

Over the past year, I have held the role of Widening Participation Fellow for the NWCDTP. I was keen to take on the role because I remember so clearly my own uncertainty about whether university was a place where I belonged as a first-generation student. I was thrilled to be able to go back to my own secondary school in West Cumbria to work with sixth form students on a project linking their Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) to PhD study. I wanted to highlight how the skills the students were already building – creating interesting research questions, carrying out primary and secondary research, working independently, and doing a ‘deep dive’ into the thing they were passionate about – were the very foundations of doctoral study.

For most students, the EPQ is the first piece of real independent research they will carry out, and the longest piece of written work they will have faced. I worked with small groups of sixth formers, delivering workshops on various aspects of research including how to sculpt a research question, finding and selecting appropriate materials, referencing, ethical considerations, avoiding bias, and working with non-textual sources. My aim was to not only support the EPQ projects and help the students to navigate new methods of working, but to make the idea of a PhD a less intimidating or distant one.

The highlight of the project was the culminating trip to Lancaster University, where the students got to carry out their own research in the library, and tour the campus. For many of them, it was their first time at a university, and it was brilliant to get to experience that moment alongside them. I believe that universities are shaped by the students who pass through their doors, and that scholarship is stronger when it reflects the full diversity of the society it serves. The topics the students were working on ranged from investigating the biggest threats to Sea Turtles, to the impact of TikTok on teenage mental health; every project was thoughtfully chosen, and for me, encapsulate the importance of widening participation, and making sure the door to PhD study isn’t closed to anyone.