Demand and Barriers: Extracurricular Provision in Oxfordshire Schools

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Abstract

This research examines the types of extra-curricular activities (ECAs) that are most in demand among local schools and families, as well as the perceived logistical, cultural, and structural barriers to implementing ECAs in schools in Oxfordshire. This study enhances our understanding of the demand and supply-side factors that impact the operation of ECAs and the variety of those on offer in an Oxford-specific context, where a literature gap exists. Substantial inequalities are prevalent in Oxfordshire schools, with Oxfordshire facing some of the lowest literacy rates in the country despite having the presence of the world-leading University of Oxford. This research allows us to address the attainment gap, a focus on Oxfordshire regions, enabling us to make highly specific and relevant recommendations for future outreach efforts.

We completed this research by using a mixed methods approach, using online surveys and semi-structured interviews to extract the largest amount of information, both in terms of qualitative and quantitative data. The interviews allowed for an in-depth exploration of the perspectives of teachers through open-ended questions, and the surveys providing context-specific parental insight. The results indicated that overall, schools and parents are strongly aligned in recognizing the value of ECAs for students. Parent-oriented constraints were the most significant form of limitation to student involvement, including costs, timings, and transportation issues. Schools' most significant barriers limiting extra-curricular activity provisions were staffing, funding, and facilities, with many schools finding it difficult to motivate teachers to host extra-curricular activities. This research will be used to inform the University of Oxford's involvement with local schools to adequately address these barriers to effective extra-curricular provisions, perhaps by the University of Oxford offering it's extensive use of facilities and establishing student-led networks to host extra-curricular activities.

Introduction

Participation in extracurricular activities (ECAs) have a significant influence on individual development during childhood and adolescence. Able to recognise the benefits of ECAs, school leaders, teachers and parents alike desire improvement in participation and delivery of ECAs.
With extensive literature supporting the benefits of ECAs, school leaders, teachers and parents alike aspire to improve participation and delivery of ECAs. However, there nevertheless exists significant discrepancies in participation and delivery, shaped by variation among parental desires, and differing logistical, cultural and structural barriers which limit the success of ECA delivery to meet demand (Donnelly et al., 2019). This paper investigates these dynamics within the context of Oxfordshire, exploring the existence of significant disparities in the participation and delivery of ECAs between schools and within them. Firstly, we assess factors shaping demand for ECAs among local schools and families, following this by evaluating the significance of parental influence as a factor. Secondly, we examine barriers which limit the provision of ECAs in local schools, in particular the critical roles staffing, funding, and infrastructure-capacity play. Lastly, we offer recommendations for building relationships with Oxfordshire schools to ensure that university intervention creates sustainable educational impact.

While there has been significant literature analysing class-based differences in participation, it has been largely theoretical or drawn from national samples (Donnelly et al., 2019). Few studies have investigated how these dynamics unfold within local school systems, particularly in Oxfordshire. Research from the previous cohort of Laidlaw scholars (Adams et al., 2024) compared extracurricular provision in deprived areas within Oxfordshire with extracurricular provision in other international contexts. However, the analysis was concerned with external providers and the supply-side landscape and did not sufficiently consider demand-side factors influencing extracurricular participation. Therefore, we aim to address the literature gaps in understanding how social class influences participation within Oxfordshire.

Literature Review

A significant portion of the literature surrounding ECAs is concerned with patterns of student participation. Parents play a pivotal role in shaping students' access to and experience of ECAs. While many parents share similar values and sentiments regarding ECAs (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014), differences in social class, forms of parental involvement, and institutional barriers create significant variation in the nature and quantity of their children's

extracurricular participation (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014; Pugh, 2009; Chin & Phillips, 2004; Sullivan et al., 2018).

Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2014) found that both working- and middle-class parents value enrichment activities, both sets of parents noting the potential ECAs have for, socialising experiences, improvement of health through exercise, and being a way for children to have fun. This is further supported by Pugh (2009), whose ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the San Francisco Bay area reveals that both affluent parents with children at private schools and low-income parents with children at public schools value ECAs. However, these qualitative insights are likely to be biased due to self-selection, as the parents who elect to participate in extracurricular research may be motivated by pre-existing interest and investment (Carbonara and Maloney, 2019).

However, despite broad consensus of parental support, there are significant variations in student extracurricular participation. Patterns of access to ECAs are often clustered around economic divisions. These divisions constrain working class parents more, and thus reduce extracurricular participation among working class students. This is due to the greater time and labour constraints faced by working-class parents, who often lack the flexibility to attend events or facilitate activities scheduled during after-school hours but during working hours (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014; Chin & Phillips, 2004). Additionally, some students internalise financial limitations and avoid participation to reduce burden on their families. The consequences of this is demonstrated by Sullivan et al. (2018) who found that children from wealthier families are more likely to take part in every type of activity, with particularly pronounced disparities in costly pursuits such as music and sport.

Economic divisions can also influence the type or nature of activities students may participate in due to differences in cultural capital. First conceptualised by Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital refers to non-financial assets such as cultural tastes and educational qualifications that signal a higher social status. Lareau (2002) extends this to explain differences in extracurricular participation, finding that middle-class families often engage in “concerted cultivation” where they guide children to structured activities which maximises their child’s development. Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson (2014) reason that enrichment becomes normalised and interwoven with routine childhood, this perhaps not being the case for working-class families. Consequently, working-class students may lack exposure to such activities or not see them as relevant to their aspirations, limiting both ECA participation and its benefits (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014; Vincent & Ball, 2007). This means that students from disadvantaged backgrounds may self-exclude due to a perceived mismatch between their social identity and the ECA, even when school-based ECAs may be free (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014). This is further supported by Pugh (2009), who argues that as children from all class levels want to belong, they will elect ECAs which cohere best with their social membership, informed by class-based norms and market logic. Therefore, students with cultural capital informed by a higher socioeconomic background are more likely to participate in ECAs different from students whose cultural capital were informed by their lower socioeconomic background.

Although parental support is generally associated with greater overall involvement in ECAs, the form in which it is delivered is a factor affecting participation patterns. Fredricks and Eccles (2004) found that children perceive two distinct types of parental involvement: facilitative support (e.g., encouragement and provision of choices) and controlling behaviours (e.g., imposing performance standards). While both forms influence the child's affective experience of activities, it is perceived support, and not pressure, that positively predicts the extent of participation. This aligns with broader findings that children benefit most when they feel autonomy and parental encouragement, particularly in choosing activities that align with their interests (Paccaud et al., 2021).

Paccaud et al. (2021) advocate for a collaborative model, wherein schools and parents share responsibility for facilitating enrichment. This model encourages communication and mutual understanding, supporting both short-term outcomes like enjoyment and exercise, and longer-term goals like social skill development and academic confidence (Eccles & Barber, 1999). However, institutional structures pose a significant limitation for parental input.

McNeal (1998) noted that schools often function bureaucratically, offering limited consultation opportunities for families. ECAs are typically designed top-down, with little room for family input unless parents are part of Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs) or funding bodies (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). This intersects with the dimension of social class, as higher-SES families have more leverage to influence programme availability and quality, while lower-SES families must navigate and adapt to changes that may not align with their child's interests or needs.

Furthermore, institutional gatekeeping may limit access on the basis of academic performance or perceived behaviour (McNeal, 1998). These policies may unintentionally exclude children who could benefit most from participation, reinforcing existing educational disparities. Therefore, institutional provision, without equal opportunities for parental input across class divisions, has the potential to reinforce existing class inequalities, rather than improve them (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2014).

While models of school-parent collaboration have been analysed conceptually, there is little literature which explores this dynamic within specific school contexts (Apps et al., 2019, p. 18). Research regarding the impacts of school-parent collaboration in the UK are often within the context of children with special educational needs (Walker and Bond, 2025), and not with respect to extracurricular participation. As the extent to which parents are engaged varies significantly between schools and is likely to intersect with other contextual factors including ethnicity and geography, it is critical to explore this in the context of Oxfordshire. Furthermore, there has been limited demand-side research which compares parental perspectives with provision within schools (Donnelly et al., 2019). In addition, existing literature generally explore a small sample of schools which differ with respect to a variety of factors including school type, age range, geographic locality and level of deprivation (Deonnelly et al., 2019). This can introduce confounding variables and the potential for them to interact in unpredictable ways. Consequently, it is difficult to establish conclusive causal

relationships that determine the exact impact of parental influence on ECA participation. Therefore, we aim to mitigate these challenges by limiting our research scope to state schools within Oxfordshire and aim to fill the wider literature gap comparing parental perspectives and school provision through the inclusion of a dedicated parent survey to assess parental attitudes towards existing provision.

SUPPLY-SIDE FACTORS

While there are significant discrepancies to the nature and extent of extracurricular provision in primary and secondary state schools (Donnelly et al., 2019), there seems to exist a consensus in school intentions behind provision efforts (Sullivan, 2018). A unified national curriculum is likely the explanation for the existence of such a consensus. In particular, school inspection systems such as Ofsted (Jones & Tymms, 2014), and SEND support (Van Herwegen et al., 2024) play a crucial role in improving the provision of school services in the UK. Lumby & Foskett (2005) note that the English curriculum, after the Great Debate (Silverwood & Wolstencroft, 2023), increasingly adopted an instrumental worldview, defining education as a means to train individuals for performing their roles within the workforce (Scrimshaw, 1983). This is supported by literature published by educational researchers, who operationalised success using outcome variables such as occupation (Eccles & Barber, 1999). Furthermore, researchers have examined how extracurricular attendance can improve the employability of students within the labour market. For example, Donnelly et al. (2019) demonstrated how self-management skills, and team-work skills, which can be gained through extracurricular participation, are highly demanded by prospective employers.

Arguably, elements of the liberal humanist view have also been observed, which is the worldview that education seeks to help individuals achieve personal and moral development (Scrimshaw, 1983). This is supported by literature that operationalised success using outcome variables such as social and psychological outcomes, including social self-concept, level of self-esteem, and feelings of control over one's life (Marsh, 1992; Holland & Andre, 1987).

However, there is a lack of research which verifies these sentiments within schools themselves. While Sullivan (2018) analyses the rationale behind ECA participation across stakeholders ranging from students to senior leaders, the thematic analysis remained at the level of shared motivations and did not extend to the depth of educational worldviews. Furthermore, the conducted research was restricted to an unidentified South-East England county. Therefore, there is no research which has examined the extent to which sentiments are shared across Oxfordshire schools, and how this may correlate with levels of extracurricular provision. Our research aims to address this gap by determining how schools internally conceptualise the value of ECAs and further communicate it to parents.

Despite these shared values, there are significant discrepancies in the nature and extent of extracurricular provision across different state schools. Donnelly et al. (2019) primarily analysed demand-side influences on extracurricular provision, echoing previous literature in

finding that socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, and geography can significantly influence student participation in ECAs. However, the causal mechanisms linking levels of student participation to the provision of ECAs is unclear.

Firstly, schools can only assess demand patterns for existing ECAs based on metrics such as number of enrolments or attendance records. Without a formalised survey, schools lack insight into latent demand, or activities they do not yet offer, and thus cannot adjust extracurricular provision as accurately or flexibly. While Donelly et al. (2019, p. 41) found that provision of ECAs within state schools was often contingent on pupil demand, it was noted that this did not apply generally. For example, one school cited in the report offered 12 – 20 per day over a three-day period, with clubs continuing to run despite low popularity. One parent interviewed mentioned that "[her daughter] was the only one that turned up, but the teacher still ran the club." (Donnelly et al., 2019, p. 41). This was attributed to the headteacher placing particular emphasis on extracurricular provision, suggesting that demand patterns may not necessarily play a significant role in the provision of extracurricular programs. Therefore, while there is significant literature on how demand-side factors shape participation in ECAs, the assumption that this reflects the supply-side provision of ECAs does not seem well-founded.

Supply-side constraints, such as staffing and funding may pose as more significant influences of extracurricular provision within state schools (Briggs & Simons, 2014). A research report consisting of 20 semi-structured interviews with school leaders and further focus groups with teaching staff found that a key determinant in the provision of ECAs was staff capacity and continuity (Bertram et al., 2017). The majority of surveyed schools mentioned that extracurricular delivery was subject to the interests and availability of staff. As the continuity of provision was contingent on staff themselves, a key concern was limiting the negative impacts of staff turnover on extracurricular delivery (Bertram et al., 2017). One surveyed school reported that while a folk club had been highly popular amongst students, the departure of the supporting teacher triggered a drop in attendance that ultimately led to its closure, despite attempts to sustain it via external providers (Bertram et al., 2017). Therefore, staffing has significant impacts on the delivery and quality of ECAs, going so far as to shape student demand patterns itself.

Furthermore, financial constraints are a significant factor restricting extracurricular provision. The annual funding state schools receive is determined by the national funding formula, which allocates a specific amount for local authorities (West et al. 2022). For the 2024-25 academic year, 75.7% of funding was allocated to basic per pupil funding, with a further 17.8% of total funding allocated to additional needs, which include deprivation and low prior attainment. 6.5% of total funding was allocated according to school-led factors, which is primarily composed of a lump-sum payment (Department of Education, 2024). While local authorities have the discretion to further allocate this funding to schools using a formula as they see fit (West et al. 2022), Oxfordshire chose to apply the same national formula (Oxfordshire County Council, 2025a). Therefore, student enrolment figures are a more significant factor in determining the level of funding received in comparison to the socio-economic features of students.

While the UK adopts a progressive model of funding distribution, more being allocated to the most deprived schools, policy shifts in the 2010s have reduced the effective funding premium for disadvantaged schools (Farquharson et al., 2022, p. 72). A significant shift was the increase in minimum funding floors in the National Funding Formula, which disproportionately benefitted affluent schools over deprived schools (Sibieta, 2021). As noted by the National Audit Office (2021), schools in the most deprived quintile did not benefit from this shift, whereas 37% of schools in the least deprived quintile received increased funding. While this represents a direct policy change that redistributed resources towards more affluent schools, the broader decline in real-terms spending of 15% between 2010-11 and 2019-20 exerted a more indirect effect (Farquharson et al., 2022, pp. 11-12). This further constrained resources in schools serving lower-income neighbourhoods than other schools, and exacerbated funding inequalities. In a report investigating barriers for lengthening the school day, which includes the provision of after-school ECAs, Briggs & Simons (2014) found that 89% of headteachers cited funding as a challenge. Therefore, funding acts as a significant constraint on the delivery and quality of ECAs.

Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods (McGurik and O'Neill, 2021) approach using online surveys and semi-structured interviews to examine the demand and supply of ECAs in Oxford schools, focused on push and pull factors. By gathering data from headteachers, school teachers, parents and metadata from the internet, our approach synthesises both qualitative and quantitative insights essential for research analysis whilst also incorporating the diverse stakeholders engaged.

Sampling Frame

We focused on state schools in Oxford in line with Briggs and Simmons (2014), who cite funding as the main barrier for provisions in schools, and also, to simplify the comparison between schools. Metadata from the Oxfordshire City Council (2025b) and Ofsted (2025) websites was filtered for state schools within a 10-mile radius to generate a large sample size of twenty-two schools- a convenience sampling approach (Stratford and Bradshaw, 2021). In addition, schools already engaged in programmes run by the University of Oxford or the Oxford SDG Impact Lab were also approached using existing connections, as, this enables room for further partnerships whilst also increasing the likelihood of engagement. Since headteachers' email addresses are commonly available on official websites, and they are directly able to delegate our interview invites to their school staff, our drafted interview invitations were initially sent to them. Within this context, headteachers are regarded as "knowledgeable informants" (Stratford and Bradshaw, 2021, p. 99) due to the leadership they exhibit within educational settings, the strong connections they have to the community, and their ability to provide essential contextual knowledge, these factors making them invaluable contributors to school-based research. If no response was received, the invitations were then forwarded to the schools' reception inboxes and followed up by phone calls.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews, conducted both online and in person, involved a primary school headteacher and four secondary school teachers. Given the limited time available for data collection, the study encompassed both primary and secondary schools, utilising a convenience sampling strategy. Online interviews were most popular due to their accessibility, provision of e-transcription services, and affordability (Dunn, 2021). To build relationships, obtain detailed information, and ensure the smooth coordination of events, we employed a semi-structured interview approach (ibid). This method's flexibility facilitated open dialogue, allowing for an in-depth exploration of (head)teachers' perspectives through open-ended questions. Prior consent was negotiated before the start of all interviews, under ethical best practices (ibid). Participants were informed that their data would be anonymised and that interview recordings would be securely stored on the University of Oxford's OneDrive system. We posed questions relating to ECAs offered, quality perceived, barriers to provisions and student retention. These questions were selected due to the fact they allowed for more development past the survey-questions, enabling more in-depth engagement and analysis. Two researchers conducted the interviews: one led the questioning whilst the other took concise notes and manually coded emerging themes. Although full thematic analysis was carried out later through systematic coding (see 'Data Analysis' section), this initial note-taking functioned similarly to a traditional fieldwork diary (Cantungal and Dowling, 2021)- providing immediate contextual insights that informed subsequent analysis.

Surveys

The online surveys (McGurik and O'Neill, 2021) encompassed short-answer, Likert-style, and open-ended qualitative questions. These were sent to parents through the (head)teachers we engaged in our study. This meant that it had direct reach to parents, and that we were able to limit parental responses to the site of study, Oxfordshire. As McGuirk and O'Neill (2021) note, surveys also capture context-specific insights that inform subsequent research whilst also supporting culturally sensitive engagement. Moreover, the survey was intentionally designed in a way to minimise burdens on already time-constrained parents and elders while also accommodating the diverse data types required for analysis. The survey gathered parental insights on the perceived quality and quantity of ECAs, frequency of student participation, barriers to engagement, and students' interests. These measures aimed to contextualise parental and institutional factors whilst attempting to explore students' perceptions of existing extracurricular provisions within the school. However, the discussion extended beyond critical inquiry to encompass potential strategies for addressing existing barriers to extracurricular provision. To facilitate schools' deeper understanding of parental concerns, the survey data was also sent to each respective school.

Data Analysis

Following successful transcription of the interviews using both Nvivo and manual corrections, a thematic analysis was conducted per Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Only one researcher undertook the coding process to facilitate consistent cross-referencing across the various interview transcripts, aiding the identification of overarching themes whilst minimising the risk of confirmation bias (Cope and Hilda, 2016). Preliminary codes, initially developed in the 'fieldwork diary' during the interviews and later refined using uploaded transcriptions in NVivo, were grouped into clusters of related concepts. These were then organised into broader thematic categories and further divided into sub-themes for detailed analysis. Word clouds and quotes were generated to show the frequency and examples of the themes constructed.

Quantitative data from the 23 survey responses was dissected using Excel to identify and visualise broader patterns and correlations. Upon detailed examination, outliers, which are difficult to define solely through statistical measures owing to the qualitative data present, were identified as 'participants whose responses were contradictory.' Through an iterative process, multiple graphs were generated, incorporating correlation coefficients (Pearson's r) and regression values (r^2) to show type and strength of relationships. Open-ended responses, designed to parallel interview questions were also thematically coded.

Overall, this inductive, mixed-methods research approach offers a practical and coherent framework for data collection and analysis: combining in-depth insights from interviews with broader perspectives from surveys.

School Type	Identifier
Primary School A	Head teacher
Primary School B	School teacher 1
Primary School C	School teacher 2
Secondary School	Year Coordinator
Special Needs School	School teacher 3

Table 1: Participating Schools and Assigned Identifiers

Results

The following results are collated from 5 semi-structured interviews (4 with school staff and 1 with the headteacher) and the 23 survey responses received from Primary School A.
The values parents placed on ECAs were a significant determinant in influencing their child's overall participation in ECAs. Parents hoped their children could gain a wide range of benefits, from health improvements, social skills, exposure to new interests, and skills for future careers. These themes arose through the interviews or mission statements online, being echoed by the schools in our study. Parents prioritised social confidence, enjoyment, and academic improvement as key benefits gained from extracurricular participation (Figure

1). Academic improvement was extensively and explicitly mentioned across the interviews, with all three primary schools citing academically oriented ECAs such as homework and reading club. Specifically, Schoolteacher 1 acknowledged that “families don't necessarily have the technology or the headspace all the time to be able to do those things at home”. Social confidence was similarly reflected within mission statements, with ECAs cited to encourage students to “meet new people and thrive” (Cheney School, 2025), and “move out of their comfort zones working as part of a team” (Extra-Curricular Activities, 2025). While enjoyment was not explicitly mentioned, it was often implicitly referred to when staff discussed the popularity of certain clubs amongst students.

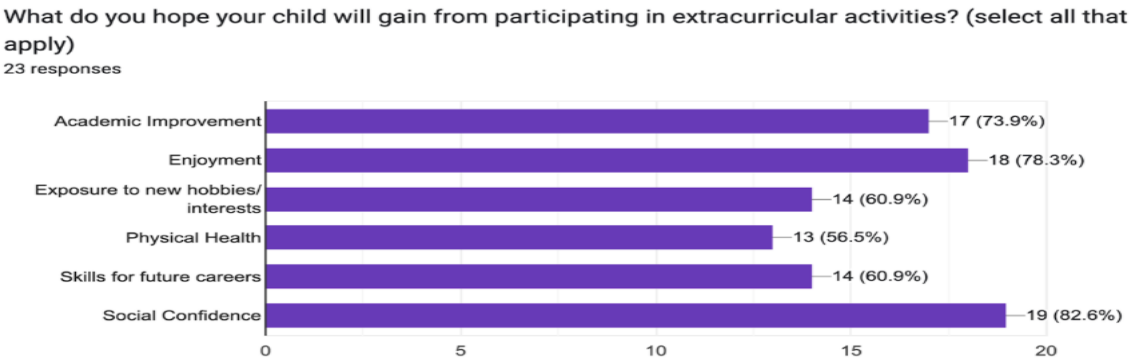

Figure 1: Percentage of surveyed parents (n=23) reporting each benefit they hoped their child would gain from participation in ECAs

However, one value which schools emphasised more than parents was exposure to new interests, with all interviewed staff highlighting this as the rationale behind the range of ECAs provided. The Head Teacher stated “for [our rationale], it’s the things that they might not develop naturally in everyday life…our children don’t necessarily get taken to the theatre…see a concert…that enrichment and conversation for our children is really really important.” Schoolteacher 2 further supplemented that “the more things young children are exposed to…give [them] some culture capital to then become a better person in general.” Despite this variation, we can conclude that overall, schools and parents are strongly aligned in recognising the value of ECAs for students.

While overall participation can be largely attributed to parental influence, the type of ECA students participated in was largely guided by child interest. This is demonstrated in Figure 2, where 65.2% parents identified child interest as a factor influencing extracurricular participation. In turn, child interest is largely influenced by their confidence and familiarity with an activity. Schoolteacher 2 affirmed that there is a significant level of self-selection, where sports like football see high participation due to students’ familiarity, whereas cricket may struggle for engagement due to limited exposure.

While child interest influenced the initial choice of ECAs, the sense of belonging was a significant predictor of sustained engagement. Schoolteacher 1 commented that “they really do start to build their own community [within the orchestra], and it grows and grows…”, and “once you get a little handful of boys, then [choir and ensemble attendance] will steadily increase”. However, they noted that activities like ‘Spanish club’ struggled to retain students once initial goals of achieving language proficiency were met.

Lastly, child interest, through student voice mechanisms, shape ECAs attendance by directly influencing ECAs provision. Some schools have underdeveloped student voice mechanisms. For example, Primary School A acknowledged that “we do need to do some pupil voice around enrichment activities. So, we’ll probably put those back into our quality assurance plans next year.” However, the Secondary School was much more developed, from established platforms delivering satisfaction surveys to enabling students to start their own clubs, with the Year Coordinator saying, “We had a group of kids come and ask Sir, can we set up a Dungeons and Dragons club. And so, I said, if you can get a member of staff to be with you at lunchtime, then absolutely, and they’ve been running that for two years.”

Whilst student-oriented factors were significant in determining what encouraged student involvement, parent-oriented constraints were the most significant form of limitation to student involvement represented. From Figure 2, the most significant factor limiting extracurricular participation was costs at 52.5%, followed by timings offered, at 47.8%. This was echoed by one of the parents elaborating that “Most of the activities are either expensive or too far for me”, and that “a lot of kids need it, but the parents can’t afford it”.

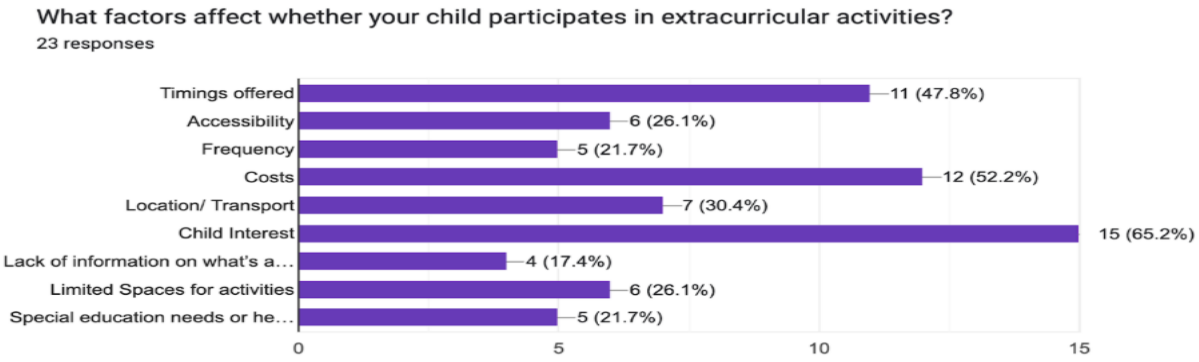

Figure 2: Percentage of surveyed parents (n=23) reporting each factor that affected their children’s participation in ECAs

Another significant barrier was “limited spaces for activities”, which was mentioned by 50% of respondents who opted to further elaborate (3 of 6, and 4 of 8, from the two “further response” sections available). 2 of the 8 responses from the “additional information” section mentioned that the football team was oversubscribed, with one stating that “My child has been trying to get on the football team but never gets chosen”, and another stating “it may not be possible to always secure a place [on the football team]”. 4 of the 8 responses from that section touched upon the wish for a wider range of activities offered, including music, dance, and baking.

While constraints often originated from parents’ limitations, 5 of the 23 respondents reported “Special education needs or health considerations” to be a factor affecting their child’s participation in ECAs. Two parents further expanded upon this, with one citing that “waiting for adhd assessment” was the reason why their child did not participate in any ECAs. The other parent pointed out that “A lot of what the school currently provides are sports orientated, one of my children has a physical disability so sports isn’t really his favourite

thing to do", demonstrating how children with special education needs and disabilities face more limitations when trying to participate in ECAs.

Parents were then directed to self-report how they perceived the quantity and quality of extracurricular provision within schools, as well as how well-informed they felt. Figure 3 exhibits a moderately strong positive correlation between parents' perception of the quantity of ECAs offered and their perception of the quality of extracurricular opportunities offered, with a PMCC value of 0.77 ($p<0.001$). Further regression analysis yielded an R^2 percentage of 59.5% (Table 1), which means that 59.5% of the variability in the quality perception of extracurricular opportunities offered can be explained by the quantity perception. However, the relationship between parents' level of information regarding extracurricular provision and their perception of the quantity (PMCC = -0.102; Figure 4) and quality of ECAs offered (PMCC = 0.026; Figure 5) was not statistically significant.

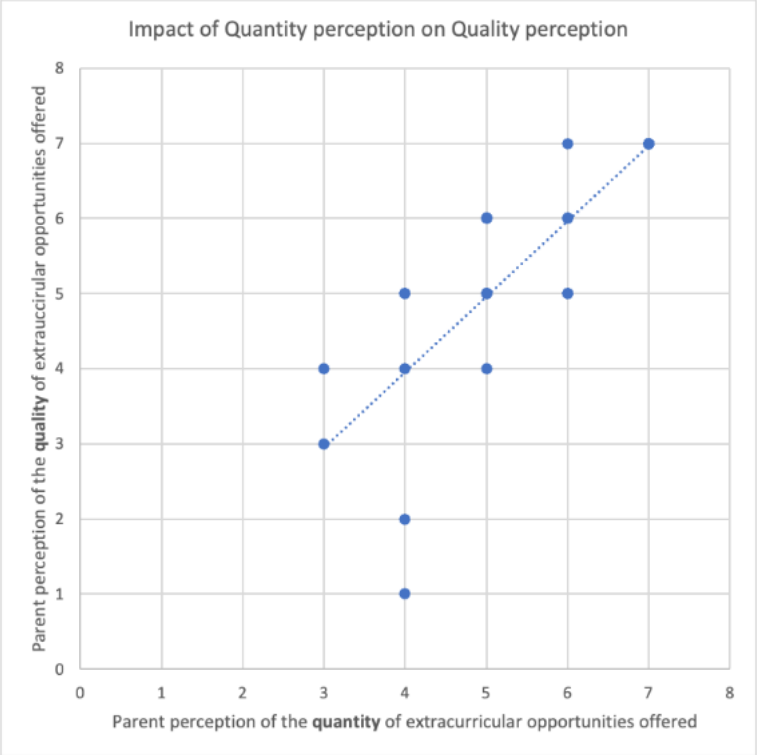

Figure 3: How parental perception of the quantity of extracurricular opportunities offered correlated with their perception of the quality of extracurricular opportunities offered

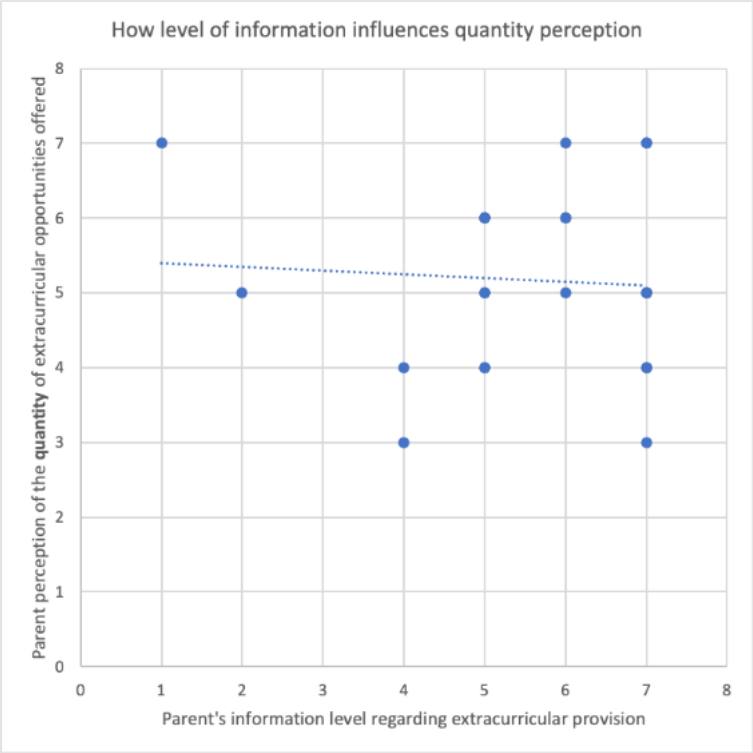

Figure 4: How parents' self-reported informational level regarding extracurricular provision correlated with their perception of the quantity of extracurricular opportunities offered

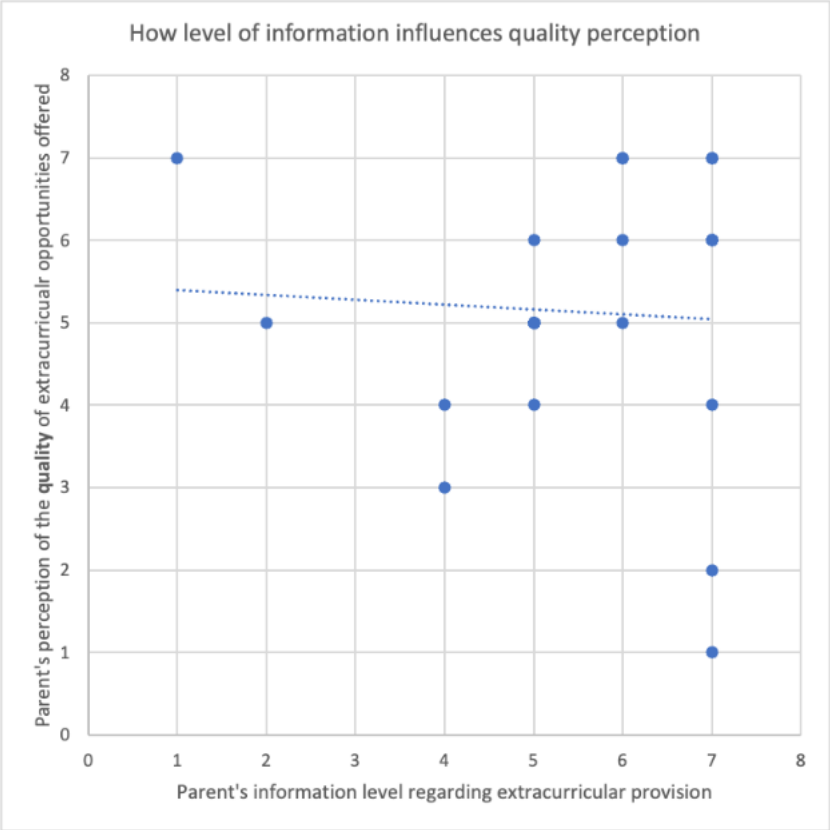

Figure 5: How parents' self-reported informational level regarding extracurricular provision correlated with their perception of the quality of extracurricular opportunities offered

Furthermore, age was a significant predictor of participation patterns. Secondary schools found a negative correlation, with the Year Coordinator stating: “I think we definitely see, as they’re younger, they get involved in more stuff, […] you get a bit more apathy as they get older.” However, one primary school reports that for certain activities like choir, over half of the student population participated in higher years compared to a third in the lower years.

Staff interviews identified staffing, funding, and facilities as the three most significant barriers limiting extracurricular provision. A Year Coordinator articulated the dependence of extracurricular provision on staff availability, saying “staff don’t have to do it, we don’t get paid extra”, further elaborating the consequence: “it’s really hard to sell it to staff.” The primary school headteacher further [elaborated] how the type of ECA provided was also dependent on staff capability, illustrating that “what staff will do is say, I will do cooking club, because that’s something they’re interested in. So, if it’s something like Spanish, then we don’t necessarily have that skill set.” This sentiment was further echoed by Schoolteacher 1 (from Primary School B), who mentioned that “having more adult support would absolutely transform what we could offer”.

However, while the secondary school did not pay staff for extracurricular provision, the primary school headteacher stated that they did. However, they noted that this payment was not covered by the school and instead relied on charging parents for extracurricular involvement. They illustrate the cycle of under provision and limited demand as a consequence of the lack of funding: “because our families can’t afford that extra cost, […] we don’t charge… then we don’t have revenue to pay staff.”

A further concern reported was the necessary administrative measures in ECA provision, this perhaps acting as a burden to teachers who have a myriad of other responsibilities. This was fortified by comments by the Year Coordinator who mentioned, “...you’ve got to email every single time [and] get confirmation every single time [we require parental consent for ECA participation], on top of that you’ve got to fill out a risk assessment for every fixture you’ve got if it’s outside of 30 minutes away”. This was further exacerbated when staff cater for students with medical conditions, with the same Year Coordinator citing that one staff maintained a correspondence of “36 emails…about [the student with severe allergies] from when it first started to there, just to make sure everything was in place”.

Lastly, interviewed schools identified constraints on suitable spaces for ECAs, particularly for activities requiring specialised facilities or equipment, which may restrict program diversity and quality. Schoolteacher 1 identifies this challenge: “the things that I struggle with are having the space, the kind of literal where can I put those musicians.”

Table 1

	Correlation (PMCC)	Coefficient of determination (R^2)
Figure 3	0.77102924	0.5945
Figure 4	-0.1023868	0.0105

Figure 5	-0.0266371	0.0007

Discussion

This discussion interprets the results in response to the following research questions: (1) 'What types of ECAs are most in demand among local schools and families in Oxfordshire?', and (2) 'What are the perceived logistical, cultural, and structural barriers to implementing ECAs programmes in schools in Oxfordshire?'. These interpretations will contribute to the existing literature landscape by verifying them and proposing recommendations local to the Oxfordshire context on ECAs, educational inequalities, and provisions, enabling us to advise further steps forward in light of these findings.

Our research will firstly contribute to the existing literature landscape by providing a highly context-specific framework of demand and supply factors regarding ECAs in Oxfordshire. Furthermore, these interpretations will verify the relevance of existing literature within this Oxfordshire context, enabling us to propose context-specific recommendations

a. **Student Participation**

The factors which influence student involvement and participation can be summarised as child interest; children's motivation; increased academic pressures alongside growing autonomy; and parental influence-which are in turn influenced by family attitudes, commitments, and financial barriers. Child interest and parental influence are the primary determinants of ECA demand. While parental influences impact students' participation in ECAs, this influence is particularly salient amongst primary-school students, as their participation in ECAs are highly dependent upon parental support and facilitation, corroborating ideas from the literature that the forms in which parental support are delivered are factors affecting participation patterns (Fredrick & Eccles, 2004). Younger children are more likely to be convinced by parental encouragement to participate in ECAs, with this involvement more likely to continue if parents consistently facilitate support and build habits of participation from a young age. This is crucial for sustained ECA engagement, as older students have greater autonomy over their participation. Parental influence in promoting high standards of achievement is likely to sustain students' involvement in ECAs in later high school years despite the increase of academic demands.

In relation to parental influence, our results also verified existing literature which argued that socio-economic background is a significant factor influencing ECA engagement (Donelly et al., 2019). 47.8% of parents and 52.2% of parents reported that timings offered and costs were a significant factor shaping their children's ECA participation, respectively. Relatedly, accessibility and location/transport were also important factors of consideration. These

factors can often be seen to be clustered around socio-economic status, displaying the influence they have in engagement in ECAs.

However, from our parental survey, the most significant factor influencing demand for different ECAs was child interest. In turn, there are several factors that can shape this interest. Broadly, a variety of choice in ECAs can encourage curiosity and thus cultivate a willingness to engage among a greater number of students. From these initial opportunities of exploration, sustained participation is ensured from interested students who further find joy in the skills they cultivate, thus fostering a sense of competence or accomplishment upon participating. Additionally, social bonding and the sense of belonging that arises from participation is a key predictor of child interest and sustained demand for ECAs, as demonstrated by Fredricks and Eccles (2004; 2006) whose research suggests social networks and a sense of identity are extremely important to sustained engagement. Fredricks and Eccles (2004; 2006), and Eccles and Barber (1999) build upon this idea that shared identity can create additional connections between students themselves and students and the school, which further encourages ECA participation. These sentiments are also verified within our findings. As Schoolteacher 1 mentioned, the social bonds formed within a school choir provided an incentive for sustained engagement for students who had an existing interest. Furthermore, this acted to increase broader participation as other children saw the ECA as an opportunity for social bonding and enjoyment. This ultimately supports the idea that co-curriculars act as a key site for cultivating a sense of belonging which encourages participation (Pugh, 2009). Thus, a strong demand for ECAs exists amongst students as it allows for an exploration of existing interest, and further encourages social bonding, communication, and involvement with others. As child interest has been identified as the most significant factor influencing ECA demand, we suggest schools to consider providing a wide range of ECAs that facilitate social bonding when developing and implementing further programs.

Disadvantaged students face multiple barriers that compound over time whether that be in terms of finances, levels of motivation, or scheduling issues, especially in winter months when it becomes more dangerous to walk home in the dark or cold, meaning this participation gap can be seen to only widen, aligning with the Donnelly et al (2019)'s findings that socio-economic status can significantly influence student participation in co-curriculars.

Limits on student voice mechanisms in certain schools must also be addressed when assessing co-curricular demand, with more schools to be encouraged to establish student platforms to act as a voice for the student body.

b. **Parent-Oriented Constraints**

Socio-economic status can influence guardian capacity to enrol their children in ECAs. Parents with a higher socio-economic status are somewhat able to respond quicker to opportunities, demonstrate greater engagement with school communications, and maintain participation over time, meaning, though demand may be stable throughout varying socio-economic backgrounds, access to these co-curriculars differs. Costs and timings of co-curriculars being limiting factors reflect this. Lareau (2002)'s idea that middle class families are able to engage in 'concerted cultivation', guiding children to structured activities which maximise their child's development is solidified by this in that, middle class families are

likelier to be able to address the barriers of costs and timings than families facing lower socio-economic backgrounds. Middle class families are more likely to both earn more and be more likely to respond to emails during working hours which leads to less missed opportunities for their children. Through these greater participation rates, enrichment, as Holloway & Pimlott (2014) discuss, becomes normalised and merged into their routines, with those of higher socio-economic status having access to more co-curriculars, as cost is less of a barrier.

From our results, students from disadvantaged backgrounds often faced multiple barriers to participation in ECAs which are likely to intersect in complex ways. Parents who cannot afford activity costs may often be the same individuals constrained by demanding work schedules, which in turn reduces their time and mental capacity to support their child's participation in ECAs. These compounding barriers may explain the disproportionately high disparity in extracurricular attainment which exists along socioeconomic divisions (Donnelly et al., 2019).

Limited spaces for activities also restrict participation though demand exists for those ECAs, for example, the demand for football club in results and the limited places. Supply-side struggles mean not everyone can be accommodated for, hindering the positive impacts ECAs can have.

c. **Quantitative Analysis**

Figure 1's moderately strong positive correlation between parent's perception of the quantity of co-curricular opportunities offered and their perceptions of the quality of co-curricular opportunities offered demonstrates that parents who perceive a wide range of extracurricular provision tend to rate the quality of offerings more favourably. This may reflect a cognitive bias where their positive sentiments regarding the quantity of co-curricular provision leads to an assumption in the quality of their delivery. Furthermore, this may suggest that patterns of parental perception may not be organised around these cleavages and instead are distinguished along other variables.

The lack of linear correlation between parent's level of information regarding co-curricular provision and their perception of the quantity and quality of co-curricular activities as shown by Figure 2 and 3 may indicate that there are other potential explanations for their perceptions of quantity and quality of co-curricular provision which may offer a stronger level of determination than informational levels, their children's attitudes toward provisions perhaps being another factor explaining their perceptions on quality and quantity. However, the lack of correlation is likely to be over-inflated, and self-selection means that parents who contribute to this survey are more likely to have particularly positive or negative experiences which may motivate their participation. Our data is more likely to capture extreme opinions rather than standard opinions.

However, our survey results cannot be fully generalised to draw conclusions, and our data is more likely to indicate perceptions of ECA supply and demand as opposed to measured

conclusions, due to the small size of our sample. The size of our sample also means our results also cannot generally be statistically significant.

d. **Staffing, Funding, and Facilities**

Teachers obligated to run clubs often face practical constraints in taking on responsibilities regarding ECAs, lacking financial compensation for their efforts. Running ECAs limits how much free time and energy teachers have, intensifying their workload. Administrative demands and the pressure to improve academic outcomes placed on teachers make ECA commitments difficult to sustain, leading to reduced levels of teacher motivation. Schools with fewer teachers face greater issues. There is more workload per teacher due to staffing deficiencies, and, with fewer staff, the variety of ECAs is limited due to a less diverse range of interests of teachers, on which ECA delivery often depends. ECA delivery, being subject to the interests and availability of staff, fortifies Bertram et al. (2017) and their ideas on the negative impact of staff turnover on delivery of ECAs

Financial barriers operate at both family and school levels, with schools facing difficult decisions about resource allocation. With ECAs usually running for free, they run on limited funding through using existing resources of the school, larger schools having advantages in provisions, and smaller schools struggling to maintain diverse programming due to limited resources and staff capacity especially since the 2000's policy shifts have eroded funding for pupil premium, due to inflation, for schools serving economically disadvantaged communities (Farquharson et al., 2022). Funding consistently came up in interviews as a barrier to ECA provisions, corroborating findings of Briggs & Simmons (2014), who found that the majority of head teachers cited funding as a challenge.

As seen in the results, administrative barriers also exist for provisions of ECAs, especially surrounding safeguarding, risk assessments and parental communications. Though these requirements serve important safety functions, institutional barriers such as long waiting times for children's diagnoses and the extra workload created for teachers can deter supplying certain ECAs, even if they are in high demand. Thus, there should be clear and easily accessible avenues for teachers to complete administrative forms in a streamlined way that doesn't require more from them than they can offer.

All schools within this study had Ofsted ratings of 'Good'(¾ of the schools) or 'Outstanding'(¼ of the schools). Our results reliably corroborated Ofsted data, with the school rating 'Outstanding' having fewer issues with funding and facilities in running ECAs, especially since the school had a high number of students, with the school mainly having issues with teacher workload and motivation. Other schools, all rated 'Good', though similarly had issues with teacher workload and motivation impacting provisions for ECAs, had an additional focus on funding in ways the 'Outstanding' school didn't. The 'Outstanding' school also had more avenues for student voice, using external providers to achieve this, while also having more staff on hand for purely administrative matters, such as a P.E coordinator to send emails. Despite these differences between the 'Good' schools and the 'Outstanding' one, all the schools reflected the same issues of staffing and teacher motivation as barriers to the provisions of ECAs, though for the 'Good' schools, this was a larger problem, and they additionally struggled more with finances comparatively.

e. **Limitations**

Though data collected and displayed in the results have been of use in addressing demand-side and supply-side factors which impact the provisions of ECAs, any conclusions drawn are limited by the fact that the size of the sample is quite small. Due to time constraints of when the research was conducted, being at the end of the academic year with schools in Oxfordshire being less likely to participate in the study, the number of responses were low and thus there is a lack of variation of schools in terms of pupil size, funding, areas, and Ofsted ratings limiting any conclusive results made from this study though leaving the room for future research to be conducted but with a greater number of schools.

In addition, survey response rates exceeded those of the interviews, likely due to the concise format of the survey and the ability of digital platforms to accelerate distribution and broaden reach (Sikkens et al., 2017). Although this meant we had strong empirical backing, to gain further nuance and critical insights, in the future, we will also increase the number of interviews.

f. **Potential Solutions**

Despite limitations, many steps can be taken from this point onwards to support schools facing these barriers to adequately address inequalities in provisions in Oxfordshire. Local educational policy and involvement with universities embedded in the local community, the University of Oxford for example, is likely to have a significant impact in addressing concerns from both the demand and supply side of the delivery of ECAs.

Support for local schools by the University of Oxford in enhancing access to ECAs and quality by using its extensive facilities of student volunteer networks and strong research base would aid in addressing inequalities in the participation and delivery of ECAs. The University of Oxford can share its use of facilities, offering access to university sports halls, laboratories, rehearsal spaces, and theatres during evenings or weekends, reducing the pressures schools face for space to conduct activities and the costs of venues if not accessible within schools, perhaps also aiding in providing transport, which often exists as a barrier for schools. Student-led enrichment programmes can also be implemented, mobilising the student force to deliver clubs, mentoring schemes, and workshops, particularly in areas such as STEM, music, drama, and debating, which may also alleviate stress on schools in terms of funding and staffing. Additionally, targeted outreach to schools in the area, ensuring partnerships exist within schools that face high barriers with a greater need for support, would greatly benefit the area. These measures, whilst not completely solving all issues schools face in the delivery of ECAs, enable more equal access to provisions for ECAs and strengthen the relationship the University has with its surrounding community.

Conclusion

This study has examined the social, economic, and institutional factors impacting demand for ECAs amongst parents and schools in Oxfordshire, whilst also identifying social,

economic, and institutional barriers that currently act against ECAs delivery and implementation. In line with our research brief, we explored how various factors influence both availability and uptake of ECAs provision. Through analysing existing literature on ECA pupil participation, parental involvement, and demand-side and supply-side factors alongside our use of mixed methods to evaluate hypotheses set out by the literature and our results, our findings confirm that ECAs, while unanimously acknowledged for their role in supporting academic achievement and mental well-being, are not of equal accessibility to all students.

Financial barriers existed both in demand and supply areas, with limitations on resources constraining the range, quality, and sustainability of provision. Parental involvement also arose as a determining factor in involvement in ECAs, variations in the type and consistency of engagement reflecting socio-economic inequalities which were closely interlinked with time availability. Schools facing volatile or low budgets often prioritise academic provision, threatening the effective implementation of ECAs and their quantity. More socio-economically advantaged communities, on the other hand, are able to provide diverse co-curriculars at higher quality levels. Also, households facing challenging socio-economic circumstances have more obstacles in accessing the limited ECAs they are offered.

Institutional constraints with policy and administrative factors were found to interact with these factors in complex ways. Administrative factors such as consent forms and risk assessments exacerbated current barriers to provision, making the delivery of ECAs more difficult to implement.

In conclusion, our findings display that participation in ECAs and delivery of them are formed by an interplay of family resources, institutional capacity, and student development. By utilising its resources and expertise, Oxford University can aid the local community in supporting schools to create and implement inclusive, high-quality ECA opportunities. Future research on Oxford-specific data, considering socio-economic, demographic, and institutional variations between schools in the city and surrounding areas, may support positive university involvement. Further studies may investigate more specific cultural attitudes toward ECA engagement and how this might affect take-up within groups, as well as what can be done to address different attitudes to encourage ECA participation. Impact assessments of university outreach programmes supporting ECAs could also be conducted to measure the impact of these programmes on participation and inclusivity. Encouraging schools to establish more mechanisms for ‘student voice’ within schools would also provide better understanding of demand for ECAs going forward, enabling better provisions for co-curriculars going forward.

Ultimately, the move towards a more equitable landscape for ECAs in Oxfordshire can be made by addressing these gaps found in participation patterns and implementation barriers, though this problem cannot only be solved through university engagement; real policy change is necessary to see long-term, substantial improvements. Nonetheless, attempts can be made through university engagement to enable an environment in which every student, regardless of background, is allowed to thrive, grow, and succeed, whether that be in the classroom or out of it.

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