the conceptual and methodological design of Study II and Study III, the quantitative, longitudinal elements of this thesis. TAP school-university outreach programmes fall within the multi-dimensional category of WP intervention given the multiple elements of the programmes as outlined in the Introduction chapter. However, this thesis explores the pathways and mentoring

elements of the intervention. Specifically, Study II explores young people's educational aspirations and future goals in depth, capturing how school-university outreach initiatives (pathways activities and mentoring programmes) may shape students' imagined futures. Building on this, Study III investigates whether students' stated post-school plans align with their actual enrolment outcomes six months later. By examining both the aspirational and behavioural dimensions of educational decision-making, these studies aim to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of WP interventions. Moreover, by collecting longitudinal data, they respond to the review's call for robust, larger-scale, time-sensitive evaluations which can in turn better guide policy and practice in the Irish WP context.

Study II: Measuring success: a school-university partnership model for widening participation in higher education (Ní Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2025).

Table 11: Overview of research questions for Study II

Overall Thesis Research Question	Sub Research Questions (Study II)
To what extent do school-university widening participation outreach programmes influence the educational aspirations and post-school progression of marginalised secondary school students, and how are these outcomes shaped by intervention type and contextual factors?	RQ2a: What influence does TAP outreach have on students' future goals and aspirations? RQ2b: What contextual factors moderate this impact? RQ2c: Are effects on goals/aspirations sustained over time?

A key focus of Study II was to explore the impact of targeted widening participation (WP) outreach activities, specifically mentoring and pathways programmes, on secondary school students' future goals and aspirations. Findings demonstrate that, even when controlling for a range of individual and contextual factors through Bronfenbrenner's PPCT (Person,

Process, Context, Time) model, participation in these WP initiatives was positively associated with higher scores on the future goals and aspirations measure. This aligns with recent Irish policy developments, such as the National Access Plan 2022-2028 (HEA, 2022), which emphasises the importance of early intervention and the creation of a culture of high educational expectations. Previous research has highlighted the predictive power of aspirations for post-secondary enrolment (Fraysier, Rechly and Appleton, 2020), suggesting that interventions which effectively raise aspirations may have long-term impacts on access and progression.

The findings echo earlier studies which identified mentoring and structured information, advice and guidance (IAG) activities as particularly beneficial for students from marginalised and under-represented groups (Torgerson et al., 2014; Ní Chorcora et al., 2023; Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020). These results underscore the value of in-school delivery models that embed WP practices within students' everyday educational environments. However, they also suggest that further impact could be achieved through increased partnership with parents and the development of culturally sensitive and tailored interventions. This is particularly essential for students from the Traveller and Roma communities, who reported significantly lower future goals and aspirations scores than their peers (Ní Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2025b). These findings are consistent with previous work highlighting the structural exclusion and cultural dissonance experienced by these communities within mainstream education systems (Derrington, 2007; Danvers & Hinton-Smith, 2022; Brennan, Cummins, Leane, Ó Súilleabháin, McGovern and Quilligan, 2024 and Ní Chorcora, Paszkowska, Mihai, Mallon, Treacy, Berry, Joyce, Hennessey, Joyce and Maguire (2025).

While the HEA (2022; 2023) has recognised these groups as priority cohorts through dedicated PATH (Programme for Access to Higher Education) funding, the sustainability of such interventions remains uncertain. Interventions such as those described by Danvers and Hinton-Smith (2022), which involved community-led outreach, small group engagement, and targeted cultural education for school staff, have shown promise in the UK context and offer useful insights for similar efforts in Ireland (as well as Brennan et al., 2024). However, these must be underpinned by sustained investment and ongoing evaluation. With the recent launch of the Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024-2030, it is hoped that such

models may receive the long-term support needed to address entrenched disparities in educational opportunity (DES, DCEDIY, DFHERIS, 2024).

Study II also found that gender and ethnicity were significant predictors of educational aspirations. Female students consistently scored higher on aspiration measures, mirroring findings from international literature (Stahl, 2012) and recent Irish access data, which show that young males from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely to transition to higher education (HEA, 2022). This highlights a persistent gender gap that warrants further exploration, particularly with regard to early interventions that might support young men's educational motivation and engagement.

Similarly, students from most ethnic minority backgrounds, excluding those from the Traveller and Roma communities, reported significantly higher educational aspirations than their White or White Irish peers. This pattern reflects earlier UK findings (Crawford & Greaves, 2015) and may be linked to a combination of cultural values around education, family expectations, and a desire to overcome social and economic barriers. However, it also raises important questions about how ethnicity intersects with other aspects of disadvantage and how WP programmes can be designed to respond to this complexity.

The influence of parental education and involvement was another significant factor, reinforcing long-standing findings that link parental background to students' educational outcomes (Sewell & Shah, 1968; Dickson, Gregg & Robinson, 2016). In Study II, students whose mothers had completed a university degree were significantly more likely to report higher aspirations, and parental support more broadly was also a strong predictor. These findings are consistent with research emphasising the intergenerational transmission of educational disadvantage (Reay, 2018; Byrne & McCoy, 2017; Lynch & O'Riordan, 1998), but also point to the role of parental engagement as a potential site for intervention. WP programmes should consider how to co-design activities with parents and families, while also acknowledging the structural barriers they may face (Harackiewicz et al., 2012; Rosenzweig & Wigfield, 2016).

The findings also complicate simplistic distinctions between DEIS and non-DEIS schools. Although both types of schools were included, the non-DEIS schools in this study were also located in areas of traditionally low higher education progression. As such, results showed

no significant differences in aspirations between students attending DEIS and non-DEIS schools. This challenges prevailing assumptions that non-DEIS schools are universally more advantaged and supports critiques of the DEIS classification system, which has been shown to overlook many students experiencing disadvantage outside of designated areas (Children's Rights Alliance, 2020; Social Justice Ireland, 2019; Pavee Point, 2024). Recent OECD (2024) findings also highlight the need for more nuanced indicators of disadvantage in the DEIS scheme and stress the importance of resourcing non-DEIS schools that serve disadvantaged populations.

A notable trend identified in the data was the decline in aspirations as students moved into later school years, specifically those in fifth and sixth year. This was confirmed through longitudinal analysis of a sub-sample of students surveyed in both 2019 and 2022, which revealed statistically significant decreases in aspirations over time. There are no national comparison for this future goals and aspirations measure in Ireland and given the specific sample in Dublin schools, these findings are not generalisable.

However, the findings within in this group of students do raise important concerns about how structural inequalities such as financial uncertainty, lack of guidance, and risk aversion can shape students' perceptions of the value and attainability of higher education (McCoy et al., 2010; Reay et al., 2005; Campbell & McKendrick, 2017; Sanderson & Spacey, 2020). Students from marginalised backgrounds may develop more "realistic" expectations based on the material and social risks they face, suggesting that early promise can be eroded without targeted supports throughout the secondary school journey.

Despite this overall decline, Study II demonstrated that engagement in WP activities was associated with a relative increase in future goals and aspirations scores, even when accounting for background factors. This suggests that school-university partnerships have a positive effect by providing students with opportunities to imagine alternative futures. Understanding future goals and aspirations within an ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the intersecting personal, familial, school-based, and societal influences shaping educational decision-making.

Study III: Plans, Progression and Post-Compulsory Education: Measuring the Success of a School-University Widening Participation Programme in Ireland (Ní Chorcora, Banks and Bray, 2025).

Table 12: Overview of research questions for Study III

Overall Thesis Research Question	Sub Research Questions (Study III)
To what extent do school-university widening participation outreach programmes influence the educational aspirations and post-school progression of marginalised secondary school students, and how are these outcomes shaped by intervention type and contextual factors?	RQ3a: Do students achieve the post-school plans made during final year? RQ3b: Is participation in TAP WP programmes associated with higher likelihood of post-school progression?

Study III offers timely insights into the challenges and opportunities surrounding post-school transitions for students from marginalised backgrounds in Ireland. In light of global policy emphasis on improving access to further and higher education (OECD, 2023), the lack of empirical research evaluating whether students' final-year educational plans materialise post-school is noteworthy. This study addresses that gap by tracking the post-school outcomes of 227 secondary school students six months after completing their Leaving Certificate. The results highlight a significant mismatch between intended and actual destinations, raising critical questions about equity, guidance, and the structural realities facing young people from under-served communities.

Overall, 63% of students in the study realised their initial post-school plans, while 37% ended up pursuing different pathways. While 64% of participants had intended to enter higher education, only 41% had secured a university place within six months. Conversely, although just 18% of students had planned to enrol in a Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) course, 24% were attending PLCs six months later. These patterns echo previous literature on the barriers to educational progression, particularly for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Factors such as insufficient grades (Greene & Forster, 2003), financial

concerns, low perceived probability of success, and uncertainty about returns on investment (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997) are all potential explanations.

A striking example of altered plans involved students who initially intended to enter higher education but instead opted for PLC programmes, 23 such cases were identified. This shift may reflect the pragmatic decision-making of students from underserved backgrounds who perceive PLCs as a less risky or more financially accessible stepping-stone towards university (McGuinness, 2018). For some, this also included deferring university places (1.3%) or enrolling in foundation courses (2.3%), which may offer alternative routes into higher education but still indicate a delay or diversion from original plans. The mismatch between students' intentions and outcomes in this study diverges from national data, such as that from the Growing Up in Ireland study, which suggests that 80% of young people who aspire to higher education at age 13 go on to achieve that goal (O'Mahony et al., 2022). The discrepancy may reflect socio-economic differences, with students from more advantaged backgrounds experiencing fewer disruptions between aspiration and attainment. It also reinforces previous research which identifies a gap between what students hope to achieve and what they believe is realistically attainable (Harrison & Waller, 2018; Khattab, 2015).

A similar trend was observed with employment outcomes. While only 4.4% of participants had planned to enter the workforce after school, nearly 17% were working six months later. This included students who had initially planned to attend university, complete a PLC course, or who had been uncertain about their next steps. These results mirror international findings that, while many young people from marginalised backgrounds aspire to further study, they are often diverted into employment due to financial pressures or perceived inaccessibility of education (Kintrea et al., 2011; Goodman & Gregg, 2010). This shift may be explained not only by attainment but also by broader contextual and structural factors, including insufficient guidance or unanticipated life events. Such patterns reinforce the need to distinguish between students' aspirations and the practical realities that shape their post-school decisions (Boxer et al., 2011).

Encouragingly, the study found a strong association between participation in multiple pathways activities within the academic year of being surveyed, and actual progression to post-secondary education. Students who engaged in three or more targeted pathways activities were nearly five times more likely to continue in education after school, even after

controlling for gender, ethnicity, year group, parental education, and school status. These findings align with international literature that supports sustained, in-school WP models and structured information, advice and guidance (Campbell & McKendrick, 2017).

Parental involvement emerged as a significant predictor of progression to higher education, even when controlling for gender, ethnicity, parental education, and school type. In this context, parental involvement refers to active engagement in a student's educational experience, as measured by how frequently parents check homework, discuss school progress, review test or exam results, and talk about post-secondary options. This finding suggests that the quality and consistency of parental engagement, rather than parents' own educational background, play a crucial role in shaping post-school aspirations and outcomes. It aligns with previous research (Harackiewicz et al., 2012; Rosenzweig & Wigfield, 2016) which highlights that supportive parental behaviours can foster motivation, academic self-concept, and goal-setting, thereby increasing the likelihood of progression to higher education. Interestingly, mentoring, though previously linked to raised future goals and aspirations (in Study II) was not significantly associated with post-school progression in this study. This reflects emerging findings from the HEAT (Higher Education Access Tracker) in the UK, which have similarly found mixed results regarding mentoring outcomes (TASO, 2021). Despite Study II demonstrating that mentoring is effective in enhancing aspirations, Study III findings suggest that mentoring may be less influential when it comes to realising those aspirations in practice. This could also be due to the variability in mentor quality, the nature of mentor-mentee relationships, or limitations in how mentoring is implemented (Reilly, 2024).

Ultimately, this study reinforces that widening participation is not just about raising aspirations but supporting students to realise them. Effective WP practice requires partnership, persistence, and policy frameworks that recognise and address the complex barriers many young people face in the journey beyond secondary school. Systemic changes, particularly in how we evaluate and support these efforts, will be essential to ensure that aspirations do not outpace opportunities.

Study IV: Exploring the Retrospective Impact of a Widening Participation Programme: A Bourdieusian Perspective

Table 13: Overview of research questions for Study IV (Phase 3 Primary Data)

Overall Thesis Research Question	Sub Research Questions (Study IV)
To what extent do school-university widening participation outreach programmes influence the educational aspirations and post-school progression of marginalised secondary school students, and how are these outcomes shaped by intervention type and contextual factors?	RQ4a: How did engagement in TAP-linked school outreach programmes influence students' future aspirations, goals, and post-school pathways?

The conceptual framework underpinning this thesis was not a synthesis of the two theoretical traditions, but rather a pragmatic alignment between them. This alignment enabled a broader and more nuanced understanding of how and why WP programmes can support young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds to access and succeed in higher education. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, and particularly the Process–Person–Context–Time (PPCT) model, informed Studies II and III by framing how interconnected systems, such as family, school, community, and policy, interact to influence student future goals, aspirations and educational trajectories. This ecological perspective illuminated the complex and dynamic relationships between individual, relational, and structural factors shaping progression. However, while Bronfenbrenner's model provides a valuable lens for understanding these multi-level interactions, it offers limited explanatory tools for unpacking the *mechanisms* through which such relationships operate. For instance, although parental support and participation in Pathways activities were shown to influence aspirations and post-school progression, the model does not fully account for how these influences are internalised or reproduced within educational structures.

For this reason, Bourdieu's Theory of Social and Cultural Capital was adopted as the primary interpretive lens in Chapter 7 (Study IV). Bourdieu's concepts of social capital, cultural capital, familial capital, and institutional habitus provided the analytical depth required to

explore how families, schools, and universities shape students' opportunities, choices, and experiences. These concepts were particularly useful in examining the cultural and relational processes through which students from underserved backgrounds navigate higher education.

Accordingly, while both frameworks underpin the overall thesis, their application differs in emphasis and purpose. Bronfenbrenner's theory supports the analysis of ecological relationships and contextual influences evident in the quantitative studies, whereas Bourdieu's framework facilitates a deeper exploration of the social and cultural mechanisms revealed through the qualitative data. The discussion of Study IV that follows therefore draws more explicitly on Bourdieu's concepts, while recognising Bronfenbrenner's ecological model as the broader contextual foundation for understanding how multiple systems interact to influence educational pathways and outcomes.

Study IV explored the post-secondary journeys of six students, Martin, Zak, Harry, Meg, Ali, and Tadhg, from TAP-linked schools. The findings of this study are limited by the small and specific sample size and intended to provide a life history perspective to the quantitative analysis of the previous phases of the research programme (Study 1; Ní Chorcora, Bray and Banks, 2025b and Study II; Ní Chorcora, Banks and Bray, 2025a). Their retrospective insights into the TAP programme, along with their reflections on their educational journeys through secondary school and into post-secondary education, offer valuable and meaningful perspectives. All engaged in TAP's "Pathways" activities, with five reporting mentorships during their final year in school. Only Ali and Tadhg progressed directly to university and remained in their original courses. Others experienced disruptions: Martin changed degree programmes, Meg withdrew from her university course and re-enrolled in another institution the following year, Harry transferred institutions, and Zak left and re-entered higher education.

Using Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field, Study IV (Chapter 7) illustrates how students leveraged limited personal and social resources, supplemented by TAP's institutional and cultural capital. The findings show that TAP provided critical support, yet their varied paths highlight systemic barriers within education. The analysis shows that while widening participation programmes like TAP have transformative potential, they cannot operate in isolation. Without parallel reforms in policy, funding, and institutional practice,

such initiatives are limited in their ability to overcome the deep-rooted structural inequalities that shape educational outcomes as echoed in Keane (2011). Lasting educational equity requires broader structural reform to reshape access, experience, and value in higher education.

Familial Capital

Findings reaffirm the importance of familial influence, particularly from parents and siblings, in shaping young people's educational trajectories, even in contexts with limited formal educational capital. While most participants were first-generation college students, their families often provided support consistent with Bourdieu's (1986) concept of embodied cultural capital: deeply internalised values and attitudes toward education developed through everyday life. Some students attributed their success in accessing higher education to the perceived advantage of having supportive parents or older siblings who had previously navigated the system. For several participants, mothers played a particularly influential role, encouraging academic persistence and framing education as a pathway to self-improvement, despite lacking direct experience of higher education themselves. This dynamic is also echoed in the Growing Up in Ireland (GUI, 2020) study, which found that among 17/18-year-olds still in secondary education, 79% of those from never-employed households turned to their mothers for career advice as well as findings from Smyth and colleagues (2014).

Qualitative insights into the influence of family, particularly a parent, are reinforced by quantitative findings from Studies II and III. Study II found that higher parental involvement, as perceived by young people, was significantly associated with stronger educational goals and aspirations. Study III showed that increased parental involvement correlated with a higher likelihood of progressing to post-secondary education, even after accounting for gender, ethnicity, parental education, and school type. These findings suggest that widening participation (WP) efforts may be more effective when they engage families alongside students.

Parental involvement plays a critical role in shaping educational outcomes and can help address intergenerational disadvantage (Harackiewicz et al., 2012; Harackiewicz & Priniski, 2018; Rosenzweig & Wigfield, 2016). Strayhorn (2010) emphasises that partnerships with parents, through engagement in learning and participation in school events, can enhance

WP initiatives. Involving parents in programme design and delivery, while addressing barriers such as work or caregiving responsibilities, may lead to more inclusive and sustainable approaches. Recognising these dynamics enables WP programmes to better support students' transitions to higher education through meaningful school-family collaborations.

Beyond parental influence, the findings also highlight the critical role siblings play in navigating educational systems. In cases where institutional knowledge was not available from parents, older siblings acted as translators and brokers of information, advising on college processes, financial deadlines, and course options. This supports Reay, David and Ball's (2005) and McFarlane's (2023) arguments that in working-class families, siblings often become key transmitters of educational capital, particularly when schools or institutions fail to bridge informational gaps. This kind of intergenerational and intra-family support network illustrates a broader, more relational form of familial capital than typically recognised in policy or institutional frameworks.

Despite these strengths, the findings also highlight the persistence of systemic barriers for students whose families lack familiarity with higher education processes. In several cases, students were unable to navigate the complex documentation required for access schemes such as HEAR and SUSI, leading to stress, confusion, and, in one case, ineligibility for the HEAR scheme due to missing documentation. These gaps in institutional communication expose how working-class families, though deeply supportive, are often left to navigate opaque systems without sufficient, accessible guidance.

This echoes findings by McSweeney (2020), who critiqued the HEAR scheme, and Ní Chorcora, Paszkowska, Mihai, Mallon, Treacy, Berry, Joyce, Hennessey, Joyce, & Maguire (2025), whose research into the experiences of Traveller and Roma students also identified documentation processes as significant barriers. However, it contrasts with Byrne et al. (2014), whose evaluation of the HEAR and DARE schemes found no clear correlation between administrative demands (e.g., income verification, social welfare documentation) and failure to apply. While stakeholders in that study did raise concerns that the volume of paperwork might discourage the most 'disadvantaged' applicants, the authors concluded that these individuals may be either accustomed to such processes or find them relatively manageable (Byrne et al., 2014).

Social Capital

The findings highlight the crucial role of social capital in helping students from working-class backgrounds navigate higher education. Where there were gaps in familial knowledge or institutional cultural capital, many participants relied on peer networks for practical support and guidance. For one participant, a friend who had already navigated the system acted as an informal mentor to them, offering insights that demystified complex processes such as college applications and course changes. This peer support was especially valuable in contexts where families could not provide similar guidance. This aligns with previous findings on the benefits of peer-to-peer social capital in transitioning (Olivier & Burton, 2020) progressing (Fuller, 2014; Thiem, & Dasgupta, 2022) and succeeding (Mishra, 2020) in higher education for underserved groups.

Participants reported that advice from peers, particularly those with recent and relatable experiences, was often more impactful than guidance from teachers or lecturers. The latter were perceived as following traditional and linear educational paths that felt increasingly disconnected from the complex realities facing many students today. These informal peer networks provided not only practical guidance but also emotional validation for non-traditional pathways into higher education, such as Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses or so-called "backdoor" entry routes.

Importantly, students who had benefited from such informal support often went on to mentor siblings and peers, contributing to a ‘ripple’ or ‘trickle-down’ effect of intergenerational and community-based cycles of educational support (McFarlane, 2023; Ní Chorcora, Paszkowska, Mihai, Mallon, Treacy, Berry, Joyce, Hennessey, Joyce and Maguire 2025; Káplár-Kodácsy, Dorner, & Fillingim, 2024; Brennan et al., 2024). This dynamic aligns with Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of social capital, which highlights how access to valuable networks and resources is unevenly distributed and plays a central role in the reproduction of educational inequality. Keane (2011) further underscores the significance of the socio-relational realm, demonstrating how peer relationships, which are crucial sites for building social capital, can both mitigate and perpetuate class-based disparities in higher education. Her findings reveal that class-differentiated patterns of engagement within peer networks influence not only students’ experiences of social integration and belonging but also their retention in higher education and future labour market outcomes. This highlights the

complex role that peer support can play, not only in fostering educational persistence but also in reproducing existing inequalities depending on how social capital is formed and accessed.

These findings also echo insights from the stereotype inoculation model (Dasgupta, 2011; Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022), which emphasises the importance of exposure to relatable role models. When students encounter peers or community members with similar backgrounds who have successfully navigated higher education, it helps them envision similar futures for themselves. Such exposure boosts confidence and reinforces the belief that college is both desirable and attainable. However, for students from under-resourced schools or families with no prior college experience, these role models are often scarce. In such contexts, informal peer networks may fill a crucial gap, functioning as accessible sources of aspiration, guidance, and motivation. Recognising and integrating these informal forms of social capital into formal outreach strategies could therefore be key to widening participation in higher education and helping to create more equitable access for students from marginalised or underserved backgrounds.

School-University Partnerships

"I remember we had calls about criminal law one week and then maybe family law another, you know, different things like that every month. Yeah, it really piqued my interest. That was kind of when the decision was set in stone. I was like, yeah, I want to go to college."

This kind of reflection captures the immediate and personal impact of TAP for many participants. The findings illustrate the complex and multifaceted influence of university access programmes on students from marginalised backgrounds, highlighting both their transformative potential and their limitations. Participants spoke about Trinity Access Programme (TAP) providing vital resources, such as academic tutoring, exposure to new subjects, information and peer support, that help students accumulate cultural and social capital often absent from their home or school environments. These opportunities reshape students' aspirations, build confidence, and make higher education feel attainable (Hannon, Faas and O'Sullivan, 2017; Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022; Younger, Gascoine, Menzies and Torgerson, 2019).

Students benefited, not only from practical information and emotional support, but also from symbolic capital, seeing others like themselves succeed helped solidify their own ambitions. Moreover, the role of cultural capital was evident in students' exposure to academic experiences beyond the standard school curriculum, such as debating, coding, and subject-specific university workshops. During interviews, several participants highlighted the impact of engaging in Pathways activities, such as Pathways to Law, Philosophical Society Week (Phil Debating Week), CodePlus, and the Bridge to College Coding programme, on their educational journeys (see Tangney et al., 2021 and Trinity Access Programmes (2025) for more details on these programmes). These opportunities challenged students' existing perceptions of their abilities and opened up new academic and professional possibilities. Importantly, such exposure often acted as a "conversion point," reshaping students' aspirations in meaningful and lasting ways. These subject-specific pedagogical interventions align with those identified in the systematic review in Study I(Ní Chorcora, Bray, & Banks, 2023) and with discipline-specific initiatives described by Geagea, Vernon, & MacCallum (2019) and Crump, Ned, & Winkleby (2015). Such initiatives gave students, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, access to subject areas they might not traditionally explore or pursue.

"I had no extracurriculars, so I decided to check it out. That's when I realised coding was fun. From there, I decided to take computer science as a Leaving Cert subject and later put it on my CAO application."

Building on this, participants expressed a need for more experiential, subject-specific engagement, including taster programmes and study shadowing, to support informed decision-making around course and career choices. While raising aspirations is important, helping students navigate the educational field, understanding their options, pathways, and personal fit, is equally crucial. Notably, only one of the six students interviewed remained in the same course they had originally entered after leaving school. These findings underscore the importance of not just enabling access to further and higher education, but also ensuring students find the right course and institution to support their success and progression.

The findings also reveal unintended consequences. Some participants became overly focused on Trinity College Dublin, due to prolonged engagement with single-institution

outreach initiatives. This narrowed institutional awareness risks limiting student choice and reinforcing existing prestige hierarchies, echoing concerns raised by Reay, Crozier, and Clayton (2010) that elite institutions can shape participation in ways that prioritise "fitting in" over broader access. Burke (2013) similarly critiques such approaches as often rooted in institutional branding and compliance, rather than a genuine commitment to educational equity or transformation. By promoting one particular pathway above another, these programmes may inadvertently marginalise other valuable forms of post-secondary progression, including technological universities, further education colleges, or vocational routes (Ball, Reay, & David, 2002). A more inclusive and socially just outreach model would actively showcase a wider spectrum of post-secondary options, reflecting the diversity of students' interests, contexts, and aspirations, rather than reinforcing a narrow pipeline into a single elite institution.

The data also reinforces Bourdieu's concept of institutional habitus, illustrating how schools tend to channel encouragement and resources toward students who align with dominant academic norms. One student described a peer who teachers perceived as lower-achieving. Despite this peer expressing clear aspirations for higher education, he received little guidance or support. This uneven distribution of encouragement serves to reproduce existing structural inequalities and further limits the educational opportunities available to already disadvantaged students. These findings align with Smyth and Banks (2012a), who, in their comparative study of working- and middle-class schools, highlight significant disparities in access to higher education information and guidance. Social capital, such as peer networks formed through the TAP outreach programmes, emerged as a key enabler for two of the participants.

"Because my school was small enough, you wouldn't necessarily have someone who would be interested in that subject area… Seeing other students who were interested in it as well really helped."

In sum, while access programmes can be powerful tools for supporting increased student educational goals, aspirations and progression to post-school education, they must be critically designed to ensure they do not replicate existing inequalities. Broader institutional collaboration, differentiated guidance, and meaningful exposure to diverse pathways are key to creating truly equitable access to higher education.

Institutional Habitus

The findings highlight the pivotal role of school-based guidance counselling in supporting working-class and underrepresented students to access and navigate higher education. From a Bourdieusian perspective, guidance counsellors act as crucial mediators of institutional capital, interpreting and translating the implicit rules of the educational system for those without familial access to such knowledge. Students repeatedly identified guidance support as essential for understanding application systems like the CAO, SUSI, HEAR, and DARE, enabling them to convert aspirations into concrete strategies for progression.

Personalised, one-to-one guidance emerged as especially important, however, this support was inconsistently available. Many of the participants described guidance services as overstretched, working part-time, or under-resourced, with one participant stating that guidance counsellors were stretched to support personal and mental health issues with students as opposed to career guidance work. Despite the commitment of staff (mentioned by the participants), resource inequality meant that support was unevenly distributed, mirroring broader structural disparities in the education system.

"I think all the teachers and staff really cared about us, and that was encouraging. But as a DEIS school, there was a lot to be desired in terms of facilities and direct supports. I was very lucky that the system worked for me and I was able to get through it."

Moreover, while students often received general information about access schemes, there was a lack of deeper, context-specific guidance that could help them make informed decisions. Misinformation about financial regulations e.g., SUSI rules for withdrawing from university or struggles with scheme documentation point to a wider issue: access to surface-level information is not enough. Bureaucratic complexity also disproportionately affected students without insider knowledge or institutional literacy. In several cases, minor administrative errors resulted in significant consequences, such as being excluded from access supports (for similar findings see also Sparks and Lovett, 2014; and Ní Chorcora, Paszkowska, Mihai, Mallon, Treacy, Berry, Joyce, Hennessey, Joyce and Maguire (2025).). This underscores how easily students from lower income backgrounds can fall through the cracks of a system designed around assumed familiarity with institutional norms.

Unequal access to information about access routes were also identified by McFarlane (2023) who found that guidance counsellors gave different information to different students even within the same school based on guidance counsellors assumptions and false beliefs on student eligibility. McFarlane (2023) found that many students missed opportunities due to poor guidance during their time in secondary school. Similar to the findings in Study IV, despite the lack of guidance experienced by some students in their schools, they were not critical of their guidance counsellors and instead blamed systemic and structural barriers and a lack of resources, quoting many of their guidance counsellors were 'overworked' (McFarlane, 2023).

"Our guidance counsellor was very overstretched. We could have done with more supports, more check-ins. There were about 1,000 students in the school, it's very hard to keep track of that many people."

In conclusion, Study IV offers a nuanced exploration of the post-secondary transitions of six students from TAP-linked schools, revealing the complex interplay between individual agency, familial and social capital, institutional support, and systemic constraints. Given the limitations of this small and specific sample (discussed in Methodology chapter), it is important to reiterate that these findings are specific to the six students interviewed and do not represent the group as a whole. While TAP provided critical scaffolding, offering cultural, social, and symbolic capital, students' varied trajectories illustrate that widening participation programmes alone cannot overcome the structural barriers embedded within the educational system. Familial influence, particularly from mothers and siblings, emerged as a vital, though often overlooked, source of embodied and relational capital, while peer networks helped bridge informational gaps when institutional guidance fell short. At the same time, inconsistencies in school-based support and bureaucratic complexity disproportionately burdened students from working-class backgrounds, reinforcing the reproduction of inequality. As highlighted in Study III, policymakers must prioritise funding for schools to ensure students experiencing educational disadvantage have access to structured opportunities, such as pathways activities, to explore and prepare for life after school. While school-university partnerships are a promising model for widening participation, they must complement, not replace, in-school guidance counselling. These activities should enhance rather than retrofit gaps in an overstretched and under-resourced

system. Meaningful educational equity demands more than access; it requires sustained, context-sensitive support and broader systemic reform to ensure all students can navigate and thrive in higher education.

Contributions of the Study

Research Design

This thesis makes a significant contribution to widening participation (WP) research in Ireland through its innovative longitudinal research design. Longitudinal research, as defined by Polyhart and Vandenberg (2010), involves repeated observations over time to study change, providing crucial insights into developmental processes. This study is among the first in Ireland to adopt such an approach in investigating the impact of WP outreach, addressing a notable gap in the existing literature where longitudinal evaluations of similar programmes remain scarce globally (Geagea et al., 2019; Crump et al., 2015; Barkat, 2019; Peter & Zambre, 2017).

By employing a longitudinal questionnaire design, the research captures dynamic changes in educational aspirations, and post-school progression, allowing for the analysis of immediate, sequential, and delayed intervention effects (Magnusson, 2000). The TAP longitudinal dataset, collected annually since 2019, offers a rich resource enabling both cross-sectional and time-series analysis of students from underserved backgrounds in the Irish context. This approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of how WP interventions influence students' trajectories within the socio-ecological framework of Bronfenbrenner's PPCT model and Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital.

The integration of qualitative methods further enhances the design, with retrospective interviews conducted two years post-school providing further depth to the quantitative trends. This mixed-methods strategy in Study IV reflects Lund's (2012) assertion that combining quantitative and qualitative data enhances validity, allows for richer interpretations, and can reveal the mechanisms underlying observed changes. The directed content analysis guided by prior quantitative findings adds explanatory power by capturing students' lived experiences, thus bridging statistical outcomes with individual narratives.

Overall, the thesis advances WP research by demonstrating how a carefully structured longitudinal mixed-methods design can provide comprehensive, context-sensitive insights into the long-term effects of outreach programmes. It sets a methodological precedent for future research in Ireland while also highlighting challenges and implications that future researchers can learn from.

Blended Approach to a Theoretical Framework

The adoption of a blended theoretical framework in this thesis, combining Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, constitutes a significant theoretical contribution to the field of widening participation (WP) in higher education. This integrated approach moves beyond the dominant, economically driven paradigms, such as human capital theory, that have traditionally underpinned policy discourse in Ireland. While human capital theory has played a formative role in shaping Ireland's access policy by linking higher education to national productivity and labour market outcomes (O'Connor, 2014; Clancy, 2015), its narrow emphasis on economic returns fails to acknowledge the broader socio-cultural and institutional structures that perpetuate educational inequality.

This blended approach is particularly important in addressing the limitations of deficit models that underpin many WP interventions. As Armstrong and Cairnduff (2012) argue, programmes focused solely on raising aspirations often disregard the structural and cultural conditions that restrict access to higher education. The incorporation of Bourdieu's theory brings attention to these entrenched inequalities by highlighting how cultural and social capital are unevenly distributed and differentially valued within the educational field. Habitus and field further illuminate how dominant norms and unspoken assumptions within schools and universities may inadvertently reinforce exclusion, especially for underrepresented students. This insight is crucial for designing WP initiatives that are reflexive, equity-focused, and attuned to the lived realities of marginalised communities.

At the same time, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory extends this analysis by situating individuals within a broader environmental context, encompassing microsystems (e.g., family, friends, guidance counsellors), mesosystems (e.g., school-university relationships), and exo- and macrosystems (e.g., DEIS policy, societal norms). This ecological

lens is particularly valuable for WP research, as it allows for the examination of how institutional practices and social structures interact over time (chronosystem) to shape students' educational pathways. For example, school-university partnerships or shifts in policy related to DEIS schools can have ripple effects that either support or constrain students' post-school progression. The PPCT model used in this thesis provides a structured yet flexible framework for analysing these dynamic interactions.

Importantly, the PPCT model was operationalised in quantitative studies II and III, allowing the researcher to conduct robust statistical analyses underpinned by a strong theoretical foundation. This model accounted for the contextual complexity of students' ecosystems and provided a means to investigate how specific environmental factors influenced educational trajectories. In tandem, Bourdieu's theory of capital and field was used to "connect the dots" between the quantitative data and the qualitative interviews conducted with a small sample of the same students in Study IV. This mixed-methods design enabled the researcher to go beyond descriptive trends and instead probe more deeply into the lived experiences behind the numbers. Bourdieu's concepts helped to illuminate how educational advantage and disadvantage is (re)produced through the differential distribution and recognition of capital, and how these dynamics ultimately shape how students participate in, and benefit from, WP programmes.

It is important to note that, given their differing epistemological orientations (Bourdieu's being rooted in critical sociology and Bronfenbrenner's in developmental psychology), this approach does not seek a theoretical synthesis. Rather, it reflects a pragmatic alignment that allows a broader, interdisciplinary perspective to emerge on how and why WP programmes can support young people from low-socioeconomic backgrounds to access higher education. This blending enables the researcher to investigate a variety of interrelated factors in the young person's social world, factors that involve both enabling and constraining social structures, asymmetrical power relations, and unequal access to resources.

Crucially, the blended framework underscores the importance of recognising both structural constraints and individual agency. While Bourdieu helps to articulate how social reproduction occurs through unequal distributions of capital, Bronfenbrenner's later work, particularly his focus on proximal processes, emphasises the transformative potential of positive, sustained relationships and supportive environments such as strong school-

university partnerships. When viewed together, these theories create space to understand how WP programmes can simultaneously mitigate systemic barriers and empower students to navigate complex educational landscapes.

Although the use of these two frameworks in tandem remains relatively rare, other scholars have similarly recognised the value of this theoretical pairing. Notably, Strayhorn (2010), Houston (2017), and Fearnley (2020) have drawn on both Bourdieu and Bronfenbrenner to explore how access to higher education is shaped by interwoven personal, social, and institutional factors. This study builds on and extends such work by further clarifying how a multi-level analytical lens can be operationalised to inform both research and practice in WP.

In sum, the blended theoretical approach adopted in this study enriches the field of widening participation research by offering a holistic, critically engaged lens. It supports the development of more inclusive, context-sensitive interventions and highlights the potential for systemic change through collaboration between educational institutions, families, and communities. By embracing complexity and interrogating power, this framework offers a robust conceptual foundation for understanding and advancing equity in higher education.

Contributions to Knowledge

Findings across the four studies highlight a number of important contributions to knowledge in the field of widening participation and educational inequality. Study I identifies a significant gap in the international literature on widening participation (WP) interventions targeting secondary students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, with only 19 studies meeting basic inclusion criteria over a ten-year period. The study highlights that most existing research lacks longitudinal data, standardised measures, and robust outcome indicators, revealing a limited evidence base in this field. Study II contributes new insights into patterns of aspiration among underrepresented groups, finding that Traveller and Roma students reported significantly lower future goals and aspirations scores compared to all other ethnic groups, and that males expressed lower future goals and aspirations than females. No significant differences were found between students attending DEIS and non-DEIS schools, indicating that school designation alone does not account for variation in educational ambition within this group of schools. Study II also demonstrates that mentoring has a positive influence on students' educational goals and aspirations, and that higher

levels of perceived parental involvement are associated with stronger educational aspirations. Study III builds on these findings by showing that participation in three or more Pathways activities increases the odds of progression to post-school education nearly fivefold, underscoring the importance of sustained engagement. While mentoring did not have a statistically significant impact on actual progression outcomes in Study III, higher parental involvement was shown to be significantly associated with an increased likelihood of progressing to post-secondary education, even when controlling for gender, ethnicity, parental education, and school type. It is important to note, however, that these findings are drawn from a specific cohort of students attending Dublin schools engaged in the TAP programme. Although the sample size is substantial and offers valuable insights into patterns within this context, the results are not generalisable to all students in underserved areas in Ireland or to other regions without caution. In particular, there are no national comparison data available for the future goals and aspirations scale, which limits the ability to benchmark these findings against broader student populations. Implications for Practice

Schools and School Leaders

The findings across the studies underscore the critical role of schools as foundational settings for widening participation (WP) efforts. A review of international literature in Study I suggests that interventions are most effective when embedded within the everyday school environment and delivered by staff who have established relationships with students. Schools should therefore prioritise the integration of WP into the curriculum, timetables, and overall school culture.

Mentoring was shown in Study II to have a positive influence on students' future goals and aspirations, although no significant impact on actual progression was observed in Study III. While further research is needed to explore why and how mentoring influences aspiration but not progression, existing evidence suggests it plays an important role in raising aspirations. To enhance the effectiveness of mentoring, schools should invest in structured programmes with trained mentors, consistent delivery, and alignment with students' individual needs. Mentoring programmes should be regularly monitored and evaluated, incorporating feedback from both mentors and mentees to ensure continuous improvement.

Pathways activities were found to influence both students' future aspirations (Study II) and their likelihood of continuing to post-school education (Study III). Schools should ensure that all students have regular access to a variety of pathways activities each year, encompassing a broad range of educational and vocational options, not limited to a single route or specific university.

In Study III, students often deviated from their stated post-Leaving Certificate plans, highlighting the need for more robust supports in the final year of school. Furthermore, although the sample size was limited, Study IV revealed that many students changed courses or institutions within their first year after leaving school. While the students themselves viewed these decisions as the best course of action, schools should collaborate with further and higher education institutions and employers to support more confident decision-making and smoother transitions by expanding experiential learning opportunities such as college taster days, study shadowing, and realistic career exploration sessions.

Finally, Study IV identified inconsistency in school guidance provision, with some students describing services as overstretched or primarily focused on wellbeing. School leaders must advocate for well-resourced, comprehensive guidance counselling services as essential educational infrastructure, particularly in DEIS schools and those with low-progression rates.

Finally, to address these systemic inequities, the thesis suggests that schools should prioritise professional development that includes cultural awareness, anti-racism, and bias training. Creating opportunities for staff to critically reflect on their own expectations, assumptions, and potential microaggressions is essential. Such training can help ensure that all students, regardless of background, are provided with equitable encouragement, high expectations, and access to opportunities. Schools should also implement practices that monitor and address differential treatment in how guidance and academic support are distributed, particularly in relation to students from marginalised groups.

Guidance Counsellors

Effective guidance is central to equitable access and informed decision-making, as discussed in Studies III and IV. Guidance counsellors must be supported to move beyond transactional interactions toward relational and developmental models that allow students to build confidence and cultural capital over time. Guidance provision should encompass both

technical knowledge (e.g., CAO, SUSI, DARE/HEAR) and the contextual understanding students need to navigate complex post-secondary pathways. Students in Study IV reported confusion about rules and available options, highlighting the importance of sustained, one-to-one guidance relationships that address both immediate decisions and longer-term educational planning. Furthermore, although the sample size was limited, Study IV revealed that many students changed courses or institutions within their first year after leaving school. Enhanced one-to-one guidance is therefore essential to help students explore their educational and career options, supporting both successful transitions and retention in post-secondary education. Finally, findings suggest that guidance services should be meaningfully involved in co-designing WP initiatives with universities. Findings also emphasise that school-university outreach must complement, not replace, comprehensive guidance counselling.

Widening Participation Practitioners

The studies collectively stress the need for WP practitioners to design multi-touchpoint, longitudinal programmes. As Study III shows, participation in three or more activities increased progression odds nearly fivefold highlighting the value of sustained engagement over several years. Short-term or generic interventions are unlikely to produce deep or lasting impact.

Study I found that guidance-based interventions are most effective when delivered relationally, within school contexts. WP practitioners should prioritise continuity, personalisation, and embedded delivery. Similarly, Study IV shows that family and peer networks significantly influence students' decision-making. WP programmes should develop strategies to actively involve families, through multilingual resources, accessible events, and culturally relevant content, and build peer support systems, such as near-peer mentoring or alumni engagement with past pupils from the same or similar communities.

Culturally responsive outreach is also essential. Study II surfaced significantly lower aspirations among Traveller and Roma students. Practitioners should collaborate with communities and community organisations to leverage national strategies (e.g., the newly established Traveller and Roma Education Strategy) and community-driven approaches to co-create inclusive programming that reflects students' lived experiences and promotes

visibility and representation of different cultures through meaningful participation (see Brennan et al., 2024 and Ní Chorcora, Paszkowska, Mihai, Mallon, Treacy, Berry, Joyce, Hennessey, Joyce and Maguire (2025).for examples of such initiatives).

Finally, Study I highlights the need for improved evaluation practices. WP providers must define shared success metrics that include both aspirations and behavioural outcomes (e.g., enrolment, retention) and invest in tracking systems to monitor long-term impacts.

Higher Education Institutions

The findings of this thesis suggest that universities must take an active and sustained role in widening participation (WP) by building meaningful partnerships with schools and offering tailored supports for underserved students. Studies III and IV demonstrate that post-application support is critical: many students who initially intended to pursue higher education ultimately did not enrol. Based on findings from Study IV, higher education institutions should enhance transition programming for offer-holders through initiatives such as summer schools, peer coaching, and pre-entry orientation, all of which may improve both access and retention.

TAP's work, examined in Study IV, illustrates the potential of structured academic and subject-specific engagement activities to raise aspirations and support student progression. However, it also highlights the importance of avoiding over-identification with a single institution, which can inadvertently limit student autonomy and informed choice. While TAP's outreach has been transformative for many, its TCD-centric model risks positioning Trinity College Dublin as the default or only viable destination. This benefits the institution in terms of student recruitment but may not always serve students' best interests. Outreach efforts should therefore ensure that students are exposed to a broad and balanced range of post-secondary options, enabling them to make independent decisions that align with their own goals and contexts.

Alternative models, such as the HEAR and DARE access routes, which are coordinated nationally through the Irish Universities Association, aim to provide information across institutions without favouring one. More recently, initiatives like College Connect and SOAR, developed under the PATH 3 funding stream in the MEND (Midlands, East, and North Dublin) and Munster regions, offer collaborative outreach that connects students to a wider

ecosystem of higher education institutions (College Connect, n.d.; SOAR, n.d.). Such models may offer a more equitable approach by decentralising access information and avoiding the branding of outreach under a single university, which can reinforce existing hierarchies in higher education.

HEIs should also play a role in addressing systemic inequities beyond their campuses. This includes advocating for stronger school guidance systems and co-developing context-sensitive, data-informed outreach models. Evaluating interventions not only in terms of aspiration-raising but also actual progression will help institutions better align their access strategies with the lived realities of underrepresented students.

Crucially, widening participation must be viewed as a whole-institution responsibility, not the remit of access offices alone. Stronger collaboration between access offices and academic departments is urgently needed. Academic units can contribute through subject-specific outreach, mentoring, student shadowing and taster days, while researchers can support the evaluation of WP interventions and their long-term impact as well as future participatory research with students from underserved backgrounds on what is needed for them to thrive in HE. Likewise, partnerships with diverse communities must be deepened to ensure relevance and responsiveness.

Given national and international commitments to equity in higher education, such as the United Nations' 2024 Sustainable Development Goals report and the Higher Education Authority's (2022) National Access Plan, HEIs should be obliged to actively support and promote the participation of all members of society in higher education. Representation and inclusion must be embedded as core values and strategic priorities across the institution. While universities hold significant potential as advocates for equity and social change, this begins with critical self-reflection. Institutions must examine their own cultures and practices that may perpetuate exclusion and commit to co-developing strategies in genuine partnership with communities, rather than imposing solutions without meaningful consultation. This also entails scrutinising how teaching practices, knowledge production, and the structural role of universities as gatekeepers of privilege may contribute to reproducing inequality.

Implications for Policymakers

The findings from this research programme carry important implications for education policymakers seeking to advance equity in post-secondary access through widening participation (WP). Across all four studies, a central theme emerges: while current outreach and support initiatives have some positive effects, their fragmented implementation, inconsistent quality, and limited integration into broader educational systems risk undermining their potential. Strategic policy reform is required to ensure that WP efforts are evidence-informed, adequately resourced, and holistically embedded within school and higher education systems.

Strengthening the Evidence Base through Data Integration

Study I reveals a striking gap in the international literature on WP interventions targeting secondary students from lower SES backgrounds, with only 19 studies meeting basic inclusion criteria over a decade. Most lacked longitudinal data, standardised metrics, or rigorous outcome measures. As Bernstein-Sierra and Corwin (2018) argue, the lack of access to centralised enrolment data significantly restricts the ability of evaluative studies to demonstrate impact. Without reliable, longitudinal data, it is difficult to identify which interventions are most effective, for whom, and under what circumstances. To strengthen the evidence base, policymakers should explore the feasibility of tracking students annually after they complete secondary school, to assess whether those who enter further education continue on to higher education. Models from England (TASO, 2021) and Scandinavia (Jensen & Rasmussen, 2011; Haley, 2020) offer promising templates for integrating data across educational sectors, ensuring that policy and practice are informed by robust, cross-institutional evidence.

Embedding Whole-School Approaches to Widening Participation

Study II and III highlight the positive impact of specific WP interventions that are embedded within school structures. However, the studies also reveal challenges in sustaining student progression without structural alignment across sectors. One key implication for policy is the need to move beyond short-term, one-off interventions toward whole-school approaches to WP. Policymakers should consider developing a national WP framework for schools, outlining minimum entitlements for career guidance, mentoring, and outreach, particularly in disadvantaged contexts. This framework could work in partnership with further and higher

education institutions and should be backed by funding and training supports to ensure school capacity to deliver.

Repositioning Guidance Counselling as Central to Equity Policy

In Study IV, guidance counselling emerged as a linchpin in students' post-secondary decision-making, yet it was inconsistently available and often under-resourced. Several students reported minimal one-to-one support, with school counsellors overwhelmed by wellbeing responsibilities or administrative duties. For policymakers, this highlights the necessity of positioning guidance counselling as a central pillar of equity policy, not as an auxiliary service. Targeted investment is needed to increase staffing ratios, particularly in DEIS schools, and to support the professional development of counsellors in areas such as HEAR/DARE, funding schemes, and progression planning. Moreover, guidance services should be supported to adopt more developmental, relational approaches rather than simply delivering procedural information.

Building Coherent, Multi-Touchpoint Progression Pathways

Study II and III found that students who participated in three or more pathways activities were significantly more likely to have higher future goals and aspirations (study II) and progress to post-secondary education (Study III). This finding supports the case for longitudinal, multi-touchpoint engagement rather than one-off or ad-hoc outreach. From a policy perspective, this highlights the need for coherent progression pathways that enable students to engage in a series of age-appropriate interventions throughout their school journey, from junior cycle taster sessions to senior cycle application supports. Funding models should be long-term, ring-fenced, and designed to incentivise collaboration between schools and higher education institutions. This collaboration should focus on mapping and coordinating key touchpoints to ensure sustained, developmental engagement rather than isolated activities. In addition, funding must be accompanied by training and capacity-building supports to enable schools to deliver these interventions effectively.

Addressing Structural Inequalities for Traveller and Roma Students

A key finding from Study II is the gap in educational aspirations among Traveller and Roma students across all year groups, which reflects broader structural inequalities. Policymakers must take a culturally responsive approach to WP, embedding equity and inclusion into national strategies. The Traveller and Roma Education Strategy 2024-2030 represents a

timely opportunity to institutionalise targeted supports (DES, DCEDIY and DFHERIS, 2024). Policy mechanisms could include ring-fenced outreach funding specifically for Traveller and Roma led outreach, partnerships with community organisations, and specific targets for progression from underserved minority groups (as recommended by Ní Chorcora, Paszkowska, Mihai, Mallon, Treacy, Berry, Joyce, Hennessey, Joyce and Maguire, 2025;. Brennan et al., 2024). Crucially, this requires a shift from deficit framing towards strengths-based, culturally affirming practices that recognise and build upon the strengths of these communities, including their history and culture.

Expanding Family Engagement in WP Efforts

Study II and IV reinforce the pivotal role of families, particularly parents, in shaping students' aspirations and educational decisions. Importantly, parental involvement was found to be more predictive of student outcomes than parental education levels when it came to post-school progression. This finding has clear policy implications: WP should not be confined to students, but extended to families through accessible, inclusive formats. National policy could support family engagement through joint information evenings, multilingual resources, or modules demystifying higher education pathways and funding. Importantly, these initiatives must be sensitive to the differing levels of familiarity families have with the education system and address barriers such as literacy, language, and trust.

Moving Towards DEIS plus

In March 2025, the Minister for Education pledged to increase supports for pupils at risk, aligning with a programme for government commitment to introduce a DEIS-plus scheme. This new plan aims to provide greater assistance to schools with the highest concentrations of disadvantaged students, while also building stronger links with further and higher education and the world of work (O'Brien, 2025b). Although the researcher acknowledges the many benefits to the DEIS scheme policies in the past, Study III challenges the sufficiency of DEIS classification as a proxy for capturing the intersectional nature of disadvantage. Students in non-DEIS schools located in low-progression areas often faced similar barriers, yet were not always reached by WP programmes. Policymakers should adopt a more granular, intersectional understanding of educational disadvantage, one that includes geographic, ethnic, and intra-school disparities. Future policy design should consider broader targeting mechanisms and avoid relying solely on DEIS categorisation to allocate

resources. These findings should be considered in future iterations of the soon to be established DEIS plus scheme.

Improving Post-School Transitions

Finally, a challenge discussed across Studies III and IV is the mismatch between post-school plans and post-school progression. For policymakers, this signals a need to improve the final-year transition period. Potential strategies include expanding transition coaching, creating pre-enrolment summer schools, and mandating structured post-offer supports for underserved applicants. Policy should build on efforts such as the establishment of the National Tertiary Office to recognise the value of further education as a legitimate and often preferred route, ensuring parity of esteem, information and clear progression pathways from PLCs to higher education.

Implications for Researchers

Implications for Future PhD Students

The development of this integrated thesis marks the first instance of its kind within the School of Education at Trinity College Dublin. Approval for an 'integrated thesis format' was granted by the Graduate Studies Committee following a submission by the researchers' supervisors and the School in December 2022. The integrated PhD model offers an alternative to the traditional monograph format by incorporating papers and publications authored by the PhD candidate, with all studies conducted during the period of doctoral registration. These writings were subsequently embedded into the overarching structure of the thesis. The contribution to the structural format and change in policy in TCD (TCD, College Calendar 2024/25) will enable future TCD School of Education candidates to pursue a similar route, many of whom have already begun to do so, although this thesis will be the first to be submitted for formal examination in the School of Education under this model.

Throughout the process, several insights were gained by the researcher regarding the benefits and challenges associated with this approach. Notably, structuring the thesis into a series of discrete studies (Studies I-IV) was experienced as less overwhelming than producing a single, continuous (up to) 100,000-word traditional monograph. The segmented format enabled the research to be conducted and disseminated progressively, with approximately one study completed and submitted to an academic journal per year. This

incremental approach allowed findings to inform subsequent research design and analysis, resulting in a thesis that was potentially more coherent and reflexive than if it had been written as a single, traditional document.

The peer review and publication process also served as a valuable developmental tool. Research skills were strengthened through the iterative review process, and professional identity as a researcher was fostered early in the candidature. Crucially, feedback from international reviewers offered substantive insights, including methodological critiques, theoretical considerations, and suggestions of relevant literature that had not previously been included. These engagements significantly enhanced the quality of each paper. For example, Study I underwent one major and one minor revision prior to publication. Study II, initially submitted to a different journal, received conflicting reviewer feedback: one acceptance and one methodological rejection. This required a revision and resubmission to an alternative journal, where it was accepted with minor amendments. Study III was also accepted with minor revisions.

In addition to improving the research itself, writing for journal publication and engaging in the peer review process helped the researcher to develop stronger academic writing skills. The process encouraged greater conciseness while ensuring cohesion and clarity in the overall narrative of each paper. Adhering to the word limits and formatting guidelines imposed by various academic journals further refined the researcher's ability to communicate complex ideas with precision and discipline. These skills proved beneficial in the construction of the integrated thesis as a whole.

In addition, the process of publishing during the PhD journey contributed directly to the researcher's career development within the widening participation sector. As a result of the expertise gained and visibility established through publication, two job promotions were secured during the period of candidature, progressions that were, in part, attributed to the research and publishing experience gained throughout the PhD journey.

While the benefits of publishing during the PhD were considerable, several challenges were encountered. The time-intensive nature of peer review and the extended duration required to receive journal feedback were not initially anticipated. Nonetheless, these delays were outweighed by the advantages of engaging in the academic publishing process. This

experience resonates with findings by Mason and Merga (2018), who identified both the strengths and limitations of completing a PhD through publication. Reported benefits include enhanced dissemination of findings, development of research competencies, improved career prospects, and sustained motivation. Identified challenges include ensuring cohesion across publications, managing time effectively, and navigating the complex dynamics of the publishing process.

Implications for Future Researchers

The systematic review in Study I revealed that WP research remains uneven across global contexts. While the 19 reviewed studies were conducted across the U.S., Australia, Chile, and various European countries (e.g. UK, Germany, Italy), findings often lack generalisability due to differing policy environments and educational structures. As See et al., (2012) notes, more research is urgently needed beyond the U.S. to reflect the diversity of educational systems worldwide. Future studies must adopt context-sensitive methodologies and develop locally grounded evidence bases tailored to specific student populations. A key systemic challenge is the inconsistency in programme design, evaluation methods, and definitions of success across WP interventions. Without shared standards, it is difficult to meaningfully compare studies or draw general conclusions. Future research must address this fragmentation by clearly defining outcome measures and documenting programme models with transparency.

A notable concern emerging from Study I is the potential for publication bias. All studies included in the review reported positive or somewhat positive findings, suggesting that null or negative results may be underreported. Publishing such findings is essential to build a realistic and honest evidence base, avoid ineffective practices, and minimise resource wastage. Another critical gap lies in the scarcity of longitudinal, large-scale studies. Few existing projects collect baseline data or track students beyond their school years, limiting the ability to assess long-term impact. Collecting robust data on variables such as attainment, parental education, school type, and year group would allow researchers to identify what works, and for whom.

In the Irish context, longitudinal research on access to higher education remains especially underdeveloped. While national studies like *Growing Up in Ireland* (e.g., O'Mahony et al.,

2022) and *Post Primary Longitudinal Study* (Smyth, Banks and Calvert, 2011; McCoy et al., 2014) provide some insight, there are no large-scale quantitative longitudinal studies specifically examining the impact of school-university WP programmes on student educational aspirations and outcomes. This thesis begins to address that gap, though not without limitations. Study III attempted to collect post-school progression data by working directly with schools, a resource-intensive process reliant on self-reported information. As Bernstein-Sierra and Corwin (2018) argue, restricted access to post-secondary enrolment data continues to hinder impact assessment. A coordinated national data-sharing model between schools, higher education institutions, and public agencies would support more robust and strategic WP research.

A persistent issue within widening participation (WP) work is the siloing of interventions across institutions, where WP teams often work in isolation from one another, as well as within institutions, where access departments are frequently disconnected from academic faculties and researchers. As Barnes et al. (2009) argue, meaningful and sustained university-community partnerships require co-produced, collaborative research. Greater integration between practitioners and academic staff would improve programme design, implementation, and evaluation. Open-access sharing of programme documentation and evaluation tools would also support replication and adaptation across institutions and countries.

In the Irish context, a key infrastructural gap is the lack of formal research-practice networks for WP professionals. While the HEA's Programme for Access to Higher Education (2023) provides some practitioner support, equivalent platforms for WP researchers are notably absent. O'Connor (2024) emphasises the importance of cross-sector collaboration, among researchers, policymakers, and community organisations, to achieve meaningful impact. While there are some opportunities at conferences such as the European Access Network (2025) and Equitas (National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education., 2025) conferences and initiatives like the Irish Educational Studies Special Issue Symposium on *Rethinking Educational Disadvantage* (Harford, Hyland and Fleming, 2022) symposium mark important progress, sustainable collaboration must be embedded within institutions and not left to individual or third-party efforts.

Interestingly, mentoring emerged across Studies I-IV as a complex area of WP practice. While existing literature and Study II support its positive influence on future goals and aspirations, Study III found no significant effect on actual progression. This mirrors findings from UK-based research using HEAT data, which also identified inconsistent links between mentoring and higher education entry (TASO, 2021). Further investigation is needed to understand why mentoring might raise aspirations but not result in concrete progression outcomes. Longitudinal follow-up with students' post-school would help determine whether early engagement with WP initiatives leads to sustained higher education participation.

Study IV added further nuance - although 2022 survey data suggested students participated in mentoring, qualitative interviews held in 2024 revealed that many referred to informal support from teachers or counsellors rather than structured programmes. This misalignment points to possible confusion in survey terminology and underscores the need for greater clarity in data collection instruments. Finally, future research should distinguish clearly between informal guidance and formal mentoring interventions in order to assess their respective impacts accurately.

Based on the findings presented in this thesis, it behoves policymakers, practitioners, and researchers to come together in designing holistic, evidence-informed widening participation strategies that are integrated across educational sectors and responsive to diverse student needs. Such collaboration is essential to move beyond fragmented interventions towards sustained, whole-school and cross-institutional approaches that address structural inequalities and support coherent, multi-touchpoint pathways. Furthermore, a shared commitment to transparent data sharing, longitudinal evaluation, and co-produced research will be critical to strengthening the evidence base and ensuring that widening participation efforts are both equitable and impactful at scale.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethical Approval

Aibhin Bray <braya@tcd.ie>

Revisions of TA21 ethics and consent

Phdrsrch <PHDRSRCH@tcd.ie> 1 June 2018 at 15:12
To: Aibhin Bray <BRAYA@tcd.ie>
Cc: Denis Brendan Tangney <TANGNEY@tcd.ie>

Approval Prof Brendan Tangney (STAFF) **1 June 2018**

Dear Brendan,

The School of Education's Ethics Committee has received and considered your application for approval of your Staff research project "Trinity Access 21".

It is the decision of the Committee that no additional information is needed regarding your application. Therefore, approval is granted for your research, on the condition that it is carried out as indicated on your application. Should there be a change in the design of your research project, you will need to re-apply again for approval from the School of Education's Ethics Committee.

You are required to include a copy of this letter as an appendix to your thesis.

If you have any queries regarding this decision, please contact the Chair of the School of Education's Ethics Committee and Director of Research, Dr Ann Devitt (devittan@tcd.ie).

We wish you all the very best with your research project.

Kind regards,

Fiona McKibben

Research Officer at the School of Education

on behalf of Professor Ann Devitt

Director of Research

3088 School of Education Arts Building

Trinity College Dublin, the University of Dublin

Dublin 2, Ireland.

Tel | + 353 1 8963583

3088 Scoil an Oideachais

Coláiste na Tríonóide, Baile Átha Cliath, Ollscoil Átha Cliath

Appendix B: Parent and Student Information Sheets and Consent Forms

Parent/Guardian Information Sheet

September 2022

Dear Parent/Guardian,

Your school is participating in an education project called Trinity Access 21 (TA21). This project is a collaboration between the Trinity Access Programmes, the School of Education, and the School of Computer Science & Statistics in Trinity College Dublin. The principal investigator is Professor Brendan Tangney.

What is it?

TA21 aims to transform the Irish education system, in partnership with schools, communities, other education organisations and businesses, so that every student has the opportunity to reach their full educational potential. The project includes the development of three 'core practices' to encourage a strong, college-going culture in schools: Key Skills and Capabilities; Pathways to College, and Mentoring. Outcomes from phase 1 (2014 - 2017) of the TA21 project indicate it is having a very positive impact, where high aspirations are normal and there is a more active and engaged teaching and learning environment.

What does it involve?

The project will take place during school time throughout the school year. During the programme, professional development workshops and seminars will be offered to staff. Members of the project team may spend time in the school delivering workshops and supporting teachers and the principal.

Training programmes may also be provided for students in relation to the development of the three core practices. These programmes will take place either in school or in Trinity College. Students will be under the supervision and guidance of adults at all times. All activities will comply with best practice in Child Protection and the policies of Trinity College in this area, as well as any relevant school policies, to ensure that students benefit from the learning opportunities in a safe and effective manner.

All TA21 staff have undergone the Garda Vetting procedures to receive clearance to work with minors. In the unlikely event that information about illegal activities should emerge during the study, the researchers will follow the school's Child Protection policy and inform the relevant authorities.

Research

In order to investigate the effectiveness of the project, researchers from Trinity College will collect information about the students' learning experiences, their attitudes and aspirations, and their educational and family background. Students and teachers may be asked to complete questionnaires, feedback forms or reflections at various intervals during the project, and a sample of students and teachers will be asked to participate in interviews and focus group discussions, of no more than 30 minutes duration. The research team may ask

the school for a list of participants as well as data relating to students' attainment and grades. Trinity Access aim to help empower every young person to reach their full academic potential. The research team may ask your child in 6th year if they agree to being contacted at some stage up to 2 years after they finish school. This would involve the research team asking your child about their further/ higher education or work after leaving school.

There may be lectures, Ph.D. theses, conference presentations and peer-reviewed journal articles written as a result of this project, however the students and school will not be identified.

Data Handling

All information that is collected by the researchers will be anonymised and stored in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation at Trinity College, Dublin. For the questionnaires and grade information, each student will be allocated a unique identification number, which will permit the researchers to track changes in engagement, but will not be able to be used to identify the student by name. Data that has been fully de-identified may also be shared with external researchers and project evaluators such as the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre at NUI Galway. A leaflet explaining this process has been enclosed with this information sheet.

Research Consent

We wish to seek your permission for your child to participate in the research part of the programme. Participation in this part of the programme is voluntary and you may remove your child from the process at any time, for any reason, without penalty and any information already recorded about them will not be used. Should you wish your child to be omitted from the research aspect of the project, they will still participate in the programme, but none of their information will be used in the research. Full information about your data protection rights are available on this website: https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/law-topic/data-protection/reform/rights-citizens_en.

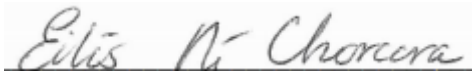
Images

From time to time, we may also record images and/or video of your child and their classmates and teachers at work, which might be used in communications and promotional/marketing material about the **TA21** programme, or in dissemination activities such as conference presentations. Use of video footage and images will be strictly in accordance with best practice in Child Protection policies and guidelines. Your child's name will not appear alongside any images/video footage.

Consent is being sought for the use of any individual/small group photos that include your child. Should you wish your child to be omitted from such material, they will still participate in the programme, but no images/video footage of them will be used in any dissemination, marketing or promotional materials. Crowd-based photos may be taken on the basis of public interest, without prior consent. Parents or data subjects can object to the use of images in crowd-based photos at any point in the future, by contacting us at the email address below.

Please sign below to indicate your consent and return the form to the School Principal's Office as soon as possible. If you have any questions in relation to this, please do not hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely,



Brendan Tangney, B.Sc., M.Sc., Ph.D., F.T.C.D.
Professor in Computer Science
Principal Investigator
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Eilís Ní Chorcora

TA21 Research Coordinator

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E: eilis@ta21.ie

TA21 Parent/Guardian Consent Form

I _____ (*name of parent/guardian*) have been provided with an information letter that outlines the activities that _____ (*name of child*), _____ will take part in, how research data will be collected and stored and how I can contact the research team. I understand that I may withdraw my child from the research project at any time should I wish to do so for any reason and without penalty.

Please sign below to indicate your consent

Data collection for **research purposes**

1. I consent to my child participating in the research associated with to the TA21 project. I am aware that this may involve my child filling in **questionnaires**, participating in individual and/or group **interviews**, the sharing of lists of participants and **grade information** relating to the TA21 project, and that my child may be asked in 6th year if they agree to being contacted by the research team at some stage up to 2 years after they finish school. I understand that this would involve the research team asking my child about their further/ higher education or work only. I agree to Trinity College, University of Dublin storing any personal data relating to my child that results from this project. I agree to the processing of such data for purposes associated with the research project as outlined to me.

Signature of parent/guardian: _____

Images/Video

2. I consent to individual or small group images/video footage of my child being occasionally used for promotional material about the TA21 program, or in dissemination activities such as conference presentations, and understand that they will not be identified by name.

Signature of parent/guardian: _____

Date: _____

Participant Information Sheet

Your school has agreed to participate in the Trinity Access 21 (TA21) research project. This project is a collaboration between the Trinity Access Programme, the School of Education, and the School of Computer Science & Statistics in Trinity College Dublin. The principal investigator is Professor Brendan Tangney.

During the programme you will be involved in different innovative learning experiences and researchers from Trinity College would like to collect information about your views on those experiences. You can choose whether or not you would like to participate in this research,

which could involve the following: Interactions between you and your classmates working together may be observed and recorded; interactions between you and your teacher may be recorded; you may be asked to complete questionnaires and feedback forms at different times during the programme; you may also be selected to take part in an interview either individually, or with a small group of your classmates, which will last about 30 minutes. Your school may also be asked to share information about what TA21 activities you took part in, and your academic attainment or grades. Trinity Access aim to help empower every young person to reach their full academic potential. When you are in 6th year the research team may also ask you'd like to be contacted at some stage up to 2 years after you finish school. This would involve the research team to ask you about your further/ higher education or work after leaving school.

All information that is collected by the researchers will be anonymised (all names will be removed) and stored in Trinity College, Dublin. For the questionnaires and grade information, each student will be allocated a unique identification number, which will permit the researchers to look at changes over time, but will not be able to be used to identify any student by name. Data that has been *fully* anonymised in this way may also be shared with researchers and project evaluators. Your participation in the research aspect of the programme is voluntary and you can change your mind about it at any time – in that case we will not use any information already collected about you, but you will continue to be involved with any of the TA21 activities that are being run by your school. Here is a link to a video that explains this process: https://www.powtoon.com/c/ePu7HlSaT7X/1/m

The results of the research are likely to be used in lectures, Ph.D. theses, conference presentations and journal articles, but you or your school will not be identified. In the unlikely event that information about illegal activities should emerge during the study, the researchers will have to inform the relevant authorities. From time to time, we may also record images and/or video of you, your classmates and your teachers at work, which might be used in communications and promotional/marketing material about the **TA21** programme, or in dissemination activities such as conference presentations. You have the right to be anonymous, therefore, your name will not appear alongside any images/video footage. Please keep in mind that you can change your mind at any time about the use of your image, and in that case, we will not use any images/video footage associated with you, but you will still participate in the programme.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask your teacher, or kevin@bridge21.ie.

Yours sincerely,

Brendan Tangney,
Professor in Computer Science
Trinity College Dublin

TA21 Participant Consent Form

I, _____(your name) have read the information sheet provided about the project and know how information will be collected and stored. I understand that I can choose not to take part in the research at any time.

Please sign below to indicate your consent

Data collection for **research purposes**

1. I consent to participating in the research associated with to the TA21 project. I am aware that this may involve filling in **questionnaires** and participating in individual or group **interviews** and the sharing of participant lists and **grade information** relating to the TA21 project. I consent to being asked when I am in 6th year if I would like to give my contact details to TA21 to contact me via phone/ email after I leave secondary school. I understand that this is so that researchers can ask me about **further/ higher education or work** only and will contact me up to 2 years after I have left secondary school. I agree to Trinity College, University of Dublin storing any personal data relating to me that results from this project. I agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the research project as outlined to me.

Signature of participant: _____

Images/Video

2. I consent to images/video footage of me being occasionally used for promotional material about the TA21 program, or in dissemination activities such as conference presentations, and understand that they I will not be identified by name.

Signature of participant*:* _____

Date: _____

Signature of Project Leader (TCD): _____

Date: _____

Appendix C: Overview of Data Management

Overview of Data Management

This appendix outlines the data collection instruments, collection, handling and processing procedures for the TA21 project.

Data Collection Instruments

Data will be collected at three levels:

1. The student-level instrument will gather demographic data, as well as information relating to the students' experiences in schools and their aspirations and goals.
2. The teacher instrument will gather information about their subject areas, experience in schools, professional development and self-efficacy.
3. The school instrument will provide information relating to management structures as well as data relating to the students' levels of exposure to the Pathways, Leadership and Mentoring pillars.

Consent, data storage and destruction

The consent forms for each of the above groups were provided with the original ethics application. Storage of data arising from the surveys is outlined below in the data management document. Following a period of 5 years after the research has concluded, all electronic copies of data that has any potential of being associated with an individual or school will be deleted from all storage sites and paper copies will be shredded.

TA21 Data Management

This document is an appendix to the TA21 Ethics application, detailing the process of anonymisation process of the TA21 data and who can be granted access to it.

Data handling

In order for a participant (student or teacher) to be included in the data collection, we must first receive all required consent forms.

1. Each participant who has provided consent will be assigned a unique TA21 number. This is primarily used to ensure that the we can identify the individual, without only relying on their name, for the purpose of matching the longitudinal data.
2. The data will be collected, and cleaned, and at this point the participants will be assigned a randomly-generated unique identifier.
3. Any non-sensitive, demographic data will be stored on a secure database and will be associated with the unique identifier.
4. All other data will be stored in a separate secure database along with the identifier.
5. Raw data will be deleted.
6. Only the research coordinator and assistant research coordinator will have access to both databases and the key to the anonymisation.
7. This process should allow for participants to withdraw or access any data that we have on them, while keeping the data anonymous and secure.

Data processing and third-party access

Only the principal investigator (Brendan Tangney), research manager (Rónán Smith) and research assistant (Kate Maloney) will have access to both databases and the anonymisation key.

The wider TA21 research and evaluation team (consisting of the individuals listed below), will have access to the de-identified data.

Name	**Position**
Wendy Crampton	Director
Eilís Ní Chorcora	PhD candidate
David Reilly	PhD candidate
Sarah Grimson	Foundation Course Coordinator
Lisa Keane	Post-Entry Progression Coordinator
Jake Byrne	PG Cert Course Coordinator
Aibhín Bray	Assistant Professor School of Education
Joanne Banks	Assistant Professor School of Education
Ann Devitt	Assistant Professor School of Education

A further level of anonymisation will be conducted before the data can be released to any third parties not listed above. This will remove any potential for identification of individual schools or locations. In order to access the fully anonymised data set, the third party will be required to submit an application to the TA21 director and research coordinator detailing their affiliation and the purposes for which they require access to the

Appendix D: Guiding Questions for the semi structured interview

Guiding Questions for the semi structured interview are outlined below:
• Can you tell me about what you've been up to since leaving secondary school? • Thinking back to when you were in school, when did you first start considering this pathway for yourself? • How would you describe the culture at your secondary school when it came to post-school pathways? • Can you tell me about any specific ways school helped or hindered students to consider post-school pathways? • What do you remember about the TAP Schools Programmes? Can you tell me about your participation in Pathway and Mentoring Programmes? • In your opinion, what aspects of the TAP programmes worked well for you/ your peers? • In your option, what aspects of the TAP programmes did not work well/ what would you change? • Anything else you'd like to add?

Appendix E: Coding Scheme

Preliminary Coding Scheme (Pre-existing and Emergent)

Code	Definition	Origin	Type of Code
Mentoring	References to participation in or influence of TAP mentoring relationships	Engagement in Mentoring was found to influence future goals and aspirations scores (Paper 2) but not post-school progression (Paper 3)	Pre-existing
TAP Pathways activities	Participation in TAP pathways activities	Engagement in Pathways activities was found to influence future goals and aspirations scores (Paper 2) and post-school progression (Paper 3)	Pre-existing
Aspirations	Statements reflecting students' goals and aspirations from when they were in secondary school	Paper 2	Pre-existing
Post-School Progression	Students' educational journeys (post Leaving certificate)	Paper 3	Pre-existing
Familial influence	Role of family support in students' educational journey	Role of parental support in influencing both students' future goals and aspirations	Pre-existing

		(paper 2) and post-school progression (paper 3)	
Institutional barriers	Challenges navigating university systems or processes	Interview data	Emergent
Course misalignment	Mismatch between expectations and actual course experiences	Interview data	Emergent
Peer influence	Impact of friends or classmates on educational decisions	Interview data	Emergent
Influence of School Guidance Counsellors	Influence of in-school career guidance (outside of Pathways activities)	Interview data	Emergent
School Culture	School culture towards various post-school progression pathways	Interview data	Emergent

Sample of Coded Transcript

Transcript Excerpt	Applied Codes	Researcher Memo
"I remember we had calls about criminal law one week and then maybe family law another, you know, different things like that every month. Yeah, it really piqued my interest. That was kind of when the decision was set in stone. I	Pathways/ Aspirations/ Post-school Progression	Reinforces the structural support role of TAP; Pathways activities as bridging capital through exposure to the TAP Pathways to Law programme and its impact on educational decision making.

was like, yeah, I want to go to college."		
"When I dropped out of NCI, I was even more lost because I didn't know how to progress. But it was my friend who talked me through what to do and how to go through... from dropping out in college, going into a new college and then progressing up the levels."	Peer Influence	Illustrates the supportive role of social capital through peer networks of those who have previously navigated the higher education system.
"Oh yeah, yeah, definitely. My mom. My mom. Definitely… She was always the one. Made sure I like when I was a kid, I had my homework done. Everything."	Familial Involvement	Reinforces the role of parental capital and impact of familial capital on educational trajectories.
"Certain people who… were doing all right, not top of the class, but… probably didn't get the full attention they needed. Whereas like me, I was going that direction	School Culture	Highlights the impact of institutional habitus and the culture of expectations from teachers on particularly students who are seen to be the 'right fit' for higher education.

anyway and I was given the attention because I was seen as going in that direction."		

Analytic Progression (Codes, Categories, Themes)

Code Group	Category	Thematic Interpretation	Linked Bourdieusian Concept
Parental Involvement, Aspirations and future goals, Post-school Progression	Navigating educational journeys with support from mothers	The influence of family habitus on educational trajectories	Familial capital
Peer Influence, Post-school progression	Navigating Decision making	The influence of peers on navigating educational trajectories	Social Capital
School Culture, Institutional barriers, Aspirations	Influence of school culture and expectations	Influence of school culture and expectations on students' aspirations and educational decision making	Institutional Habitus