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# **The Black Country Education Insight Report 2021**



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The University of Wolverhampton's Education Observatory has provided a much needed overview of the Education landscape in the Black Country. Situated in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, this report provides us with a coherent understanding of education from the early years to post-compulsory adult learning.

We are confident that it will help all sectors to not only better understand the local challenges but to also maximise the current and future opportunities in this area. The University of Wolverhampton is the 'University of Opportunity', working with our partners in the region to further economic prosperity and social mobility.

It is essential that organisations from different sectors work together to address current and future education and skills needs and we look forward to continuing working collaboratively to deliver a vibrant economic future for Black Country residents.

## **Introductory statement by Vice-Chancellor Geoff Layer**

This is the third annual report we have produced offering an overview of all phases of education in the Black Country. As in 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns have dominated all areas of education and society. Therefore, we have concentrated much less on data analysis in this report in favour of capturing the views and first-hand experiences of educational practitioners from the region, gained through snapshot online surveys and opportunistic interviews. The Black Country contains high levels of disadvantage and poverty and early evidence suggests that such areas have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. As we reported last year, schools, colleges, universities, early years settings and other education providers in the Black Country have worked extremely hard to maintain education and support for all learners, particularly those who are vulnerable, but it is too early to say how successful they have been. However, this report is testament to their efforts and persistence.

The Education Observatory was created at the University of Wolverhampton in 2017 to undertake and oversee research in all areas of education and allied areas of social policy to secure social justice and regional transformation in the West Midlands. This report takes a broad, holistic approach, moving from early years through compulsory and post-compulsory education, as well as addressing key issues such as special educational needs and disability; mental health; and digital and post-digital futures. As such it is hoped that we have been able to highlight how disparities at each phase of a Black Country resident's experiences of education influences the next as they move through childhood into adulthood.

The rapid adoption of online learning teaching, unprecedented in 2020, has been increasingly integrated into how universities and schools work and we need now to take time to begin to learn some of the lessons from this remarkable period. The pandemic has highlighted digital inequalities, in terms of both internet access and the physical space necessary to work online, and concerns about potential learning and earnings loss among young people need to be examined and contested. As the final section of the report outlines, our move into a post-digital and hopefully post-pandemic world needs to be accompanied by careful consideration of the implications of these developments for the most vulnerable children and young people in the region and more widely.

Like the previous two reports, this has been a team effort and we are very grateful to the practitioners who gave up their time during a very stressful period to talk to us and respond to our surveys to allow us to capture their experiences as accurately as possible. We have not included any conclusions in this year's report to underline our hope that it will provoke dialogue and debate among academics, practitioners and policymakers in the region which allows education in the Black Country to be reflected, renewed, and reimagined.

## Introduction

Michael Jopling



In the previous Black Country Insight reports, we focused mainly on statistical data regarding early years in the Black Country. This year we felt it was much more important to focus on the impact of Covid-19 on early years practice and investigate Black Country professionals' experiences during the pandemic. To do this we draw on two relevant pieces of research we have undertaken recently. The first was a short, impressionistic questionnaire survey, conducted in June 2021, which investigated practitioners' perspectives on the effects of the pandemic. The second was our evaluation of the Black Country Early Outcomes project, which focused on supporting children's communication, speech and language, and was completed in 2020.

#### **Practitioners' perspectives on Covid-19**

In total 50 practitioners completed the questionnaire survey from settings in Wolverhampton, Sandwell and Dudley. Thirty-eight work in early years settings, including 12 managers or deputy managers, 7 early years practitioners and 4 owners. In addition, eight childminders completed the survey, alongside 4 practitioners who work in schools, mainly in Reception, and three who are in various advisory or support roles.

Zeta Williams-Brown and Chris Pascal

## **1: Early Years and Childhood Education**

All but one of the 31 respondents who specified had at least 10 years' experience in early years. We asked these professionals to comment on their overall experience of the pandemic. Only 7 had had positive experiences, most of which focused on their efforts to support their children, parents and staff:

"Childcare providers have risen to the challenges faced by Covid-19 and the government. Business has adapted and taken a loss to continue providing childcare."

**(Childcare support officer)**

"Covid-19 has meant adapting our practice to manage restrictions and also keep staff and children as safe as possible. Setting out engaging activities to keep children stimulated and learning. Lockdowns within schools were tough but adaptations and support from co-workers has helped."

**(Teaching assistant)**

"The children on the whole have showed their resilience and drive to play, form relationships and make sense of their world."

**(Artist in residence)**

Far more, 25 in total, focused on difficulties they have experienced during the pandemic, describing them as being stressful, challenging and a struggle. The following comments were typical:

“Angry and felt we were not valued because we had [to] continue with normal sessions whilst the rest of school was shut to most except key workers. No PPE to be worn and young children cannot socially distance.”

**(Early Years Foundation Stage lead)**

“Early years have had very little support through the pandemic. The minimal funding that has been received has been threatened to be reduced meaning sustainability has been hard.”

**(Manager)**

“It has been stressful. I have been in a very fortunate position to be able to borrow money from a relative. It has made me realise that I am living hand to mouth due to the £4.07 per hour we receive as government funding.”

**(Childminder)**

We also asked about the most significant challenges they have faced during the pandemic. Table 1 brings together the most common responses.

Table 1. Significant challenges

Challenges	Cited by	Example
Parents	10	“Making sure everyone is safe and making sure parents abide by the rules and changes.” (Senior early years practitioner)
Additional health measures	8	“Cleaning, hand cleaning, taking temperatures, wearing masks”. (Childminder)
Not being able to access activities, resources and experiences	8	“EYFS is more than activities and involving others and getting out into the environment is also a big part of it”. (EYFS lead)
Financial pressures	7	“I worked throughout all of the lockdowns and offered to take on additional work. However, received no financial support”. (Childminder)
Stress and anxiety	7	“Stress and anxiety, my own, the children I care for and their parents”.



Despite this, they mostly felt supported during the pandemic. This related predominantly to their settings and local authorities (LAs), especially about the webinars offered. They were much more frustrated about the continuous changes in guidance and lack of financial support from central government. Asked whether they were planning to retain any of the changes they had made in response to the pandemic, a number of interesting ideas were cited. The most common centred on restricting parents' access to settings:

"Children have settled better into pre-school and reception as parents have left the children at the entrance (which was surprising)."

**(Early years lead)**

Retaining health procedures, and maintaining high levels of online communication with parents online were also valued:

"Much more information is given to parents via email. We have moved to an online learning journal system, we have set up a YouTube channel where staff record stories and phonics activities for children."

**(Manager)**



### The Black Country Early Outcomes project

The Early Outcomes project was a year-long project from August 2019 funded by the Department for Education. It focused on improving standards and outcomes and addressing weaknesses around speech, language and communication (SLC) in the four Black Country LAs: Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton. The project adopted an interdisciplinary approach unprecedented for these four LAs in which 12 education professionals, health visitors and speech and language therapists (SaLTs) were seconded from all the LAs to work collectively on the project. A strong partnership was also established with the National Literacy Trust. The Education Observatory evaluated the project.

The project created a range of outputs that were designed to eradicate siloed working by developing a multi-agency speech, language and communication vision, strategy and pathways across the LAs; upskill the wider early years workforce to improve early identification; and improve outcomes for children through engaging and empowering parents and maximising the impact of community and voluntary sector services. Outputs included scoping and mapping services and advice across the LAs; a Health and SALT pathway of services; a school readiness pathway; and creating literacy hubs. The project had to move online in March 2020 to develop a Black Country Early Outcomes (BCEO) microsite, an early outcomes pack and online activity packs.

*Multi-agency working: 'It's brought us all together'*  
One of the evaluation's key findings centred on the improvements the project made to multi-agency working and collaboration in and across the LAs. This underpinned and supported the development of all outputs in the project. All members of the project team identified benefits in sharing practice with other professionals and across LAs. Examples included:

"I think the success stories have been the multi-agency working. [...] I've been able to work alongside speech and language therapists and look at what similarities we have in our work. We are all here for the children and I've noticed we're all working hard, but the project has allowed us to work smarter."

**(Early years adviser)**

"It was vital for each of the professionals to work together. Anything we had [before] has been done by health visitors or early years support. There's never been this 'Let's work together and create something'."

**(Black Country Hub Manager)**

**Literacy hubs**

The National Literacy Trust literacy hubs provided an effective multi-agency approach to support parents and children. The hubs were a place-based response to low levels of literacy intergenerationally. Eight hubs were established (two in each LA) and in total 273 adults and children attended the events they held, which involved a range of creative craft and messy activities and a storytelling session. Parents were enthusiastic, as one emphasised:

“To be fair I didn’t expect any of this. I thought it would be all outdoors so it was like a shock just this being there, it’s nice. Yeah, I literally thought we were just going to go on a bear hunt walk. I didn’t realise that they got a free book or anything.”  
**(Parent with 4 month old baby).**

*What next?*

The Black Country Early Outcomes project ended in August 2020 but its relationships and working practices endure. The fact that the work continued and adapted through the pandemic underlines its value and the online resources that were created remain part of the support offered to practitioners and parents. The longer term impact of the pandemic on early years practice remains more difficult to predict.

Michael Jopling, Sean Starr, Sally Riordan and Gurpinder Lalli

## 2: Schools



In the first Black Country report in 2019 we explored school data for primary and secondary schools in the region. Last year, we combined this analysis with findings from a short questionnaire survey of primary leaders and interviews with six secondary school leaders in the Black Country about their experiences of the first Covid-19 lockdown. The pandemic has forced our hand again this year, not least because the abandonment of examinations in 2020 means that there is no performance data to analyse. Therefore, we have chosen to explore leaders' and teachers' experiences of the pandemic over the past year via a further questionnaire survey of staff in primary and secondary schools in the Black Country and surrounding areas and interviews with three leaders of secondary schools in the Black Country. The survey and the interviews explored the challenges leaders and teacher have faced during the past year, how they responded to the lockdown, the extent to which they were able to engage their pupils in learning, and their hopes for the future. In this section, we combine the findings from this research with brief summaries of other research exploring two aspects of how schools have attempted to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds during the pandemic.

## **Schools and COVID-19**

As already outlined, we undertook a short, opportunistic survey of teachers and leaders in schools in the West Midlands in June 2021, distributed through professional networks and the university's partner schools. We received 19 responses from staff in schools in the Black Country and surrounding areas in which we work. Therefore, the summary presented here offers an illustrative snapshot of the views of a small number of school staff at a time when schools were approaching the end of the second school year affected by the pandemic. Due to the small number of respondents, percentages have not been used in the analysis and no claims are made that they are representative. We have supplemented our analysis of their responses with observations made during interviews with three secondary school leaders (two male and one female), which focused on the challenges they had faced during the pandemic and how they had addressed them.

### **Survey sample**

Nine of the 19 respondent educators were teachers; the others were Headteachers/Principals (n=6), Assistant Heads (n=3) and 1 SENCO. Almost two-thirds (n=12) worked in primary schools, the others worked in secondaries. Thirteen worked in local authority (LA) maintained schools, four in academies (three of which were secondaries), one in an independent school, and one respondent did not answer this question. Six were based in Walsall, four in Birmingham, four in Sandwell, and we also had single respondents in Dudley, Shropshire, Staffordshire, Telford & Wrekin, and Wolverhampton. In terms of personal characteristics, 13 were female, 5 were male and 1 did not disclose their gender. They were most likely to have been in their current post for between 3-5 or over 10 years (both n=5) and 13 of the respondents had at least 16 years' experience working in schools.

### **Staff wellbeing**

The survey began by asking how Covid-19 and its associated lockdowns had affected respondents personally. Increased workload was the most cited response (n=15), more so among respondents in secondaries, followed by increased levels of anxiety and fatigue (both n=11). Responses were clearer about how the pandemic had affected colleagues. All but one (n=18) felt their colleagues had experienced difficulties adjusting to online working (all secondary respondents felt this), this was followed by increased anxiety levels (n=17); increased workload (n=14); and difficulty in balancing work with other responsibilities (n=13).

Respondents gave a number of examples of how they had supported their colleagues' mental health and wellbeing, which ranged from setting up WhatsApp groups and reducing the number of meetings to allocating wellbeing days each term

and generally checking on colleagues more regularly. They had looked after their own wellbeing through means such as generally keeping active, talking to their families, and trying to maintain a positive outlook. Only one said they had not been able to do anything to support their own wellbeing.

The leaders interviewed emphasised that although the initial phase of the pandemic had been particularly challenging: "I really struggled in the first lockdown. I lost all sense of work life balance, right in any way" (Leader 1), they had learned from these experiences. Although they still faced what one leader called 'that uncertainty of 'What does two weeks [time] look like? What does September look like?'" (Leader3), they had adapted their behaviour to support themselves and their colleagues. The same leader highlighted the importance of finding time away from school and particularly from being online:

"I do try and go out and go for walks and come back from the gate in the morning after being on duty [...] I really just try to think about something else you know and get some perspective."

**(Leader 3)**

Another found they had to focus more reactively on addressing short term challenges:

"It's just because I suppose my practice has just been focusing on, as you say, the challenges over the last 12 months and COVID. So I suppose in a nutshell, it's been, I suppose more, looking at the operational leadership within school."

**(Leader 2)**

#### *Children and young people's learning*

All respondents had offered online learning and had ensured staff regularly checked in which children and young people to ensure that they continued to learn, including when they were isolating. All but two (n=17) (and all working in primaries) had focused on keeping children and families safe and most (n=15) had sent learning materials home. Asked about levels of access, 8 respondents estimated that 76% or more of children and young people had accessed these arrangements, 8 estimated it as 51-75%, and three (two in secondaries) as 26-50%. This were higher proportions than in the survey of primary leaders we conducted in 2020.

One of the leaders interviewed questioned the issue of extensive learning loss:

"I don't think we've lost that much time really because some students have actually thrived being in charge of their own learning."

**(Learner 3)**

Another outlined the work they had done to ensure that all learners could access lessons wherever they were:

"If students are away, basically we are recording the whiteboard and the audio of the lesson. Kids all know we're putting those on YouTube as an unlisted video, so you can't find it unless you've got the link, and then through Show My Homework, which you log into with your credentials, the students who aren't at school are able to log in and review the videos.

**(Leader 1)**

Asked what prevented these access levels from being higher, 7 respondents cited children not engaging and 4 parents being unable (rather than unwilling) to help. Nevertheless, all but two respondents were confident (n=10) or very confident (n=7) that vulnerable children in their school were still being supported.



**Rethinking schools**

Of the specific changes made in response to the pandemic, adopting more flexible (e.g. online) approaches to staff meetings was overwhelmingly the most popular, cited by all but one of respondents. This was followed by having a more flexible school day and changes made to the curriculum (both n=7). One leader cited the importance of ensuring consistency:

"I felt like there's less room for a lack of clarity, less room for uncertainty, less room for maverick people doing things their own way. Yeah, it needs to be right and it needs to be a certain way first time. So probably I've ended to be more directive."

**(Leader 1)**

The other two leaders emphasised the value they placed on improving communication with both staff and parents:

"Things change so quickly from you know a few days for the next few days you've got to have that constant line of communication open. [...] Communication is sort of the linchpin behind all this."

**(Leader 3)**

Finally, we asked respondents how in their opinion schools could or should be rethought in the light of their lockdown experiences. Here, focusing on the mental health and wellbeing of both adults and children and young people was regarded as most important (both n=17). This was followed by having more trust in schools and reducing accountability pressures (n=16), offering more online training and teaching (n=10); broadening the curriculum (n=7) and making the curriculum more relevant to local or regional needs (n=7). Free response included offering "more opportunities to utilise children's technological skills, less emphasis on evidence in books and more use of verbal feedback"; having an "increased focus on children's emotional literacy"; and building on the independence children had developed. All of the leaders interviewed highlighted the benefits of using technology to maintain contact with parents, which they planned to maintain:

"We're trying to increase the use of social media and encourage involvement and support, with parents particularly. We've used this as a chance to assertively promote parents being able to log into our management information system for things like reports."

**(Leader 1)**

### Other research addressing disadvantage

#### Against the Odds

In July 2021 we completed the Against the Odds project for the Social Mobility Commission, which explored how secondary schools support students facing disadvantage. The research report’s recommendations included the following:

- School leaders should not just consider what pupil premium approaches to implement, but how to implement them effectively in their school context
- School leaders should regularly explore staff attitudes towards the pupil premium, how well their school responds to the needs and circumstances of its students, and the impact of their policies on students’ wellbeing
- When schools have had little success at reducing the progress gap, they should refocus on a small number of critical, context-specific issues, such as improving the experience of transferring students or reducing student absence.

As part of the research we also developed the Pupil Premium Primer, a website designed to help schools, evaluate and improve their approach to the Pupil Premium. <http://educationobservatory.co.uk/pupilpremiumprimer/>The site can be used to determine what ‘type’ of school you are and learn about the experiences of similar schools. It is intended to help schools to reflect on their context, their staff culture and, perhaps most importantly, the experiences of their students.

#### PUPIL PREMIUM PRIMER

Welcome to the Pupil Premium Primer. This website is designed to help you examine, evaluate and improve your school’s approach to the Pupil Premium. It is based on recent research, funded by the Social Mobility Commission, which explored how some schools are implementing, with varying success, a multitude of initiatives to support pupil premium students.

You can use this site to determine what ‘type’ of school you are and learn about the experiences of similar schools. It is intended to help you reflect on your context, your staff culture and, perhaps most importantly, the experiences of your students.

[VIEW THE FULL REPORT](#)



The toolkit is divided into nine sections:

<p><b>Students' views</b></p> <p><a href="#">VIEW RESOURCE</a></p>	<p><b>Staff attitudes</b></p> <p><a href="#">VIEW RESOURCE</a></p>	<p><b>Student leadership and alternative curriculum</b></p> <p><a href="#">VIEW RESOURCE</a></p>
<p><b>What kind of school are you?</b></p> <p><a href="#">VIEW RESOURCE</a></p>	<p><b>Maximising hidden resources</b></p> <p><a href="#">VIEW RESOURCE</a></p>	<p><b>Two-in-one schools</b></p> <p><a href="#">VIEW RESOURCE</a></p>
<p><b>Using data effectively</b></p> <p><a href="#">VIEW RESOURCE</a></p>	<p><b>Vertical tutoring</b></p> <p><a href="#">VIEW RESOURCE</a></p>	<p><b>What the research says</b></p> <p><a href="#">VIEW RESOURCE</a></p>

<http://educationobservatory.co.uk/pupilpremiumprimer/>



**Food vouchers**

At the beginning of the first national lockdown in spring 2020, the Department for Education introduced in England a shopping voucher scheme worth £15 per child per week to support children who would normally receive free school meals. We conducted a small study to investigate the impact of Covid-19 on schools. While it did not have a specific Black Country focus, a brief summary of its findings are likely to be of interest to schools in the region. The study found that providing families with cash, rather than vouchers, would be more likely to ensure that families are able to feed their children during such crises. Recommendations for schools and policymakers included having contingency plans for school meals in place; making school food a central part of the curriculum; and developing longer term, more localised approaches.



Stephanie Brewster

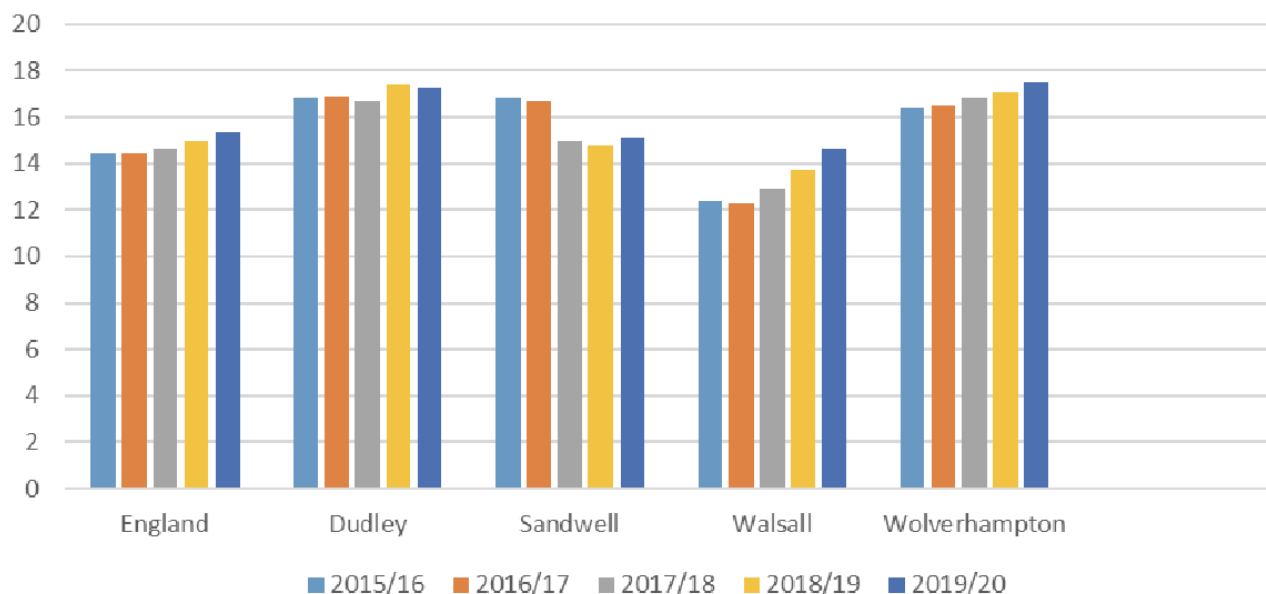
### **3: Special Educational Needs and Disability**

At the time of writing, over a year since the first pandemic lockdown, most children have settled back into a more normal routine of school attendance, but evidence of long term effects of the disruption is emerging. As early as spring 2020, it was predicted that the pandemic's adverse effects would be more severe and long-lasting among certain sectors of the population; children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are one such group. Since then, widespread concerns have been voiced about the likely long term impacts of social isolation and disrupted schooling on this vulnerable group of learners.

In Black Country Education Insight 2020, we reported on our survey of local educational practitioners about how schools were supporting children during the first lockdown. We found that they were using a raft of strategies to deliver pastoral care and distance learning for children with SEND. Staff expressed a wide range of concerns about them and their families, foremost being their health and wellbeing, as parents struggled to facilitate home learning and meet the extra care demands placed on them by social isolation. This year we explore two key themes: speech, language and communication (SLC) and social, emotional and mental health (SEMH).

**The national picture**

The most recent government data on SEND in England was published in July 2020 and based on the January 2020 school census, just ahead of the pandemic. Figure 1 reveals that 15.4% of all pupils in England have SEN, which has increased from 14.9% in 2019, continuing the slight upward trend of recent years. The four Black Country local authorities have slightly differing levels, with both Dudley and Wolverhampton higher than the national average.



Source: DfE statistics.  
 Figure 1. Pupils with EHC plans/statements and SEN support (%) over the past five years

**Speech, language and communication**

In England, speech language and communication needs (SLCN) are the second most common type of need among children with an education, health and care plan (EHCP), representing 15% of all such pupils, and the most common type of need for children with SEN support (24% of such pupils). In the Black Country, this should particularly concern us because of the links between SLCN and social disadvantage. The Bercow 10 Years On report (I CAN/RCSLT, 2018) emphasises that children living in socially disadvantaged areas are at much higher risk of long term SLCN: 50% of school starters in some areas (compared with just over 10% nationally) fall into this category. SLCN can have a major impact on children’s educational attainment, their social, emotional and mental health, and their life chances. It has been a national concern for quite some time and indeed a national priority since the original Bercow Review in 2008.

The data from the Black Country are not as alarming as this, but could well disguise smaller areas of deprivation within the LAs with much higher rates of SLCN. Figure 2 shows that in Walsall and Wolverhampton a notably higher proportion of children with SEN on FSM (38.3% and 35.9%) have been identified as having difficulties with some aspect of communication, compared to England as a whole (28.9%). The trend is generally upward.

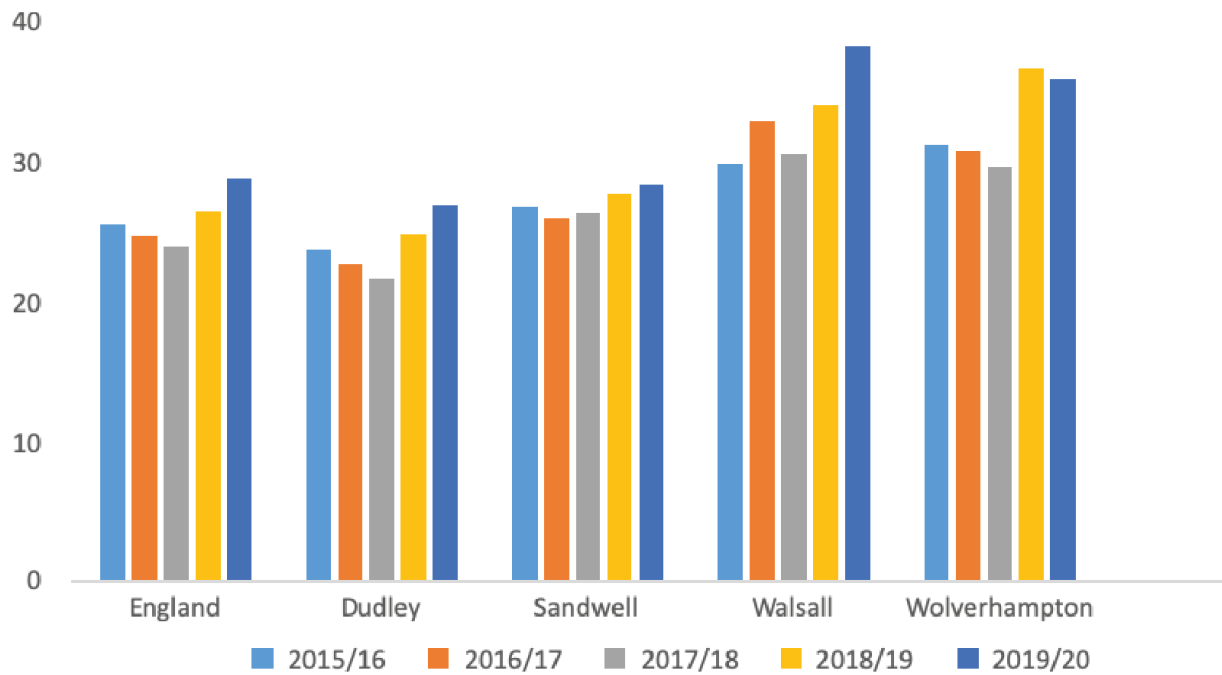


Figure 2. SEND children with SLCN who are eligible for free school meals (%)

**Social, Emotional and Mental Health**

SEMH is another high incidence category of SEND, and shows similar patterns to SLCN, with a generally upward trend, and higher than national average rates in some areas of the Black Country, as Figure 3 illustrates.

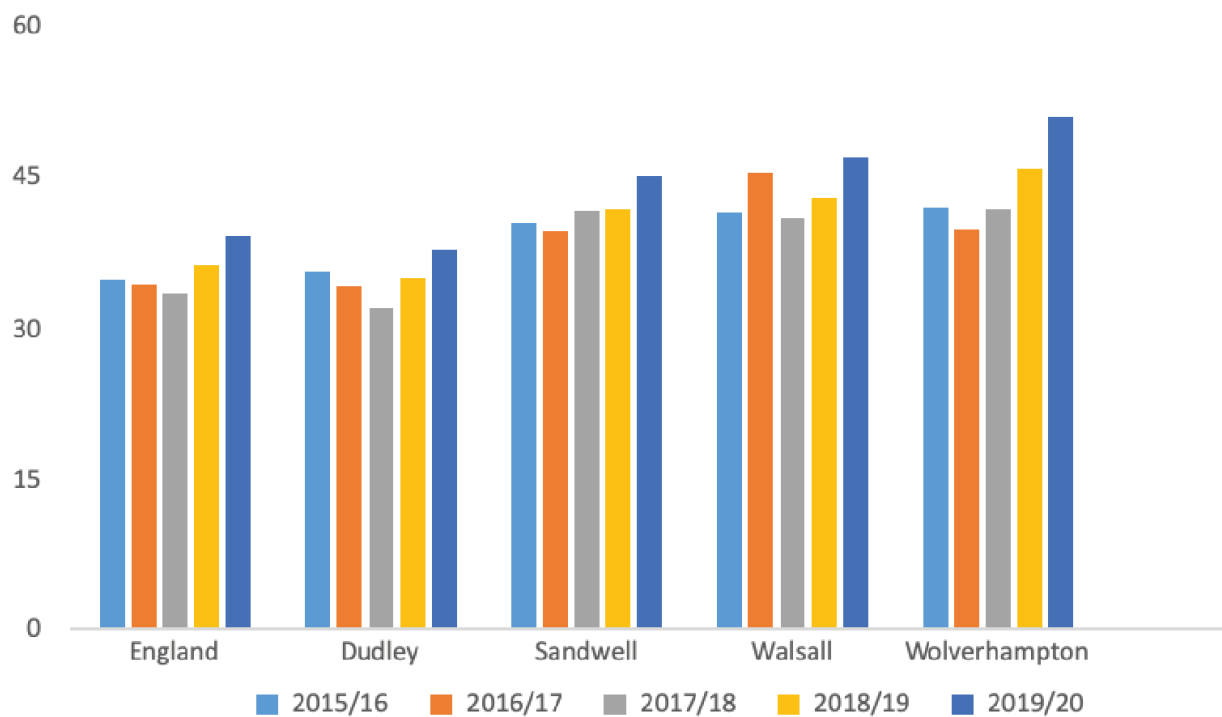


Figure 3. SEND children with SEMH who are eligible for free school meals (%)

It is unsurprising that pre-existing concerns about children and young people’s SEMH among educational practitioners were heightened by the pandemic, although we cannot assume they always

align with parents' views. Some parents have positive experiences about schools' responses. For example, H's mother told us:

"School have been brilliant. She's has counselling from the visual impairment service, and offered from school. She's got a teacher who has taken her under her wing, she's lovely, very supportive. And then we are currently paying for private counselling for her."

Her final comment is telling: the apparently excellent public provision is still insufficient. Fortunately for H her family can afford to pay to supplement it.

### **Transitions**

Having good language and communication skills is considered a key part of preparing children for school. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) published an interim report in April 2021 exploring the impact of the disruption caused by the pandemic on children's transition and adjustment to Reception classes across England. They found that 96% of schools were concerned about children's communication and language development, and 91% about Personal Social and Emotional Development, for children starting school in Autumn 2020. The schools surveyed felt that these areas should be prioritised for this age group:

"It would appear that the pandemic has exacerbated existing issues in oral language development, and this will need to be a key focus for any education recovery plans."

**(EEF, 2021: 9)**

This is broader than SEND, but as demonstrated above has particular salience for areas of deprivation such as those within the Black Country. The prominence of concern for PSED also echoes the findings of our own local research during the early phase of school closure (Black Country Education Insight 2020) relating to children with SEND. Of the parents who were surveyed by EEF, 3% had been concerned about their child's SEN prior to the start of the school year, and this increased to 5% once their child started school. At the other end of young people's school career, the pandemic has had a particularly harsh impact on teenagers with SEND as they consider the transition out of school/college. Physical visits to campuses holding university open days – not just online events – is more important for applicants with some impairments and specialist careers advice may be hard to come by. H's mother was concerned about the lack of advice about careers and applying to university:

"Knowing the campus is close to a supermarket to get her provisions, because she's not going to be able to drive, accessing public transport is going to be more difficult for her".

### **Conclusions**

An important local insight into the views of pupils with SEND themselves is provided by Dudley SEND Improvement Programme Update for March/April 2021. Relationships with friends and family was the most important theme:

"A higher proportion of young people with disabilities who responded to the survey felt worried and angry during the pandemic (41% and 37% respectively, compared to 24% and 10% of total responses)."



The young people also commented on the change in routine and lack of activities. But it is important to remember that the effects of the pandemic are very individual, in that a very small number of young people felt their communication abilities had improved. The two areas we have focussed on here – SLCN and SEMH - are of course connected, both to each other and to the change in social circumstances brought about by social isolation measures. Language and social interaction are essential for children’s social and emotional development, behaviour and wellbeing. They are also connected to social disadvantage. This is true for children generally, whether or not they have been labelled as having SEND. But the Black Country (and especially Wolverhampton and Walsall) should be of particular concern given their high levels of disadvantage. It will be important to monitor the incidence of SLCN and SEMH in these areas in the coming few years as the longer term repercussions of the pandemic are revealed. The final word goes to H’s mother:

“When you have a child with a disability, we forget that they’ve got all the general stuff with school that all kids have. Then they’ve got the Covid stuff, and then they’ve got their disability.”

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Naomi Knott, Sandwell College

## 4: Further Education and Adult Learning

I have an emergent interest in supporting professional learning in Further Education (FE) through practitioner-based research. Research does take place within FE at a local level but does not always enter the public realm (Solvasson and Elliot, 2013). Undertaking my own MA research at the University of Wolverhampton prompted me to explore the opportunities for creating a research group at the Sandwell College where I work.

Most research in FE has been produced by university-based researchers (Lloyd and Jones, 2018) and FE practitioners have begun to ask why others speak on their behalf (Jones, 2020). Listening to Sam Jones (Bedford College) and Jo Fletcher-Saxon (Ashton Sixth Form College) speak about FE research networks at the Society for Education and Training (SET) conference in November 2020 motivated me to start a research group at my own college. I secured the support of my Vice-Principal and the group held its first meeting on 15 December 2020.

Establishing the research group would have been much more difficult if I had not been supported by my colleagues in the post-compulsory team at University of Wolverhampton. Other support has come from the FE community via Twitter and in blog forums. Learning from and with others has been, and will continue to be, a significant part of the process of developing a research culture at Sandwell College. I met with Sam Jones and Jo Fletcher-Saxon who shared their experiences of setting up their research groups. Gary Husband (University of Stirling) and the Association of Research in Post Compulsory Education (ARPCE) journal also

shared ideas, particularly about publishing the group's work. Currently the research group is designed to be an informal space where individuals can share their research interests and garner support from their peers. The group uses Slack as an online collaborative space where ideas, readings and updates can be shared by anyone. The group is made up of research enthusiasts including novice researchers and those who have been involved in projects with larger organisations.

Before our initial meeting, I invited interested parties to share their research ideas using Padlet. These ranged from exploring the impact of physical exercise and nutrition on concentration to whether teacher identity has an impact on their use of technology. There were also other interesting ideas such as exploring the impact of an organisational coaching structure on staff and students. All of these contributions led to an encouraging first session where individuals discussed their thoughts to see where potential collaboration on projects could take place. Our second meeting saw more networking between individuals as research ideas began to align.

At the first session, a cross-section of the College shared their research ideas and proved how many colleagues in FE either wish to be or already are research active (Lloyd and Jones, 2018). I am keen for the group to evolve into a community of practice: a group of people with shared interests 'who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis' (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder,

2002, p.4). This community of practice is particularly important as the research group will highlight the research already being undertaken in our FE institution, and eventually this work will hopefully be amplified through wider FE communities such as Teacher Education in Lifelong Learning (TELL), Amplify and POST16 educator.

What is crucial is that despite currently having no time, remission or money allocated for undertaking research (Lloyd and Jones, 2018), many of the research ideas came from people who are not currently engaged in formal study. It is still very early days for us, but what is quickly becoming apparent is that we will need to establish processes for approval for conducting action research projects, particularly those that are not being undertaken for a formal qualification. Other FE institutions such as the Bedford College Group and Fircroft College offer action research as a CPD option, and this is something that I hope we will build in to our offer at Sandwell. The members of what we now call the Sandwell College Research Network are enthusiastic about establishing research in our institution which is of high quality, ethically conducted and contributes something to policy and/or practice. Some colleges which are already considering ethics in research are sharing their processes with me and colleagues at Wolverhampton are providing guidance in this area. I am hopeful that we will be able to start collaborating and working on new practitioner-led projects by the start of the 2021-22 academic year. Prioritising the research that is already taking place in the college will give us time to establish our own processes, make connections with others in the organisation and refine the research proposals that we wish to take forward. What is becoming apparent is that the wider FE Research community is gathering momentum and scholarly recognition. The voices of researchers in FE are beginning to be heard and I am delighted that our institution is part of that.

**(This piece appeared in slightly different form on the Education Observatory blog in March 2021.)**

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Matthew Johnson

## **5: Higher Education and Social Mobility**

The economic, social and cultural case for higher education is compelling. Participation in higher education delivers benefits for individuals, communities and for the wider economy. The importance of a highly-skilled, tertiary-educated workforce is recognised as a key driver of an innovative economy (HEPI, 2020). In this universities play a key role through developing a regional skills base, driving economic growth and social mobility, while supporting their local communities (HEPI, 2020).

According to Kitsos (2020), student spending generates between £4 and 5 billion of output, £2 to 3 billion of GVA and supports between 44 and 55 thousand jobs in the West Midlands. The West Midlands also generates the largest multiplier effect in the UK economy. This suggests that student spending, as one of many university contributions to regional development, generates between 1.6% and 2% to GVA nationally and up to 4.2% of GVA in the West Midlands (Kitsos, 2020). However, despite these clear benefits provided by universities, the sub-region still faces vast challenges. The Black Country has a long-standing skills problem: too few residents hold higher qualifications. This leads to lower levels of employment and earnings. Although recent data shows that the percentage of Black Country residents with NVQ4+ qualifications is increasing, the current level remains significantly below the national average (Black Country Annual Economic Review, 2021).

The experience of Higher Education has been difficult for many students, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Teaching and learning of course took a radical shift with many lectures and resources provided online (although a blended approach has also been offered). The shift to digital learning provides some benefits for some students. For example, it can reduce travel and accommodation costs. However, for many students there are severe challenges. Here are two examples:

"Quite a few of our students share their bedrooms with siblings. Three of my students in particular are living in households with up to 14 family members and are having to take on caring responsibilities due to different siblings having to self-isolate due to their school bubbles as well as needing to engage in their studies, which they are finding really difficult. (Graduate teaching assistant, University of Wolverhampton)



Asked about his experience of supporting his students during the pandemic, a lecturer working in the Black Country expressed his concerns about some of his first-year undergraduates during lockdown:

"I'm worried about them. I teach many mature students, from working-class backgrounds, first-generation students, many from BAME communities. I know that for some students working in the university library is important. But the library is subject to coronavirus restrictions. For our students it is not about getting clearance to travel home before Christmas, it is about getting home on the bus and not catching the virus. Some students are shielding and have vulnerable family members, they are not inclined to participate in placements that support their employability. From reports we have had this year, it seems that working-class families and those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds are being affected by COVID much more than those from affluent backgrounds, and I think this is now starting to filter through in terms of participation and engagement with my modules."





Lydia Lewis

## 6: Mental Health

In the last year, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on mental health and wellbeing has been widely discussed. There have been concerns about social isolation during periods of restrictions exacerbating mental health issues among the UK population (Mind, 2020) and wellbeing problems associated with loneliness which government had already highlighted (HM Government/DCMS, 2018). Reports have indicated the effect of this isolation on the mental health and wellbeing of particular groups, including children and young people (Mind, 2020; ONS, 2020a). There have also been reports of increases in domestic violence and child abuse during the pandemic, along with associated alcohol issues, among the UK population (Finlay and Gilmore, 2020; Svensson and Robson, 2020). The impact of the crisis on mental health inequalities as the effects of the pandemic have “interacted with many old and deep inequalities” (Blundell et al, 2020) across the areas of socio-economic status, race and ethnicity, gender and disability has been discussed. In terms of gender, research has shown how women have borne the brunt of the social impact of the crisis and the effect of this on their mental health and wellbeing (Andrew et al., 2020; Svensson and Robson, 2020), with women more likely than men to experience depression during the pandemic (ONS, 2020b).

In the West Midlands more specifically, a survey conducted for West Midlands Women's Voice and The Fawcett Society addressed the mental health impact of the pandemic on women in the region (Savanta ComRes, 2020). Interviewing 1,002 women aged over 18 via an online panel, the researchers found that 37% of West Midlands women said their mental health had got worse since the start of the pandemic and one-third were struggling financially compared to 16% before the pandemic. Some of the data indicated a more severe mental health impact of COVID-19 for women in Walsall and Wolverhampton compared to other local authority areas:

- 42% of women in Walsall and 40% of women in Wolverhampton said their mental health had got worse compared to a 37% average.
- 41% of women in Walsall and 39% of women in Wolverhampton said their self-confidence had got worse compared to a 32% average.
- 31% of women in Wolverhampton stated that their employability had been adversely affected compared to a 20% average.
- 47% of women in Walsall said their diet had got worse since the outbreak of the pandemic compared to a 37% average.
- 22% of women in Walsall and 20% of women in Wolverhampton said that they would be 'very likely' to use 'pop-up' mental health facilities compared to a 16% average.

Other data on views about service provision needs suggested a particularly difficult picture for women in Walsall. Table 2 collects responses about the relative importance and unimportance of services provided locally or regionally (Savanta ComRes, 2020).

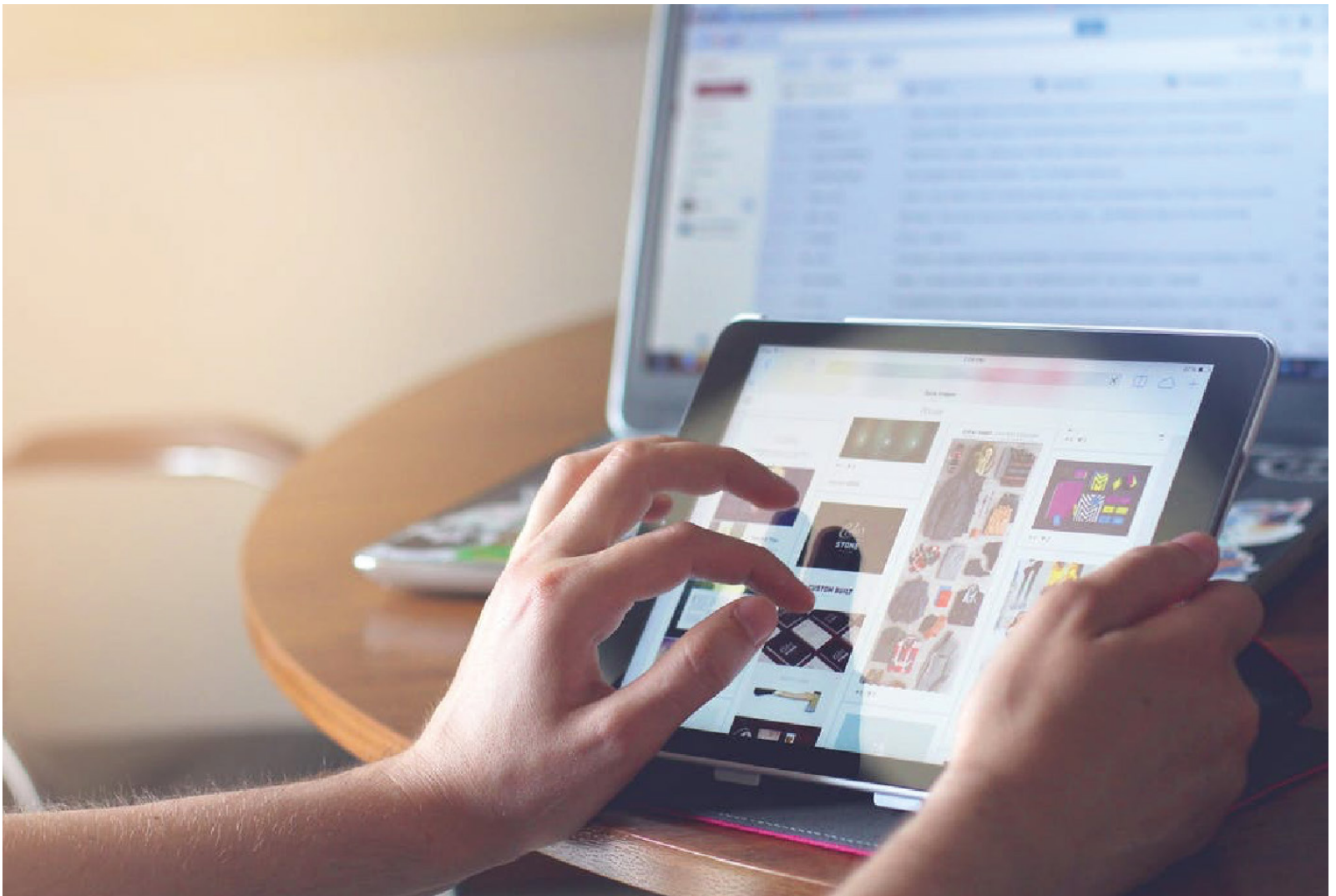
Service	'Very important' Walsall	'Very important' West Mids
Mental health services	52%	41%
Advice and support regarding loneliness and isolation	47%	34%
Financial advice and management	42%	26%
Support and assistance with issues relating to domestic abuse	53%	42%

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Sarah Hayes

## **7: Digital and Post-Digital Black Country**



In regional and national plans for recovery from the Covid-19 global pandemic, digital connectivity is considered to be “vital to our economic bounce back” (West Midlands Digital Roadmap 2021). However, there are many complex challenges relating to accessibility and barriers to participation within the digital space. Behind phrases like digital economy, digital divide and digital natives are diverse, personal encounters that might be understood as ‘postdigital’ in nature (*Black Country Education Insight, 2020: 29-32*), when digital is no longer separate to people’s natural, human and social lives (Postdigital Science and Education).

Data is interwoven through these encounters with real concern now that humans are losing autonomy and freedoms amid new global architectures of behaviour modification and grids of surveillance and data extraction. Nationally, government plans for ‘levelling up’ are linked with varied measures to improve skills provision, including the progression into legislation of the Skills and Post-16 Education Bill. As more emerges to reveal the substance of what is proposed, it is necessary for much more awareness to be raised of how both digital exclusion and digital engagement affects people differently, in diverse local communities. The role of human data interactions in individual circumstances is often overlooked when the focus remains on digital skills and employability.

### **Data and Disadvantage**

Our recently completed EPSRC-funded Human Data Interaction (HDI) project, *Data and Disadvantage: taking a regional approach towards HDI to inform local and national digital skills policies* took a cross-sector, dialogic approach towards examining the inclusion of Human Data Interaction (HDI) challenges in regional digital skills plans. The ethos of the project was based on the need to adopt a demand-led approach by mapping the existing assets in ideas that are already embedded in local communities in the Black Country. Key to this was bringing disparate voices together whereby the digital skills challenge could be perceived and discussed from a broad variety of angles. This listening to voices at the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), local authorities, universities, private sector and SMEs, local providers, the community and third sector. The project involved over 30 local leaders from digital businesses, policymakers, local intelligence agencies, schools, colleges and digital skills providers, chambers of commerce, charities, researchers and the local council in two regional events, which focused on:



**Disadvantage, data and digital skills (09.09.20)****Beyond Covid-19: Lessons for advancing digital inclusion in the region (10.03.21)**

Key questions discussed included the following:

- What are we defining exactly as the digital sector?
- What would be a successful outcome of digital inclusion?
- How are misinformation, fraud, data and privacy issues addressed in digital skills training?
- How do we include the unreachable people and take stock of their existing skills?
- How do we connect innovative regional work with digital natives in deprived locations?

The recommendations which were agreed included the following:

- Convene events that enable local cross-sector debate and follow-up actions
- Engage with and address gaps at the local community level
- Take stock of assets that already exist within local communities
- Work towards innovative co-creation of standards and training
- Create opportunities to co-author cross-sector articles, blogs and other publications.

## Education Observatory research 2020-21



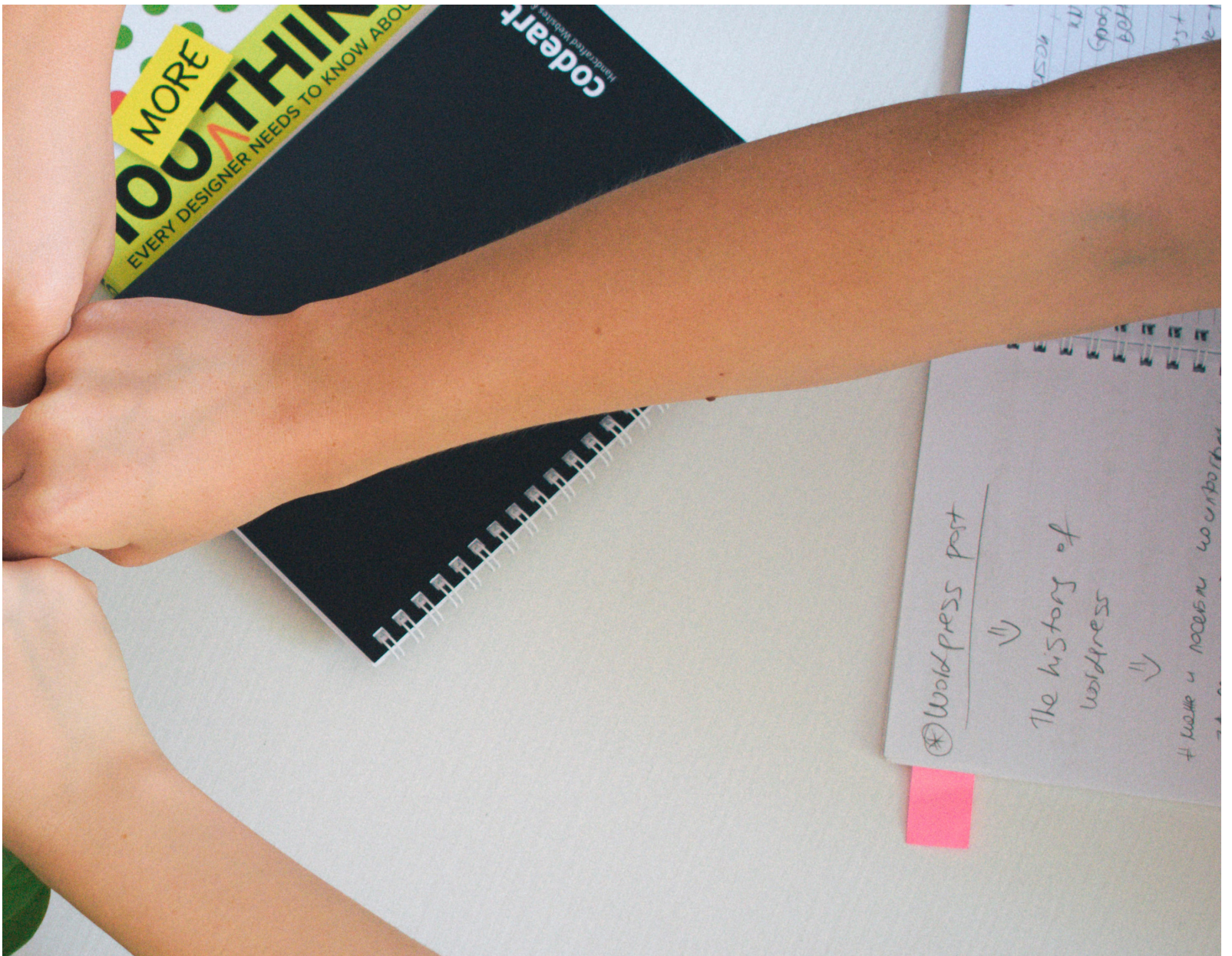
Project	Funder
Against the odds	Social Mobility Commission
Co-created interactive courseware (CIC)	EU Erasmus+
Comparative education in Education Studies	BAICE
Digital learning	British Council South Africa
Early years outcomes fund evaluation	Black Country LAs
Edtech	DfID
Ethnographic research with vulnerable families	Birmingham Children's Partnership
Evaluation support	Violence Reduction Unit, West Midlands
Human Data interaction	Data and Disadvantage: EPSRC
International work in FE	British Council
Policy Advice	Social Mobility Commission
School food and Covid-19	BERA
TALK Derby evaluation	Derby City Council
TEFL-EPAL	EU Erasmus+

For more information about these or other projects, please look at the Education Observatory website. <http://educationobservatory.co.uk/pupil-premiumprimer/>

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