# **The geographies of access to elite universities**: A mixed-methods exploration of young participation within England.

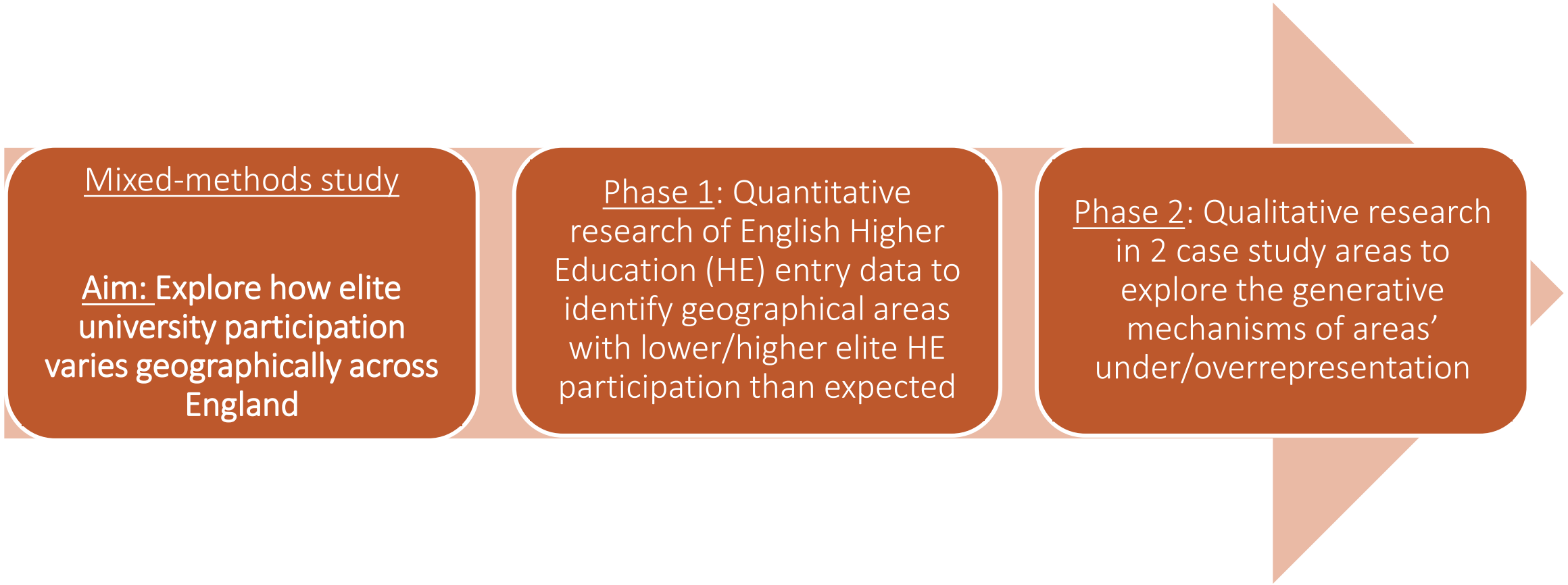
JOANNE DAVIES

UNIVERSITY OF BATH, UK

# Presentation Structure

- Overview of project
- UK policy context
- Quantitative research
- Qualitative research
- Policy implications

# PhD project outline



# UK policy context

- UK government education policy is **increasingly recognising the importance of where young people grow up in shaping their life chances**:

  - POLAR and TUNDRA methodologies - classify local areas from quintiles 1-5 depending on the proportion of young people progressing to Higher Education (HE)
  - Uni Connect programme (2017 – present), focussed on areas with low HE progression
  - Current government's 'levelling up' agenda – brought renewed focus and attention to the UK's regional inequalities, including the spatial disparities in access to HE and career opportunities

- Increased government attention on HE progression remains very generalised. **No government initiatives focussed on elite university progression specifically,** despite this being where those from disadvantaged backgrounds are most underrepresented (Crawford, Gregg, Macmillan et al., 2016)

# Quantitative data and methods

- **Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data**
- Data for **all England-domiciled students beginning university in the academic years 2008/09, 2010/11, 2012/13, 2014/15 and 2016/17**
- **'Elite' universities** defined as the **24 universities of the Russell Group** (a group of UK research-intensive universities) **plus the Universities of St Andrew's, Bath & Strathclyde** as these universities share similar characteristics.
- **Areas defined by Middle Super Output Areas (MSOAs);** a hierarchy used by the UK Office for National Statistics. Each MSOA has **between 5,000 – 15,000 inhabitants**
- Due to the nested structure of the data (students within MSOAs), **a multilevel modelling approach** was adopted

# Control variables

- **Control variables** at the **individual level:**
  - **Education** (state/private school, tariff point score, number of facilitating subjects studied)
  - **Socio-economic status** (Socio-economic classification of student for those aged 21 and over (else that of their highest-earning parent) and a marker indicating if one or more parents has a university education)
  - **Social and individual-level factors** (age, ethnicity, and sex)
  - **Proximal distance travelled** (measured from student's domicile to their university)
  - **Academic year** (08/09, 10/11, 12/13, 14/15 and 16/17)

- **Control variables** at the **MSOA-level:**
  - **Education** (MSOA-mean tariff score and MSOA-mean number of facilitating subjects studied)
  - **Accessibility** (Variable measuring the relative accessibility of each MSOA to universities within the 'elite' grouping)

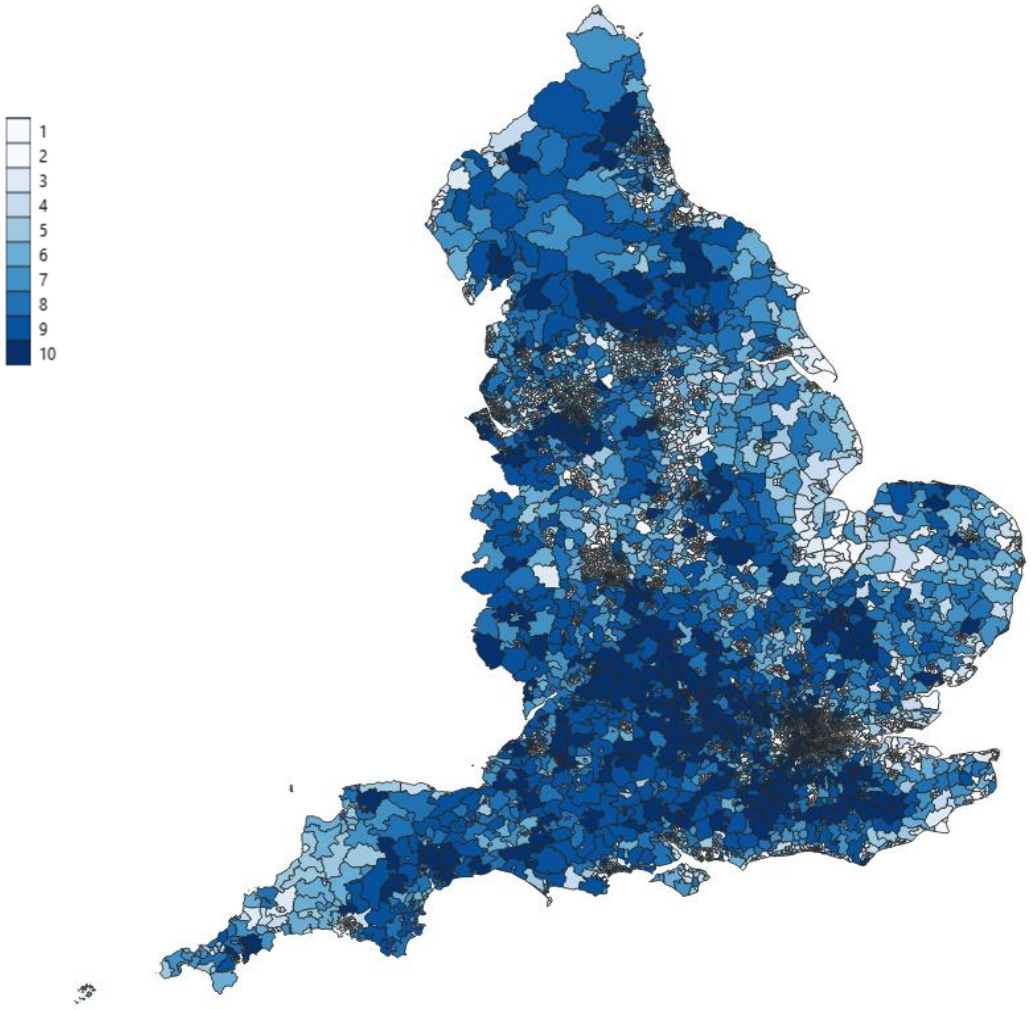
# Quantitative findings

- In the null (initial) model, **MSOAs explained approximately 10% of the differences in progression**
- Adding the **control variables reduced this to 4%.**
- **At first glance**, **where students live didn't appear to be that important** for progression to elite universities.
- However, **when progression rates by MSOA were mapped, a distinct patterning emerged**.

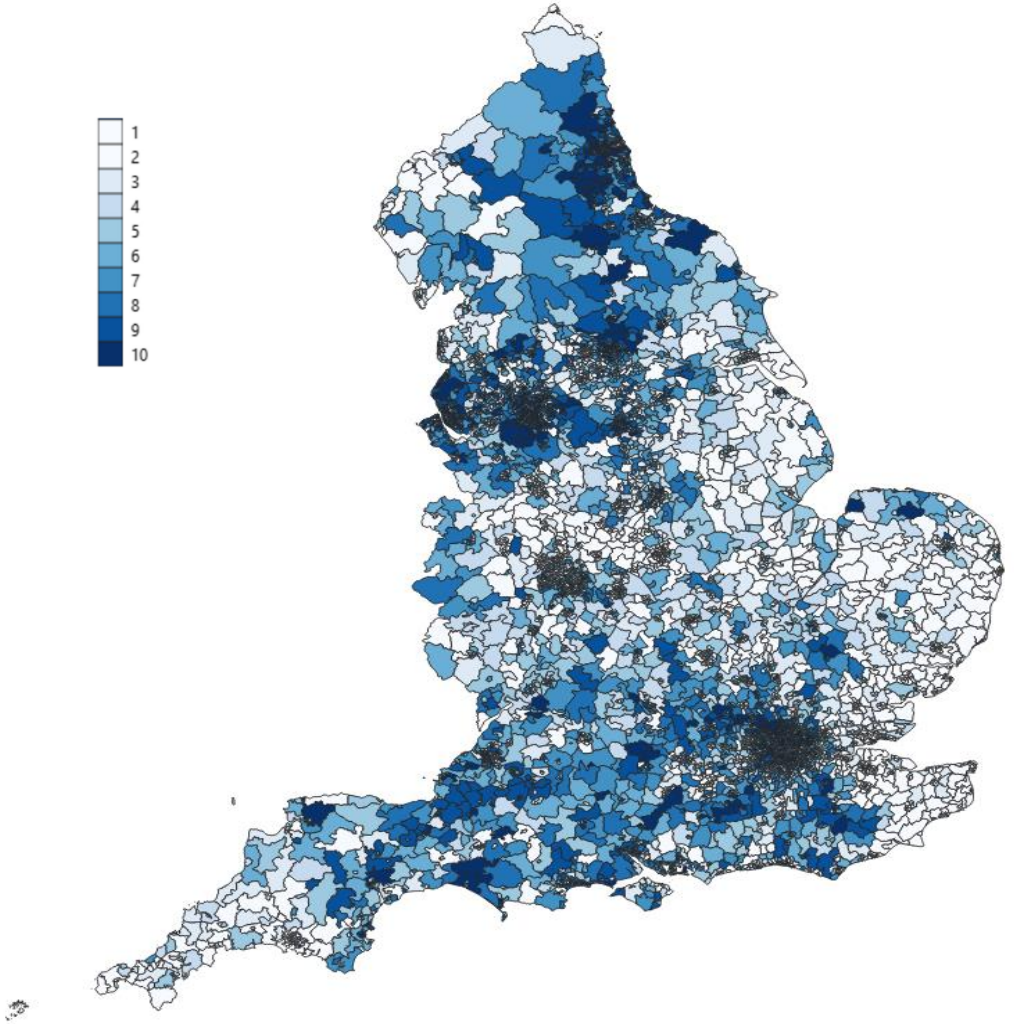
# Quantitative findings

- Mapping of MSOA (area) effects from **the null model suggested that rural areas have typically higher progression rates than urban areas.**
- However, when progression rates from **the final model** (accounting for all control variables) were mapped, **the pattern was inversed with urban areas having typically having higher progression**
- This suggests that **disadvantaged students in England's urban centres have a higher likelihood of progressing to elite UK universities** than similarly-disadvantaged students situated rurally.
- This contrast was **particularly marked in London.**

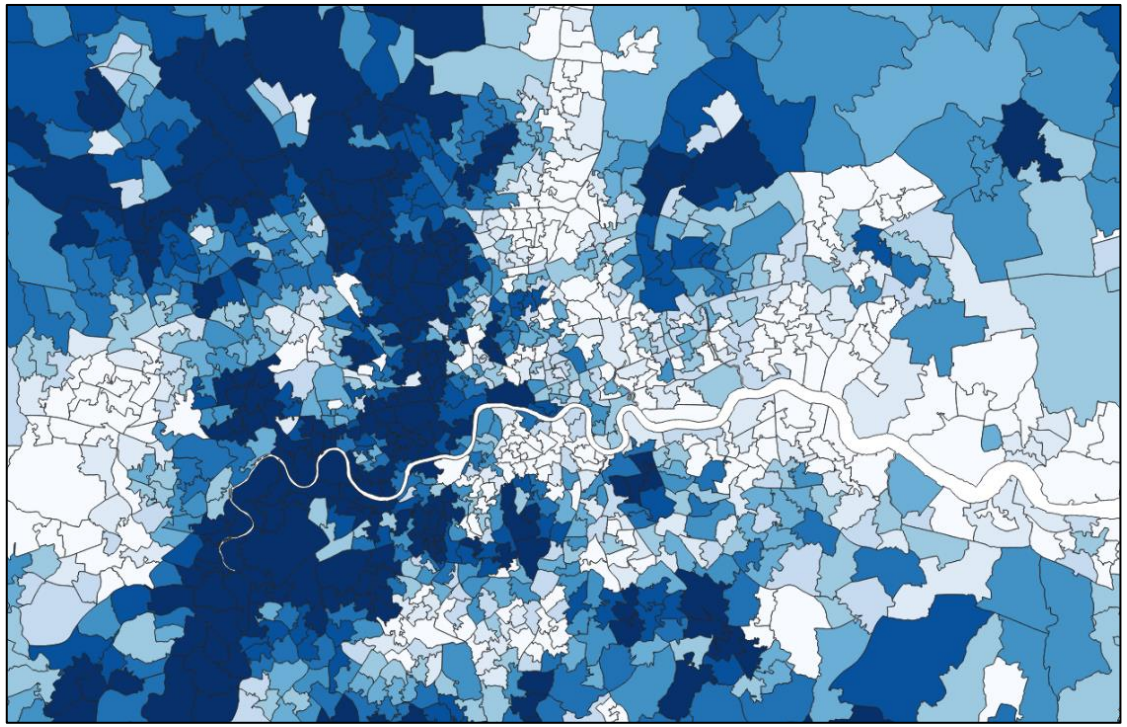
MSOA progression rates from **null model** mapped by decile



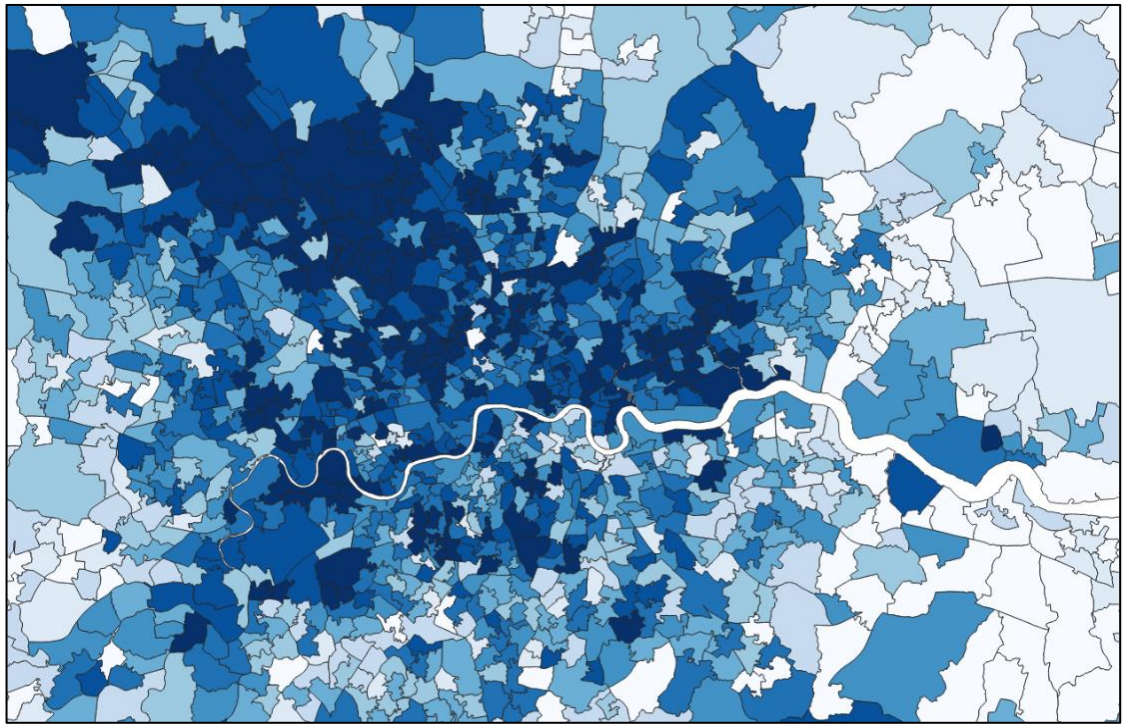

MSOA progression rates from **final model** mapped by decile



Mapping of MSOA progression rates from **null model** zoomed in on London area



Mapping of MSOA progression rates from **final model** zoomed in on London area



# Qualitative data and methods

**<u>Case study research:</u>**

**Two localities**, selected on the basis of the quantitative research

One overrepresented locality (in **East London**)

One underrepresented locality (in **Northwest Nottingham**)

Principal component of research = **semi-structured interviews**

**12 interviews** across two interviewee groupings – **high-attaining disadvantaged students** and relevant **school staff**

# Overview of qualitative findings

**Three key themes**

Valorisation of elite university progression and framing of university choices

Uneven access to elite university outreach opportunities

The importance of local economic context

# UK policy implications

- **Need for government initiatives that consider elite university progression specifically.** E.g. a sub-programme within the 'Uni Connect' programme.

- The regulator should **ensure a fairer distribution of elite university outreach activities**. This could involve using elite universities' Access and Participation Plans to map the existing targeting of activities and identify areas that have been under- or over-targeted

- Elite universities should look beyond the overall geography of their admissions, to also **examine the specific geography of where their students from disadvantaged backgrounds come from**

- Further partnerships and more collaborative widening participation work across all sectors of the economy could enable **greater internship and networking opportunities in professional sectors for all disadvantaged youth.**

# UK implications post-pandemic

- My findings relate to data primarily collected before the pandemic. However, **COVID-19 has made this topic ever more pertinent.**

- Recent UK research has shown that **the pandemic has fuelled a longer-term trend for students** - especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds - **to study at local universities** (Hall and Packham, 2021).

- In addition, **competition for places at elite universities in 2022/23 has been particularly high**:

  - Universities offering less places after being forced to take more students than planned during the pandemic
  - Additional demographic surge in the number of 18 year olds.

- *'The real fear is that many disadvantaged students, whose learning was disproportionally damaged by the pandemic, will be elbowed out' (Lee Elliot-Major, Professor of Social Mobility, University of Exeter)*

- This **raises questions** as to whether the **spatial inequalities in access** to elite universities in the UK identified **may widen yet further.**

# Wider policy implications

- Many other countries also have an uneven spatial distribution of universities, e.g. Australia, US, Egypt…
- **Egyptian universities** are particularly **concentrated within urban centres**. This is **reflected in the typically higher university progression rates of the country's urban youth**, especially those of Lower Egypt (Fahim and Sami, 2011).
- Could the impact of the pandemic have **exacerbated spatial inequalities in university progression in Egypt** too?

Shukran! (شكراً) Any questions?