BERA

50 YEARS
1974 – 2024

Far away from the ivory tower

The impact of university education on disadvantaged people & their communities

JUNE 2024

AUTHORS

MILES SMITH

TRACY HAYES

MARK LEATHER

KATIE MAJOR-SMITH

ALISON MILNER

GIL FEWINGS

ABOUT BERA

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) is the leading authority on educational research in the UK, supporting and representing the community of scholars, practitioners and everyone engaged in and with educational research both nationally and internationally. BERA is a membership association and learned society committed to advancing research quality, building research capacity and fostering research engagement. We aim to inform the development of policy and practice by promoting the best quality evidence produced by educational research.

Our vision is for educational research to have a profound and positive influence on society. We support this by promoting and sustaining the work of educational researchers. Our membership, which is more than 2,500 strong, includes educational researchers, practitioners and doctoral students from the UK and around the globe.

Founded in 1974, BERA has since expanded into an internationally renowned association. We strive to be inclusive of the diversity of education research and scholarship, and welcome members from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, theoretical orientations, methodological approaches, sectoral interests and institutional affiliations. We encourage the development of productive relationships with other associations within and beyond the UK.

We run a major international conference each year alongside a diverse and engaging series of events, and publish high-quality research in our peer-reviewed journals, reports, book series and the groundbreaking BERA Blog. We recognise excellence through our awards and fellowships, provide grants for research, support the career development of our members, and nurture an active peer community organised around networks, forums and special interest groups.

BERA is a registered charity (no. 1150237) and is a company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales (company no. 08284220). We are governed by an elected council and managed by a small office team based in London.

ABOUT THE BRIAN SIMON FUND

The research presented in this report was funded by a grant from the Brian Simon fellowship fund. Held in trust by BERA, the fund was a gift from the family of Brian Simon, a leading post-war educationalist and former BERA president. Five projects were supported by the fund in 2023–2024 and each has produced a final report published in 2024 to mark BERA's 50th anniversary year. In the spirit of Brian Simon, the projects are independent, imaginative, scholarly and dedicated to educational advance. They pertain to the topics of education and democracy, and history of education, in line with Brian Simon's own research interests.

Contents

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Miles Smith, Tracy Hayes, Mark Leather, Katie Major-Smith, Alison Milner & Gil Fewings: Plymouth Marjon University

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Published in June 2024 by the British Educational Research Association.

This report has not been through a formal peer review process.

Where material reproduced in this report include images of children, the authors have obtained the relevant permissions from parents/guardians.

British Educational Research Association (BERA)
Elizabeth Meehan Suite
Regent House
1–6 Pratt Mews
London NW1 0AD

www.bera.ac.uk | enquiries@bera.ac.uk | 020 4570 4265

Charity number: 1150237

Download
This document is available to download from:
https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/far-away-from-the-ivory-tower

Citation
If referring to or quoting from this document in your own writing, our preferred citation is as follows:

> Smith, M., Hayes, T., Leather, M., Major-Smith, K., Milner, A., & Fewings, G. (2024). *Far away from the ivory tower: The impact of university education on disadvantaged people and their communities*. British Educational Research Association. https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/far-away-from-the-ivory-tower

Executive summary

This report presents the findings of the Plymouth Marjon University (PMU) Brian Simon Research Project, which explored the experiences of individuals in higher education (HE), with a specific emphasis on those who were the first in their family to attend university. The project, conducted by a multidisciplinary team, aimed to explore the impact of HE on individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, utilising artefacts from the university's extensive archive to scaffold discussions.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Lifelong learning: testimonies from first-in-family students illustrated how HE can serve as a catalyst for lifelong learning and social mobility.
2. Feminist perspectives of inclusion: testimonies revealed the structural barriers faced by women in academia, which highlights the ongoing struggle for gender equality in HE.
3. Space and places of safety: testimonies revealed university as a refuge for individuals navigating personal challenges, underscoring the importance of nurturing and supportive educational environments.
4. Poverty and the working-class: participants' testimonies provided insights into the unique obstacles confronting students from working-class backgrounds and suggest the importance of systemic change to ensure inclusivity and equitable support.
5. Kindness of practice: testimonies showed the transformative impact of compassionate teaching practices on students' academic and personal development, and emphasise the significance of supportive pedagogical approaches.

PLANNED DISSEMINATION & POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The research team intends to disseminate findings through various channels, including academic articles, blog series, symposiums and exhibitions. Additionally, the report outlines several policy recommendations aimed at promoting inclusivity, addressing structural barriers and fostering a more equitable HE system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The report makes a number of recommendations for future research focusing on contemporary challenges in HE, such as mental health, financial burdens and accessibility. These recommendations could inform policies and practices that promote inclusivity and support for all students.

In summary, this research project contributes to the ongoing dialogue on the role of HE in promoting social mobility and equity, and emphasises the need for continued efforts to create an inclusive and supportive environment for all individuals pursuing HE.

1. Introduction

This BERA-funded project, in honour of 20th-century educationalist Brian Simon, explored the perspectives of students, staff and graduates in relation to their experience of higher education (HE), with a specific focus on those who were first-in-family (by generation) to attend university (Adamecz-Volgyi et al., 2021). As Stahl and McDonald (2022, p. 4) highlight, 'Despite efforts to widen participation, first-in-family students, as an equity group, remain severely under-represented in HE internationally.' Plymouth Marjon University (PMU) has, since 1840, a long tradition of social justice through education with our founders, James Kay-Shuttleworth and Derwent Coleridge, who believed that education was for all, not just society's elite (Leather et al., 2020). They started training orphans from the local workhouse to become teachers, changing lives by providing a route out of poverty.

The research team is inter- and multidisciplinary, and is collectively interested in and committed to issues of social justice. The team has extensive experience in informal, non-formal and formal education systems and organisations. Its research interests span a wide range of subjects (outdoor education, youth and community work, academic practice and identity, sustainability, archival research and history education), with strong methodological expertise in qualitative, postqualitative and quantitative research.

For this project, the research team engaged participants at three in-person research events, and a further four online meetings, using artefacts from the PMU archive to prompt and scaffold discussion, and to understand perspectives on the value and purpose of HE, as well as its challenges. Twenty-seven participants, who self-selected to participate in the research, shared their experiences, talking in detail about how they came to university, its impact on their personal and professional lives and its influence on their thinking about the world and their place in it. As the nature and purpose of HE is closely scrutinised, and indeed its very existence is contested (Marginson, 2024), this research project provides a powerful rationale for HE's role as a phenomenon for social mobility (The Sutton Trust, 2021) and social transformation.

2. Research design

This research set out to explore the impact that HE can have on people – individuals and members of groups, networks and communities – who have experienced disadvantage. While disadvantage can be understood as dissonance in terms of competencies and dispositions between an individual's environment and the competencies and dispositions within their learning context, it is a complex and problematic phenomenon to define (Kellaghan, 2001). Who counts as educationally disadvantaged is also complex and contested and tends to refer to those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds with lower participation rates of participation in HE (Boliver et al., 2022). Within the context of this research, therefore, with its implicit focus on engagement in HE, we selected first-in-family to university as the key criteria for participation. This acknowledged that the experience of a university education does create a life advantage. As a result, we have had a wide range of interests and concerns, many of which are critical issues in our academic practice, and include social justice, equity, access and participation as well as the experiences of nontraditional students. Therefore, the central question and concern for this project was:

'What is the impact of HE on people who are first in their family (by generation) to engage in HE, and their communities?'

Our research was underpinned by five objectives, which link back to this key question:

1. To showcase the story of university education 'for the poor' and people who have a background of disadvantage.
2. To understand how a university education affects the lives of those from disadvantaged backgrounds and first-in-family to university.
3. To use PMU's extensive archive to interrogate the university's history and to compare this to contemporary educational practice.
4. To highlight the links between social justice and PMU's values of humanity, ambition, curiosity and independence.
5. To critique current practices in access to, and participation in, university education with respect to widening participation, social mobility and educational disadvantage.

3. Methodological approach

The methodological approach used by the research team drew on disparate approaches within the qualitative and postqualitative paradigms, as well as disciplinary methods used within historical studies. Once ethical approval had been granted, the research team explored sources and objects from the PMU archive with the support of Gil Fewings, university archivist. This is a significant repository of archives and artefacts held since the origin of the university as colleges in Chelsea and Battersea in the 1840s. The process of investigation, to uncover relevant archival material for the subsequent research discussions, was intuitive and serendipitous – a common factor of such source-based research (Martin, 2016), but guided also by clarity about objectives and the intended purpose the archival stimuli were to have.

Once selected, the archival materials were used to develop prompt sheets to engage participants through the sharing of stories within informal conversations. This method improves communication and yields naturalistic data (Swain & King, 2022), and as a shared-story approach, it enables 'experiences [to] be considered, analysed critically and conceptualised to give "testimony", construct meaning and disseminate research findings' (Hayes & Prince, 2019, p. 153). We recruited participants by promoting the research through PMU's social media platforms and by leveraging our professional networks, and we held three discussion events from October to December 2023. Following requests from would-be participants, and an amendment to our ethics, we also hosted several online meetings. In-person participants were welcomed by a 'host', and then given free range to engage with the researchers and/or one another, and were encouraged to leave audio-recorded reflections linked to the artefacts. Online participants had the opportunity to look at prompt sheets/artefacts as determined through dialogue with the researchers.

The research team met regularly through the project to share and discuss the findings. This was complemented by interpretive writing activity and iterative, inductive review of the data. No hard and fast rules were determined for the research team to follow by way of analysis. This links closely to the notion of refusal of method articulated within the postqualitative paradigm (St. Pierre, 2021), and also reflects the team's pragmatic approach. However, it was clear from the group interaction that certain ideas, narratives, issues and 'magic moments' (Hayes & Prince, 2019) cohered thematically for each of the researchers.

4. Findings, analysis & discussion

As noted above, specific themes emerged for each researcher, outlined below, with fragments of participants' narratives presented in a way that captures each theme's essence within reflexive and nuanced analyses (Reay, 2018). We analysed through narration to create the five anonymised stories below.

4.1 LIFELONG LEARNING

Jack was 'a real working-class lad' whose mother's determination steered him towards a 'reasonable education'. Over time, this education enabled him to become 'one of the people who gave the orders'. Jack's first experience in HE, which served as a catalyst for social mobility, empowered and motivated him to engage in lifelong learning. He returned to HE as a mature learner, developing professional skills and knowledge. But these experiences affected him more widely, making him politically engaged, deepening his international outlook and involvement with charitable work, and inspiring his children and grandchildren in their studies and work.

Jack's testimony prompts reflection on the complexities within studies of lifelong learning. As Boeren (2023) notes, the interplay of an individual's social and behavioural characteristics with the macro context, notably the nature of learning institutions and workplace training, are powerful determinants of life-wide and -long learning. Furthermore, Jack's story (which contains comparable elements to others within this study) poses an implicit question about the credibility of the perceived and resurgent skills imperative evident in contemporary educational policy discourse (Morrin et al., 2021), and the danger of educational policy further reducing the social value of HE, with the prevalence of market-oriented instrumentalism as the dominant purpose of HE (Kromydas, 2017).

4.2 FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES OF INCLUSION

Joyce, at 18, wanted to study to be a librarian, which meant moving away as there were no local options. Instead, she chose to get a job: 'I decided not to go to university, to get a job, which in hindsight was a good thing, because my dad was made redundant… I was needed at home.' She reminisces, 'I always said to them (her parents), "I'm going to do an Open University degree at some point", but life gets in the way, doesn't it? You go out to work, you get married, have children… And then life threw something at me…' Following the death of her husband, Joyce completed a degree and got a job in a university library. Her parents were very proud.

Joyce's testimony illustrates the notion of 'pragmatic rationality' (Hodkinson et al., 2013), recognising the structural, social, cultural, familial (immediate and extended families) and relational contexts in which decisions are made. Responsibility for childcare and domestic duties continues to disproportionally reside with women, highlighting prevailing gender inequality (Reid, 2020). As Reay (2018, p. 530) highlights, 'there is a constant tension between agency and structure, the macro context and the micro details of [young] people's lives', and there is a need to illuminate the relational nature of academic and social university experiences. Universities may be viewed as a microcosm of society. They are 'spaces infused with gendered expectations' (Stahl & McDonald, 2022, p. 4), despite the multitude of policies and practices designed to make them more inclusive. Therefore, redressing historical exclusions in access to HE (and to other aspects of society) remains an ongoing process (Patfield et al., 2022).

4.3 SPACE & PLACES OF SAFETY

Martha explained how, for her, 'everything else just falls away' when studying – the worries and stresses of her personal life disappear. The concept emerged of university as a safe space and is evident in the data, especially for students with dysfunctional and traumatic backgrounds. Studying at university, with peers and supportive tutors, the space can become a safe place physically, emotionally and cognitively. This was captured by Martha, 'It's like putting on your comfy slippers' – a warm, comforting and reassuring place to be. It means that you are 'looked after, well cared for and safe'.

Martha's testimony demonstrates the importance of an 'ethic of care'. Developing and nurturing this through attending to the teacher–student relationship continues to be of interest (Katsogridakis & Leather, 2024). Paying purposeful attention to students as whole people, a shared responsibility for learning, and responsiveness to students' wellbeing reflect this underlying ethic of care (Keeling, 2014).

4.4 POVERTY & THE WORKING CLASS

Kat nearly did not attend university. Coming from a low-income working-class family made it difficult to balance university with her day job, and she considered dropping out multiple times. She would often reflect on her family's financial struggles, believing that her working-class peers would see her university attendance as being 'off on a jolly' and 'off reading books'. No one from her predominantly middle-class cohort seemed to experience similar issues, and although she's adamant that 'education is what kept me going', the feeling of 'working-class guilt' never left her.

Feelings of isolation and not belonging are common experiences among students from working-class families (Reay, 2018), and Kat's testimony illustrates the challenges that such students have transitioning into HE. Students from working-class backgrounds perceive themselves as 'outsiders' (Reay, 2021), finding it difficult to connect socially with other more well-off students (Attridge, 2021) and to integrate into a system which better supports those from the higher social classes (Bathmaker et al., 2017). Addressing these issues requires a cultural transformation of the HE sector to create an inclusive system in which working-class students can thrive (Reay, 2018).

4.5 KINDNESS OF PRACTICE

Bob recalls starting university and being confronted with the prospect of giving presentations. Speaking in front of classmates in 'small groups of six or eight people' brought him out in 'beads of sweat'; he was 'racked with nerves'. Kindness shown by two tutors helped him to develop the necessary skills, and the shyness that haunted him through university into his first years of teaching slowly dissipated. Bob reflected that, without their kindness, he wouldn't have been able to achieve what he did: 'You can't have a shy teacher, I had to grow out of it.'

Bob's testimony illuminates how students' transitioning experiences of entering HE are often complicated by the developmental expectations attached to the transition (Thompson et al., 2021). Bob's experience of tutor support resonates with the pedagogy of kindness (Denial, 2020). Kindness in practice supports students in gaining the academic skills required in HE, embeds compassion, encourages agency and actively supports connective participation in the learning environment (Gilmour, 2021).

5. Planned dissemination of findings

From a university perspective, the participants' testimonies can be seen as living PMU's values of humanity, ambition, curiosity and independence (research objective 4). They all made a success of their studies, and were keen to tell us about this. We will explore that aspect further in some of the outputs from this research. However, more importantly, and with wider application, the findings from our research provide an important and timely reminder about the value of HE within society and for people as a feature of existence and experience.

We currently have the following plans for dissemination of these findings:

• A BERA Blog special issue, in which the research team further explore the themes outlined above, drawing on data from other participants as well as wider related theory and research (proposal submitted February 2024, currently being revised following feedback from reviewers).

• A BERA symposium at the 2024 BERA Conference and WERA Focal Meeting, where the research findings are shared with a wider audience; we have received confirmation from BERA that our abstract has been accepted for this symposium (submission ID 998).

• An exhibition to share the findings. We intend to hold a launch event for the exhibition in early autumn 2024, and we anticipate that the exhibit will remain on the PMU campus until at least the end of the calendar year. We will be considering other possible venues for hosting the exhibition, which could include local museums in the Plymouth area.

• Academic articles: the team is committed to exploring the data further and to developing the findings into full academic papers following feedback from BERA; we would welcome inclusion of our findings in one of the BERA journals.

6. Policy & practice implications & recommendations

Linked to the discussion of our data above, we note the following policy and practice implications.

- Universities need to engage in discourse and policymaking related to the purpose and value of HE, asserting the intrinsic value of education, and responding openly and robustly to a narrowed, instrumentalist agenda determined by policy- and law-makers.

- Universities should enhance their offer to disadvantaged students, reaffirming their commitment to social values and creating varied opportunities through the life course.

- Universities need to be increasingly conscious of the complex needs and responsibilities of those hoping to engage in HE, including those with caring responsibilities. University leaders need to critically analyse the challenges and barriers to access and participation, and authentically plan to reduce and eliminate such barriers in the communities they serve.

- At national policy level, systematic reform to effect change in the culture and ethos of HE is crucial. There are several strands to this.

  - The university system should be more egalitarian and democratic.

  - Distribution of funds should be fairer.

  - There should be less hierarchy both between and within universities, and a recognition that HE in its current form perpetuates social injustice and inequality.

  - HE must transform both its values and culture, not just policies and practices (Reay, 2018).

7. Conclusions

The key finding of this research indicates that engagement in HE significantly affects the life experience of those who are first-in-family to engage in HE. Broadly speaking, the data suggest that participation in HE is beneficial, academically, socially and personally. Yet 'success' should be framed within broader narratives. The participants' testimonies reveal both the complex vicissitudes of human existence, and the impact of social, economic and cultural transformations, norms and systems on (their) engagement in HE.

7.1 STUDY LIMITATIONS

Choosing to focus on 'first-in-family' to university as a category risks contributing to deficit discourses, based on individuals 'sharing a similar set of "problems" that need to be remedied by policy and practice' (Patfield et al., 2022). It is, therefore, vital to recognise the diversity represented within this category: it is not a homogenous group. However, all participants in this study identified as cisgender, as either male or female, woman (girl) or man (boy). They were/are all white and from a UK background and were (are) associated with one small, post-92 university in the south-west of England. In many ways, they could be seen as non-diverse, with predominantly normative ways of viewing the world. However, commonalities do not denote homogeneity, and the testimonials offered markedly different experiences.

Additionally, we note that our participants self-selected to participate, that they were 'educationally successful' (Reay, 2018) and were keen to share their stories with us. We did not hear from those who failed to complete their education, nor who may have left feeling disillusioned with HE. This is a significant limitation, arguably risking unbalanced, biased findings. Drawing on larger scale studies as points of comparison with the data and drawing on literature from leading scholars in this field helped us to mitigate this limitation.

7.2 NEXT STEPS FOR CONSIDERATION

In addition to the planned dissemination of findings (above), the research team recognises that there is the potential for further follow-up studies to this project. In particular, and in light of the complex and intersecting issues facing the HE sector today — mental health, cost of living, spiralling costs yet stagnant tuition fees — we believe our attention should be on those engaging in HE now, so we can more fully understand their choices, their dilemmas, their perspectives and their aspirations.

REFERENCES

Adamecz-Volgyi, A., Henderson, M., & Shure, N. (2021). *'First in family': Higher education choices and labour market outcomes.*

Attridge, É. (2021). Understanding and managing identity: Working-class students at the University of Oxford. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *45*(10), 1438–1453.

Bathmaker, A. M., Ingram, N., & Waller, R. (2017). Higher education, social class and the mobilisation of capitals: Recognising and playing the game. In P. Brown, D. Reay, & C. Vincent (Eds.), *Education and social mobility* (pp. 105–125). Routledge.

Boeren, E. (2023). Conceptualizing lifelong learning participation. In M. Schemmann (Ed.), *International yearbook of adult education: Researching participation in adult education* (pp. 17–31). wbv Publikation.

Boliver, V., Gorard, S., & Siddiqui, N. (2022). Who counts as socioeconomically disadvantaged for the purposes of widening access to higher education? *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, *43*(3), 349–374.

Denial, C. (2020). A pedagogy of kindness. In J. Stommel, C. Friend, & S. M. Morris (Eds.), *Critical digital pedagogy: A collection* (pp. 212–218). Hybrid Pedagogy Inc.

Gilmour, A. (2021). Let's talk about webcams, and a pedagogy of kindness. *Compass: Journal of Learning and Teaching*, *14*(2). https://doi.org/10.21100/compass.v14i2.1177

Hayes, T. A., & Prince, H. (2019). Shared-story approaches in outdoor studies: The HEAR (hermeneutics, auto/ethnography and action research) 'listening' methodological model. In B. Humberstone, & H. Prince (Eds.), *Research methods in outdoor studies*. Routledge.

Hodkinson, P., Hodkinson, H., & Sparkes, A. C. (2013). *Triumphs and tears: Young people, markets, and the transition from school to work*. David Fulton Publishers.

Katsogridakis, G., & Leather, M. (2024). Teacher–student relationships in higher education: Reflections from an adventure sport context. *Sport, Education, and Society*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2023.2298794

Keeling, R. (2014). An ethic of care in higher education: Well-being and learning. *Journal of College and Character*, *15*(3), 141–148. https://doi.org/10.1515/jcc-2014-0018

Kellaghan, T. (2001). Towards a definition of educational disadvantage. *The Irish Journal of Education*, *xxxii*, 3–22.

Kromydas, T. (2017). Rethinking higher education and its relationship with social inequalities: Past knowledge, present state and future potential. *Palgrave Communications*, *3*(1), 1. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-017-0001-8

Leather, M., Fewings, G., & Porter, S. (2020). Outdoor education: The Romantic origins at the University of St Mark and St John. *History of Education Review*, *49*(1), 85–100. https://doi.org/10.1108/HER-04-2019-0009

Marginson, S. (2024). *Higher education faces a more fragile and contested future*. University World News.

Martin, K. (2016). *Creating context from curiosity: The role of serendipity in the research process of historians in physical and digital environments* [Doctoral thesis, The University of Western Ontario]. https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/3733

Morrin, M., Jones, M., & Salem, L. (2021). *The pathway to lifelong education: Reforming the UK's skills system*. Lifelong Education Institute.

Patfield, S., Gore, J., & Fray, L. (2022). Degrees of 'being first': Toward a nuanced understanding of first-generation entrants to higher education. *Educational Review*, *74*(6), 1137–1156.

Reay, D. (2018). Working class educational transitions to university: The limits of success. *European Journal of Education*, *53*(4), 528–540.

Reay, D. (2021). The working classes and higher education: Meritocratic fallacies of upward mobility in the United Kingdom. *European Journal of Education*, *56*(1), 53–64.

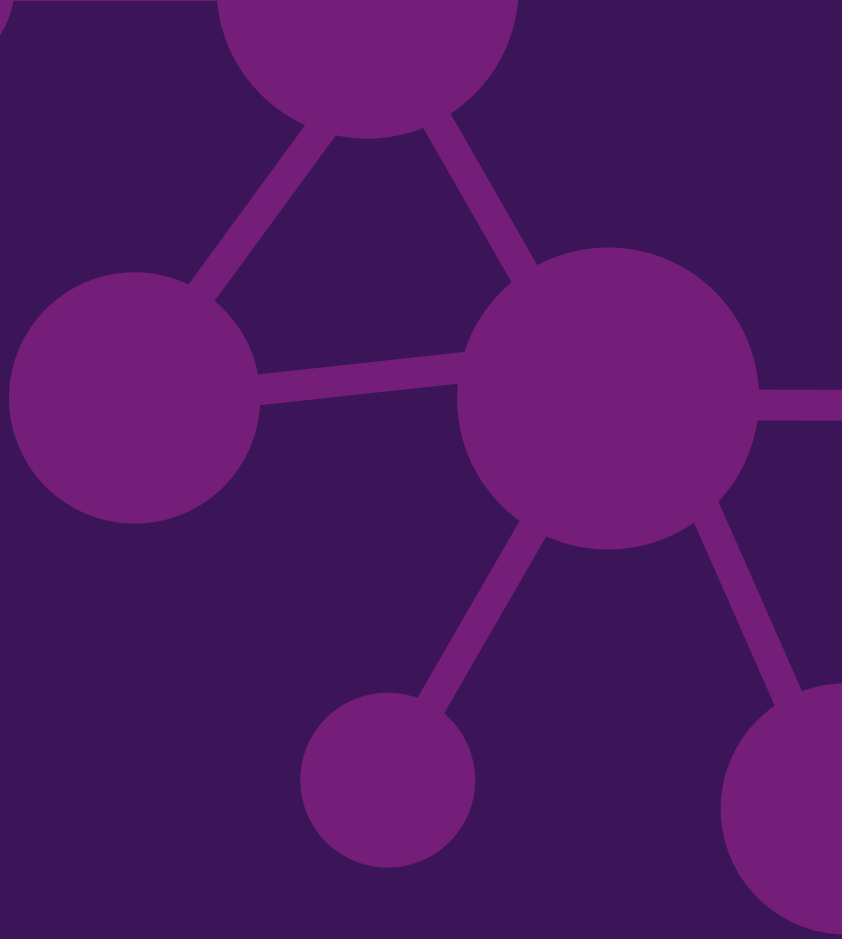Reid, J. (2020). *Mothers, Covid-19 and work at home: Their account in words and portraits*. University of Huddersfield.

St. Pierre, E. A. (2021). Post qualitative inquiry, the refusal of method, and the risk of the new. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *27*(1), 3–9. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419863005

Stahl, G., & McDonald, S. (2022). *Gendering the first-in-family experience: Transitions, liminality, performativity*. Routledge.

Swain, J., & King, B. (2022). Using informal conversations in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *21*. https://doi.org/10.1177/16094069221085056

The Sutton Trust. (2021). *Universities and social mobility: Summary report*. https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Universities-and-social-mobility-final-summary.pdf

Thompson, M., Pawson, C., & Evans, B. (2021). Navigating entry into higher education: The transition to independent learning and living. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, *45*(10), 1398–1410. https://doi.org/10.1080/030987X.2021.1933400