



Widening Access for Home-Educated Applicants to Higher Education Institutions in England

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RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

There has been a rise in Elective Home Education (EHE) as a result of the global pandemic and with this, an anticipated increase in EHE students applying to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). With this increase, it is vital institutions acknowledge and prepare for widening accessibility. It is the expectation that institutions are inclusive, and this study opens discussions on the inclusivity of this applicant group and the knowledge exchange and collaboration opportunities to facilitate change. The aims of this study were to identify potential barriers in accessing HEIs for EHE students and to gain insight into the experiences of these participants. This study will create a basis for developing policies and practices to work towards building an inclusive transitional process into HEIs for all students and be instrumental in building bridges between mainstream and alternative education.

Through a semi-structured interview with a HEI applicant, an online survey with 3 HEI applicants and 2 staff from admissions teams at HEIs in England, and a document analysis on the HEI websites, it is highlighted that more work is needed on improving the inclusivity at these establishments and further study into accessing EHE students for research purposes should be sought. Recommendations are shared.

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KEYWORDS:

home education; widening access; higher education; England; university; students

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Wheeler, L. (2023). Widening Access for Home-Educated Applicants to Higher Education Institutions in England. *International Journal of Educational and Life Transitions*, 2(1): 11, pp. 1–12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ijelt.54>

While the literature around Elective Home Education (EHE) is growing (see [Fensham-Smith, 2017, 2019, 2021](#); [Kunzman, 2016](#); [Monk, 2011](#); [Pattison, 2015, 2018](#)), there is currently a dearth of literature for EHE individuals accessing Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This gap in the literature calls for studies to explore access for this applicant group to enable the changes to be made to make this transition inclusive. This study builds towards the literature around this field.

Choosing to exercise your right as a parent to educate your child at home is not a new phenomenon and has been a significant educational practice since the 1980s - although this was mostly in the United States ([Kunzman, 2017](#)). Furthermore, once the Covid-19 pandemic struck in 2020, there has been a significant increase in EHE, with the Office of the Schools Adjudicator (OSA) reporting in 2019 that 60,544 children were registered as home-educated ([OSA, 2020](#)) with this rising to 81,200 as of October 2021, according to the Association of Directors of Children's Services ([ADCS, 2021](#)). It should be noted that currently home education is unregulated in the UK, with various levels of regulation elsewhere in the world. Because of this lack of consistency, home education is sometimes perceived as being unreliable ([Krogh & Liberto, 2021](#)) and with limited research in specific areas of EHE, this creates underrepresentation within this group.

It is inevitable for some, that attending university is the only route into a career path of their choosing. But for others, this transition into higher education is not an easy task due to the steps they must go through to prove their educational status and background. Choosing to apply to higher education usually reflects a desire to pursue a career in a specific area, or simply to widen their knowledge ([Fortune-Wood, nd](#)). Institutions provide support during the admissions process; however, this does not always appear to extend to those not from a formal educational background, and in a pandemic context, this makes it even more important to facilitate this transition as the home/school boundaries have become blurred for all. One US study which looked at the perceptions and attitudes of admissions officers towards EHE students found that admissions teams required home-educated students to complete formal college work prior to applying, with some officers in the admissions departments not believing that these individuals are "prepared" for further education ([Jones & Gloeckner, 2004: 17](#)). Conversely, some US universities have specific pages on their websites for home schooled (as it is more widely referred to in the US) applicants detailing how they can apply ([NYU, 2022](#); [UChicago, 2022](#)). This calls for the question: what happens in a UK context? Upon initial glance, it appears some UK HEIs declare in their admissions policy that applicants must evidence academic entry requirements suited to the course and show they are appropriately prepared for study in higher education. However, it does not appear clear whether this means a formal education.

This study was used to explore the admissions criteria for HEIs in England, to generate conversations about how to support these students through application and to develop the home education literature output for the UK.

WHAT IS HOME EDUCATION?

Elective Home Education (EHE) is the term used when parents choose to provide education for their children either at the child's home, or another place of choice, in place of sending them to a mainstream school ([DFE, 2019](#)). It is a legal requirement in the Education Act (1996) in section 7, where it states that a parent or guardian must ensure their child is in receipt of efficient, full-time education that is suitable for the age and development level of the child once they reach compulsory school age which, in the UK, is 5 years old ([DFE, 2019](#)).

Home education in the UK is a legal parental choice and parents do not have to follow a specific style of education. They are not obliged to follow school timetables, curricula or set hours ([DFE, 2019](#)) and have complete control over the education of their child(ren). Parents have the option to use online schools, private tutors, or other teaching adults as desired, but again, this is not a legal requirement. Parents, and children, also have the choice of whether to study for their GCSEs and it is acknowledged that some families, due to the way in which they choose to educate and their own personal beliefs, choose to not go down the GCSE route ([Govaerts, 2021](#)). While this is a choice, it could have an impact on the child's access to further and higher

education, calling for the need to explore this accessibility and the options that can be offered as alternatives.

Children have a right to an education. Article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states:

Education must develop every child's personality, talents, and abilities to the full. It must encourage the child's respect for human rights, as well as respect for their parents, their own and other cultures, and the environment. (UNCRC, 1989: 1)

This supports the policy view (DFE, 2019) that education should be efficient, full, and suitable for the age and development of the child, however the same acceptance is not placed on the delivery of the education. Ultimately, these statements support the notion that education should be suited to the individual; therefore, alternative educational provision should be a valid and equal option for a child's education journey. With this in mind, processes should be in place to allow children, from whichever chosen educational background they have, to access higher education the same way as everyone else.

THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to examine the accessibility of the admissions route into higher education for students with a background in elective home education (EHE). The study specifically looked at the perspectives of students' experiences of the application process to HEIs in England, alongside the perspectives of the admissions team members at HEIs in England. In addition to this, a documentary analysis of the website information was undertaken to examine how the HEIs promoted the application to their establishments for this demographic of students. This was done by collecting information linked to home education directly (where home educators were specified), and indirectly (where a mention of a marginalised group was noted, but not directly home educated applicants), and looking for commonalities between institutions. Further analysis was done regarding specific policies that HEIs had adopted to widen the participation of its applicants. These policies were read, and key terms identified to support or dispute the view that the institution was inclusive of this demographic.

Specifically looking at the admissions route into HEIs and the potential barriers and challenges this process brought, the analysis of both the collected data during the survey and interview, and the content gathered from the institutional websites was focused on the route into HEIs via the admissions process, rather than the route into higher education, as a whole.

To help frame the acquisition of data, the following research questions guided data collection and study design:

- i) How accessible is the application process to HEIs in England for home-educated applicants from the perspective of the students?
- ii) What information do HEIs in England share on their websites to encourage and support applicants from home-educated backgrounds?
- iii) What are the views from the admissions staff at HEIs in England regarding accessibility for home-educated applicants?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A review of the literature was conducted to a) form a strong basis of current knowledge in the field, b) access previously published work on this specific topic and c) identify any gaps in the literature. The specific focus was on access to higher education, home-educated applicants to higher education and admission processes.

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT

It has been noted in the literature that this group of individuals –home educated – are “hard to reach” (Fensham-Smith, 2021: 13) and therefore, recruitment of student participants was carried out purposefully and using a snowball sampling effect where it was encouraged

that people share the call for participants and the survey link with others they felt would be eligible to participate. The criteria for participation in this study as a student participant was individuals who had spent some, or all, of their compulsory school age learning as a home-educated student, deregistered from mainstream school. After gaining permission from the gatekeepers (administrators of the social media pages) the link to the survey was circulated on two Facebook groups with encouragement to share among their own home-educating circles (providing the students were applying to HEIs in England). This was a lower number than originally planned but due to lack of consent, only two groups permitted sharing of the survey link. The HEIs chosen for this study as a focus for data collection were chosen based on location in England to ensure fair coverage and representation of the area. Initially, 5 HEIs were contacted, representing the North, South, East, West, and Central regions of England. However, some of these institutions either did not respond, or chose to refuse participation. Because of this, alternative HEIs in those regions were sought. A total of four HEIs agreed to participate and disseminate the survey to their admissions teams – these represented the Northwest, South, and East regions. The HEIs will remain anonymous in the dissemination of data and have been assigned a pseudonym; HEI 1, HEI 2, HEI 3, HEI 4.

SURVEY

An online survey questionnaire was designed on JISCMAIL (an online platform which is both user-friendly and GDPR-compliant). The survey comprised of a mix of open and closed questions to gain both quantitative and qualitative data to further support the data collection and give opportunity to delve deeper. The survey also provided a space for participants to include their contact details if they wished to participate in the next stage of the study – the interviews.

Two versions of the survey were created to enable specific information to be gathered from the two sets of participants. The survey for the students applying to HEIs in England aimed to gain information such as age bracket, educational background, length of alternative education, formal qualifications, application requirements and information regarding their experience of applying to a HEI. Employing a ‘passive recruitment’ technique (Gelinas et al., 2017: 4), this survey was circulated in home education groups on the social media platform, Facebook, to attract potential participants and encourage them to contact the researcher for consideration. Also, it could be suggested that there was an element of ‘active recruitment’ due to the call being posted on Facebook groups known to contain members with characteristics desired for the study (Gelinas et al., 2017: 4). This platform was chosen due to the considerable number of members in the target demographic for this study using this platform regularly. The online support network for home educators on Facebook is large, with many variations of groups for support in several aspects of home education. Some groups specifically support parents and carers who are home educating, others support the process of examinations, with more looking specifically at resources and access to legal advice. Gatekeeper consent was sought from the administration members of seven home education groups, however only two administrators agreed to allow the survey link to be shared with their members. In addition to sharing on these groups, a connection with Home Education Qualifications Association (HEQA) was made to share the survey with its members.

The survey designed for the admissions teams at HEIs in England aimed to gain information such as the length of time the staff member had worked at the HEI, opinion on the admissions process, information relating to EHE applicant process and policy details for EHE applicants. Admissions staff in the HEIs chosen were identified via a gatekeeper at the institution who was asked to circulate to all admissions staff. The gatekeepers were senior members of staff in departments such as admissions, student access and recruitment, depending on the individual institution. Four HEIs gave consent to share the survey with their admissions staff.

DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

An analysis of the admissions criteria for each of the selected institutions was also conducted to further support the data collected from participants and the findings from the literature. Four institutions were chosen, based on the responses to participate in the survey. A documentary analysis was undertaken to review, examine and interpret the admissions criteria and process at the HEIs selected (Gross, 2018). When conducting documentary analysis, it is important

to consider the authenticity, reliability, meaning and theorisation of the documents and the source. The admissions documents have been placed in the public domain by the HEIs and therefore it is assumed that these are reliable and authentic. It is then necessary to further ensure the meaning of the documents are clear, which in turn aids in the interpretation of meaning into theory (McCulloch, 2004).

INTERVIEWS

A qualitative interview was conducted with an EHE student who had applied to a HEI in England to gather their views and experiences on what the admissions process looked like for them, how easy it was to access a HEI, what support they were offered, what support was received, did they feel disadvantaged (and how) and what would they like to see happen during this process. In addition to this, qualitative interviews were also scheduled to be conducted with admissions staff from 5 HEIs in England to gain their views and experiences on what the admissions process looks like generally, whether the process is different for home-educated applicants, what support do they offer applicants and how many home-educated students they have applying. Unfortunately, no admissions staff came forward to be part of the interview stage, so no interviews were conducted with this group of participants. The interview that was conducted with the EHE student lasted less than 30 minutes and was conducted online via Microsoft Teams. The interview was recorded and transcribed. All participants were to be offered an incentive to participate, and this was fulfilled. The aim of the interview was to gain a deeper insight into the thoughts and experiences of both demographics. The survey data was analysed using descriptive statistical analysis in addition to looking for any themes that emerged from the qualitative data collected. By using descriptive statistics as the method of analysis, the data could be summarised, and the results shared, looking at data structure and any emergent patterns (Coleman, 2018). This was in conjunction with a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the interview transcript, looking specifically for any common theme or threads.

ETHICS

Ethical approval was granted by Anglia Ruskin University and throughout the study, all aspects of research and the way in which the research was conducted followed the ethical principles as set out by Anglia Ruskin University and the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). Using pseudonyms and the safe storage of data (in a password protected laptop) confidentiality and anonymity was upheld. Informed consent was gained prior to the data collection stage via a consent form and details about the project and its intended benefit and proposed impact was shared with the participants via a participant information sheet to ensure complete transparency. Consent was sought in the first instance by gatekeepers for both sets of participants.

Consideration for ethical concerns while using social media falls into two categories; being transparent as a researcher and respecting the privacy of social media users (Gelinas et al., 2017). Respecting privacy pertains to the sensitive handling of the data collected. Even though the user of the social media platform has input their own data into the public domain, it has not usually been shared by the user for research purposes, more for social connectivity and personal enjoyment of the application (Gelinas et al., 2017). Because of this, all data should be handled with responsibility, even if it is thought to be made publicly available by the user. Further to this, researcher transparency supports the respectful nature of data collection in addition to promoting trust in the research itself by the user. Also, a consideration of disclosing researcher presence online and making the participants aware that data collection is happening is another way to ensure transparency when collecting data.

The recording from the interview was sent to a transcription agency for transcribing. The agency has signed a confidentiality agreement with Anglia Ruskin University and therefore uphold the ethical requirements of this project. All recordings and data were stored on a password protected laptop accessible only by the researcher. When reporting and disseminating the data collected, pseudonyms have been used to maintain anonymity of both the participants and the HEIs. This will ensure that no individual or HEI can be identified in the research outputs.

The students who responded to the survey online for this study had similar experiences with their application journeys to their chosen HEI. Student 1 fell into a slightly higher age bracket than students 2 and 3, but all three came from a home-educated background. Although the make-up of this education varied slightly, with Students 1 and 2 having been home-educated for the entirety of their education – from reception age to year 11 – and Student 1 only experiencing home education from year 8 through to year 11. However, regardless of the amount of time spent in home education, all three students were home-educated through the secondary school years, meaning they all had the same experience of access to GCSEs as home-educated students. In addition to this, two students (1 and 2) attended a mainstream college or sixth form prior to applying to HEI to gain A-level qualifications, with the remaining student (3) not attending mainstream college. However, Student 3 did still gain a recognised A Level qualification, but this was through a home learning route. Furthermore, in their application for university, all three students had recognised GCSEs, or equivalent (such as IGCSEs), and A-Level qualifications.

RESULTS

When asked whether the students felt their HEI of choice was clear on their admissions criteria whether they accepted home-educated applicants, or applicants with an alternative education background, Students 1 and 2 stated they did not feel this was made clear. However, Student 3 stated, 'I have access to the relevant qualifications (A levels), so I had no reason to think that my application would not be considered'. This reflection on the admissions information would suggest that the student still felt that it was necessary to have certain qualifications to be accepted, however because they already had these qualifications, it did not make them feel as though they were at any disadvantage. None of the students felt they had ever been refused a place based on their educational background.

All four HEIs expressed flexibility with entry requirements due to the Covid-19 pandemic affecting applicants' examinations. While this is a positive step towards inclusivity, this flexibility does not appear to be present prior to the pandemic and is only relevant for the current academic year – 2022. Therefore, next year's applicants may not have the same benefit for flexibility with the qualifications and equivalent. In addition to this, all four HEIs clearly state that should an applicant have a query regarding their qualifications they are encouraged to contact the admissions office to clarify. This does not show whether they accept alternative or equivalent qualifications, but simply that if the applicant cannot see theirs listed, they can query it. It is unclear how this would be dealt with should the qualification not be listed.

HEI1 gives clear details on how to apply and even states in its access information that they accept applicants 'regardless of background'. This would suggest that all applicants have the option to work closely with admissions to apply. However, on reading the Access and Participation Plan, the backgrounds spoken about are those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnic minorities, care leavers, and disabled students. There is no mention of applicants who have not come from a formal educational background. This is the same for HEIs 2, 3 and 4 also. HEIs 1 and 2 both provide a process called a Contextualized Offer for those in low socioeconomic areas or for care leavers. However, this just means the grade requirements are reduced a level. Yet the qualification – usually a GCSE and A Level – is still required, and it is unclear whether equivalent or alternatives are accepted. These equivalents could be qualifications such as IGCSEs, functional skills certificate, national diploma or BTECs. This is also the case for mature students. However, HEI1 does state that additional consideration can be granted for applications that are strong but do not meet the criteria so this could potentially help home-educated applicants with alternative qualifications.

A section in the Access and Participation Plan at HEI1 aimed at groups who experience barriers to higher education speaks about those with BTEC or vocational qualifications which could be typical qualifications that EHE applicants might have. Furthermore, in the admissions policy at HEI1, it states consideration is not simply based on the qualifications that an applicant has, but also 'experiences, skills and potential' too. HEI1 2 also had an Action and Participation plan with the same restrictions as above, in addition to a Widening Participation Strategy. There

were sections specifically for supporting LGBTQ+ and multi faiths, but still nothing to specifically support applicants from an alternative educational background.

HEI3 showed some promising steps stating that UCAS points can be used for equivalent qualifications and an option for applicants to provide documentary evidence to support their application if they have qualifications alternative to A Levels. This HEI also accepts BTECs and T Levels, although the support package offered to applicants for the application process is limited to care leavers. HEI4 had limited information on its website. However, they do also have an Access and Participation Plan with the same restrictions as HEI1 and HEI2.

Overall, admissions information provided by the institutions online varies slightly from institution to institution, however they share commonalities with the strategies of participation they are implementing. It is unfortunate that the home-educating community do not appear to fit neatly into the pre-populated groups on these strategies and vary in benefit from them. It is clear that HEIs are active in promoting inclusivity and access for all, however this currently is not addressing the needs of EHE learners.

While this study only recruited 5 participants overall, the data collected was able to provide some interesting insights into the admissions process for home-educated applicants and raised some more questions for further exploration. The breakdown of respondents for this study was 3 students applying for study at a HEI from home-educated backgrounds and 2 members of staff from the admissions team at a HEI in England.

ADMISSIONS

The response from the admissions teams (AT) was very minimal, with just two members of admissions staff choosing to participate in the survey. AT1 had worked in admissions for 3-6 years whereas AT2 had slightly more experience at 7-10 years. However, both members of staff highlighted that their respective HEIs accepted applicants with a home-educated background providing they had evidence in the form of certificates in the relevant qualification or had otherwise met the typical entry requirement. This suggests that the HEIs still regard formal educational qualifications to proceed with the application. Saying this, it is unclear from the survey what the process would be should the applicant not have the formal qualifications needed, and whether the HEI has another route to follow. Both AT1 and AT2 were not aware of any policies at their HEIs relating to EHE applicants and there was a contrast regarding the opinion on whether their admissions process was easily accessible to those from home-educated backgrounds, with AT1 saying they are accessible and AT2 stating they did not think their process was accessible.

STUDENT INTERVIEW

From the survey circulated to student applicants, Student 2 agreed to participate in a semi-structured interview to further discuss their responses. Because this is a single viewpoint from one student, these results cannot be generalised, however they can be used to validate the survey responses and pose questions for further research.

The admissions experience of this student is presented as being a positive process, with little mention of their alternative educational background. Student 2 made it clear that the decision to study at a HEI was that of a career choice, due to the requirement of needing a degree level qualification for their intended career path. So, while they have had a positive experience of home education throughout, it appears that the decision to continue with a non-formal education route is not possible due to the requirements of their desired vocation/job. Therefore, the transition into conventional education must ensue.

Student 2 found the process 'very competitive' however as they had come from a mainstream college environment prior to applying to the HEI of choice, they had the support of the college to help with the application process. Having additional support and help from the college for the UCAS application is a factor that the student found instrumental in the ease of the application process.

In terms of content on the application, Student 2 expressed that the application was standard, with no additional requirements to share about alternative provision or diverse educational background. Because of the lack of space to share details and information about home

education, Student 2 chose to include this information in their personal statement. For some applications there was a space to share 'any other information' and this was where Student 2 also chose to share their alternative educational background information, but it was clear that there is currently no option to state home education on the form itself.

In terms of the admissions process at the HEIs, Student 2 had to undertake assessment questionnaires, interviews, and an entrance exam for one of the HEIs - although they clearly state that these were generic expectations of all students and not a requirement because of being a home-educated applicant. The interview questions were course specific, and the student was not asked about their education route. It was also noted that the student was aware that the HEIs, whilst they did not request information about specific educational background, required a high number of GCSEs, so there was the expectation that these qualifications had been achieved prior to applying.

Student 2 felt that the HEI was just 'interested in qualifications', and only really A levels. Anything prior to A level was not asked about. Student 2 chose to mention their other qualifications but felt they did not seem entirely relevant. This prompted Student 2 to express the opinion that it was more challenging to access A Levels from GCSE rather than higher education from A Levels, because of attending a mainstream college. It was posed by the student that it could be beneficial to do more research and work around access to GCSEs for home-educated students as this is a problem encountered before the student gets to higher education. The lack of support available to parents, financial cost, access issues and practical elements of GCSEs for home educators creates problems earlier in their educational route, which then feeds into the issues of access at tertiary level. In addition to this, the college application from GCSEs to A level was more challenging for this student due to the college not recognising the equivalent qualifications taken as a home-educated student. While they had IGCSE qualifications which are recognised as equivalent to GCSE, it appears that some colleges are unsure of this, and it can cause challenges when applying. This appears to be less of an issue when this student applied for higher education, due to having the recognised A level qualifications. Another thread raised in the interview was identifying that home-educated students, due to the cost of examinations, sometimes spread their GCSEs over several years. It is important to ensure that HEIs are not penalising students for doing this.

Overall, the experience of applying to a HEI as a home-educated student has been a positive one for this student. They felt like being home-educated made them "stand out" in the process.

DISCUSSION

This study has provided the opportunity to start discussions about access into UK HEIs for applicants from an alternative educational background. EHE students are underrepresented and EHE is often presented as unreliable due to lack of regulation (Krogh & Liberto, 2021). While the rise in EHE post-pandemic has enabled a critical view, EHE remains to be seen through a negative lens from some and those accessing HEIs sometimes appear to be at a potential disadvantage, unless they have prior qualifications that meet the specification of the course requirements. There continues to be a disengagement between mainstream qualifications (such as GCSEs) and their equivalents (IGCSEs).

Because of the small number of participants in this study, the data cannot be generalised to represent England. It can, however, be used as a discussion point for further research.

CHALLENGES AND BARRIERS

This study was not without its challenges. One main limitation was access to participants. This has been highlighted in previous studies (Fensham-Smith, 2021; Govaerts, 2021; Kunzman & Gaither, 2020) and is a key driver for future research. Overall, there was a lack in responses both from student applicants and admissions teams at the HEIs.

Access to student applicants proved challenging because of the need to access via gatekeepers on multiple levels. Initially access needed to be granted by the administrators of the Facebook pages selected for inclusion. Access was requested on seven Facebook groups and only two agreed to post. Four others refused to give any response at all, and one responded negatively

towards researchers. The view of the administrator of this group was that they felt they were a group to support their members through their home education journey, and not for researchers to post survey links. There appeared to be a negative connotation to researchers and a misunderstanding to the purpose of the research. After explanation and further clarification, no response was given and therefore no survey link was posted. Further study into the reasons for refusal to take part would help gain a valuable insight to access with this group. It is imperative that research is carried out to give home educators a voice in the development of this educational choice. Without the voices of those practising, it becomes difficult to present a true reflection of experience and subsequently, the practices implemented to support this movement become less effective and targeted.

Once access was gained to post on the two groups who gave consent, a further invisible barrier was recognised as many of the members on the group were parents to the students. Therefore, there was a reliance on them to involve their children in the survey. One parent contacted me and told me the story of their child who was currently applying to a HEI in England, however the data was not able to be used for the study as the child did not want to participate in the survey or an interview to speak about their experience themselves. Therefore, this information was discarded. Further exploration into accessing the applicants directly needs to be considered for future studies. Furthermore, applicants had the option to submit their contact details to participate in an interview to further share their experiences. Two out of three respondents agreed to be interviewed, however only one interview could take place as the second respondent was too early in the application process and therefore did not meet the requirements of the study for an interview. This also potentially affected the data given by that respondent in the survey.

In addition to access issues with the students, the study also encountered access challenges with the admissions teams. As with the applicants, these individuals were contacted via a gatekeeper – senior members of staff in admissions. Access requests were either refused, or ignored, by three HEIs, without reasons given. The remaining four HEIs agreed access. One of the four agreed to complete the survey as an individual but refused to share with the rest of the admissions team, therefore only allowing one member of the team to respond. A total of two responses were collected for admissions.

Further barriers to this study were the time frame and connecting with the Local Authority (LA). This study was noticeably short – 10 weeks – therefore this impacted the study in terms of limiting the amount of time allocated to build networks and engage more participants. Should this study be replicated or developed upon, it is suggested that a longer period be allocated to allow for the appropriate networks to be created and a larger sample developed to work with. It is important to build strong foundations with the target demographic as the study shows how unreachable the participants are. In an attempt to reach more participants, a LA in one of the areas of data collection was contacted to ask for support in reaching home-educated students in the area for the study. The LA stated they did not have a home education department and could not be of help to this study. It was later identified that there was a home education department, but this was too late for this study. This potentially highlights a breakdown in communication within the LA and a lack of collaborative working within education departments. For home education to be seen as valid, collaborative working across all educational outlets should be sought.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

MORE THAN QUALIFICATIONS?

If HEIs are only interested in qualifications, they are missing the skills EHE students can bring to the course. A recommendation would be to include a broader look at applicants rather than just qualifications on paper. It is acknowledged that some HEIs do already do this. As per the interview with the HEI applicant, some HEIs are actively asking applicants about their personal qualities specifically linked with the course. However, in the same interview, it was stated that the HEI also appeared to care mostly about the formal qualifications and did not ask about personal qualities in general, only with relevance to course material. It may be beneficial for HEIs to include personal attributes of EHE applicants that enable them to engage

in tertiary education successfully, such as self-led study and pursuing goals on their own (Ray, 2004). Acknowledgement of transferable skills for courses, beyond the standard qualification requirements, could be of huge benefit to HEIs and the recruitment of a more diverse group of applicants.

TIERED SYSTEM

In the US, the National Centre for Home Education created a system to rate institutions based on how accessible and home-education friendly their admissions process is (Haan & Cruikshank, 2006), however there does not appear to be a similar system in the UK. The system in the US rates from tier 1 to tier 3, with tier 1 being the most receptive to receiving EHE applicants, putting things in place such as allowing parent transcripts and adopting recommended inclusive policies. By allowing parent transcripts, the institution is acknowledging the educator role of the parent in the applicant's educational journey, placing credibility on the role of home educator. As the tiers increase, the level of allowance reduces, by adding in the need for entrance exams and/or including GED results (the comparable qualification to the UK's GCSE) (Haan & Cruikshank, 2006). By enabling a system like this, institutions are supporting inclusive access to education and providing a platform for applicants to clearly see which institutions are accepting applicants like them. A system such as this may encourage HEIs in England to strive a more inclusive approach in the admission of students on their courses.

CLEAR RECRUITMENT ON WEBSITES/APPLICATIONS PAGES

As shown in the documentary analysis of the HEIs websites and admissions information, some work needs to be done with the recruitment of home-educated applicants. Clear indications to acceptance of those from non-formal educational backgrounds and identification of specific barriers to higher education for this group on the website would help this group of applicants feel valued, understood, and welcome at the HEI.

FUTURE RESEARCH ON ACCESS TO GCSES

It has been highlighted in this research that home-educated students experience barriers before they reach higher education, and that is when they attempt to access GCSEs. Because of the nature of the self-directed study, some children (and parents) choose to take the GCSE examination before the standard mainstream age of 16 (Govaerts, 2021). However, access to these examinations, which later gives the access to higher education, is plagued with barriers such as finance, location, and access arrangements.

In addition to looking at widening participation and access at HEI level, it would be of benefit to this demographic to look at where the access issues come from, and in this case, at the first recognised formal qualification stage; GCSE.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

Due to the small number of participants for this study and the possible identification of individuals or institutions, data has not been made publicly available for this study.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank the participants of the study for their time and input.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This work was funded and supported by the Safe and Inclusive Communities Team at Anglia Ruskin University.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

Editor(s): Dr Rhiannon Packer

Reviewer(s): Dr Sarah Gillie & Chelle Oldham

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Wheeler, L. (2023). Widening Access for Home-Educated Applicants to Higher Education Institutions in England. *International Journal of Educational and Life Transitions*, 2(1): 11, pp. 1–12. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ijelt.54>

Submitted: 14 December 2022

Accepted: 15 December 2022

Published: 04 April 2023

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International Journal of Educational and Life Transitions is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.