Tracking and Mitigating the Psychological Impact of Lockdown on Y7-13 Pupils

A Comparison of Pre-Lockdown (2018-March 2020) to School-Return Period (Sept-Oct 23) Pupil Steering Bias Data collected by the AS Tracking Programme

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Report date: **08.11.2020**

Report key findings

- Comparison of pre-lockdown (2018-March 2020) to school-return period (Sept-Oct 23) 40% increase in boys and girls exhibiting a psychological pattern of Internalised Control, 3/10 girls and 2/10 boys now exhibit this pattern.
- The rise is specific to one sector of schools (state)
- Internalised Control is unlikely to be detected by teachers in schools because it is linked to a pupil projecting a different public persona to mask any observation. The percentage of pupils masking their needs has risen over the same period to 8/10 girls and 6/10 boys.
- Over time **Internalised Control** is likely to lead to an increase in a collection of explicit psychological risks: *perceived/ actual social isolation, undisclosed online attachments, unhealthy patterns of thinking, limited academic progress, stress related difficulties, unexpected volatility, hidden self-soothing.*
- There is evidence that the source of the rise in Internalised Control has, to date, been the experience of school rather than generalised response to the pandemic. COVID-related disruptions to school routine, life, teaching, interactions are postulated to be the cause.
- A window of opportunity now exists for teachers to target specific messages to pupils to prevent Internalised Control becoming a generalised and embedded adolescent psychological phenomenon. There is prior evidence that such targeted signposting is effective.
- Other psychological risk patterns were identified as surging during lockdown and then retreating post-lockdown. This reinforces the conclusion that the sustained surge in Internalised Control is real.

Report Contents

1. **Data sample**

Data from Years 7-13 gathered from the STEER Education AS Tracking programme has been included in this report. 92 UK mainstream secondary schools were included in the pre-lockdown sample (data collected from 2018-March 2020). The sample was made up of 79 independent schools (pupil n = greater than 23,000) and 13 state academies (pupil n = greater than 4,300). 51% girls, 49% boys. Schools self- selected to participate as part of a commercial programme offered by STEER Education to track and improve social-emotional biases. In-school pupil cohorts were selected to be tracked by schools according to time and financial resources. 55% of schools tracked 100% of their Y7-13 pupils; STEER did not specify specific groups to track over others to any school. Over 80% of participant schools had six rounds or more of tracking data, collected between 2018- Oct 2020. 32% of schools managed to track pupils during lockdown through remote pupil assessments. State academies reflected a wide diversity of affluence if measured against FSM data. No particular experimental design in school cohort selection was used.

2. **Data collection method**

Data was collected using the AS Tracking online assessment. The AS Tracking assessment was developed over a 15 year period to overcome the problems associated with pupil welfare self-reports. [1] The principle advance within AS Tracking is the measurement not of a pupil's direct perception of their own wellbeing/welfare via direct item questions, but by measuring the pupil's pattern of affective-social biases: *steering biases*.[2] Measuring steering biases involves a novel and unusual assessment process, which pupils find both accessible, often enjoyable, and has been shown to provide highly accurate insight into data otherwise not available from pupils. [3] Steers' multi-year research programme has shown that patterns of steering biases correlate 82% with specific wellbeing and welfare risks.[4]

Data for this report was collected in six rounds: October 2018, February 2019, October 2019, February 2020, April- July 2020 (lockdown), Sept-October 2020 (post lockdown school return). Pupils completed the STEER Education AS Tracking assessment at each assessment round. The AS Tracking assessment is an online pupil-voice assessment designed to measure and track the steering biases of a pupil. A four factor model of steering biases is assessed through a 32 item instrument. 16 items assess a pupil's generalised steering biases- biases which are not triggered by any particular context. 16 further items assess a pupil's contextual steering biases- specifically biases which are triggered by the context of school. By comparing the two sets of data the effect of school as a context- or road- which impacts pupil steering can be quantified.

3. **Data model**

The AS Tracking data measures four affective-social steering biases: Self-disclosure, Trust of Self, Trust of Others and Seeking Change. The significance of these biases for healthy adolescent social-emotional development has been articulated by the assessment authors.[5][6][7][8] Steering sits within a range of literature fields including self-regulation, executive function, metacognition, social priming and cognitive biasing[9].

The ability to regulate, or steer, these biases is a critical developmental skill underpinning mental health, social competencies and the ability to access learning. Steering is expected to improve over maturation but can be adversely affected by events in a child's life. Patterns of bias which become entrenched and iterated reduce the ability of a child to respond appropriately to the situation around them. Steering is also

[1] https://steer.global/en/thought-leadership/research/Thinking-straight-or-true-1.2.pdf
[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steering_cognition
[3] https://steer.global/en/thought-leadership/research
[4] https://steer.global/en/thought-leadership/research/AS_Tracking_Assessment_An_ecological_assessment_to_measure_Steering_Cognition__02.07.18.pdf
[5] https://steer.global/en/thought-leadership/research/Self-regulation.-The-ability-to-steer-JW-2.9.16.pdf
[6] https://steer.global/en/thought-leadership/research/AS-Tracking-a-psychological-and-developmental-understanding-of-trust-of-self-JW-28.8.16.pdf
[7] https://steer.global/en/thought-leadership/research/AS-Tracking-a-psychological-and-developmental-understanding-of-self-disclosure-JW-28.8.16.pdf
[8] https://steer.global/en/thought-leadership/research/AS-Tracking-a-psychological-and-developmental-understanding-of-trust-of-others-JW-28.8.16.pdf
[9] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Steering_cognition

contingent upon the 'effect of the road' on which a child drives. School is a road, home is another road. Contexts such as home and school have a quantifiable impact on the biases a child develops. Tracking the changes in a pupil's steering biases, therefore, exhibited both in school, and outside, can give an indication of adverse but hidden changes in those environments, and have often highlighted unknown safeguarding concerns

Pupil steering biases have proved to be stable for any given age of pupil over the past years. Age –related mean bias score trajectories are observed for each factor. Figure 1 shows the age-trajectories for several biases we measure in both 2018 and 2019.
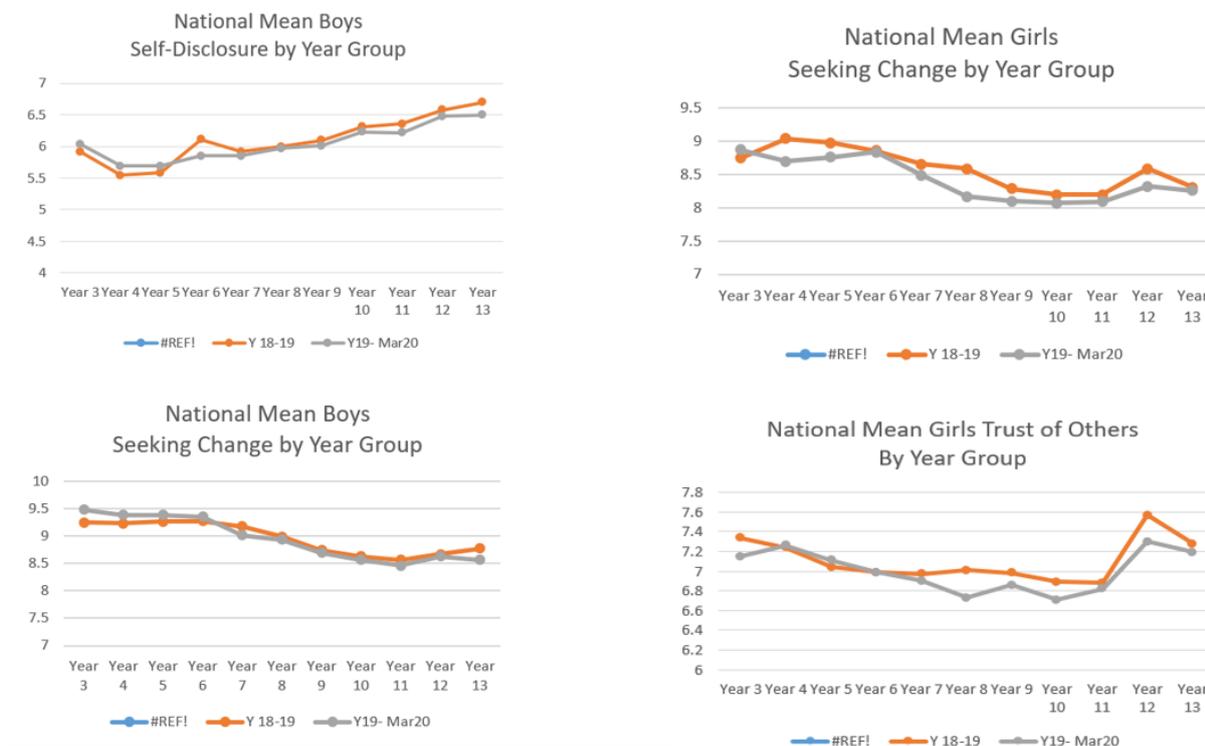

Figure 1

By contrast, Figure 2 includes data from April- October 2020 (lockdown and school return). The deviation from previous trajectories is clear. Lockdown was an event which has dysregulated steering against historical norms.
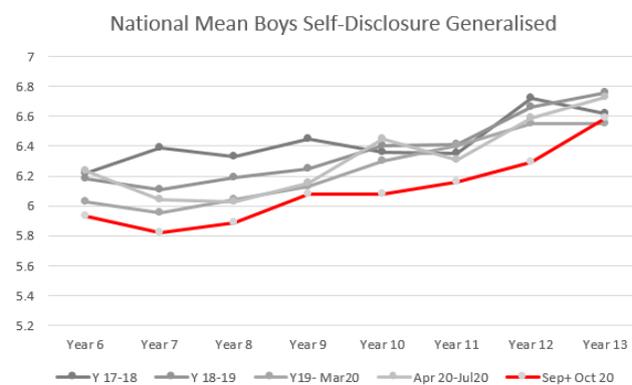

Figure 2

4. Key findings

Data from two phases reveals a lockdown effect (April- July), and a post-lockdown effect (school return Sept-Oct 2020).

4.1. **Some increased risks are gender specific**

Figure 3 shows the variance in aggregated bias means by school year when comparing pre lockdown data from 2018-19 with lockdown data, by gender. Girls exhibit roughly three times the variance compared to boys. Higher variance for girls indicates that girls found lockdown more difficult to navigate socially and emotionally than boys, compared to their previous social-emotional steering. Figure 4, which shows the same data for the post-lockdown school return period, indicates this trend has continued. Across both periods, girls have been more dysregulated than boys.
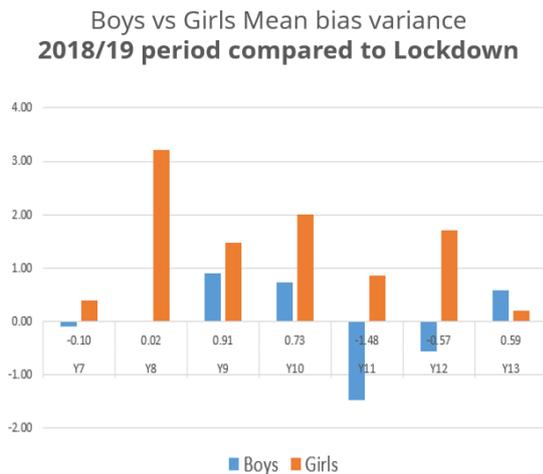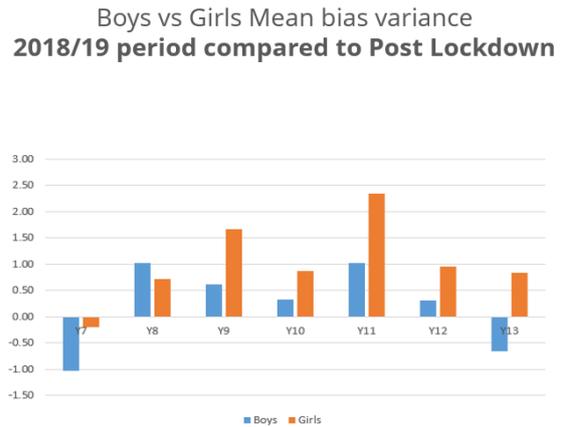
Boys vs Girls Mean bias variance
2018/19 period compared to Lockdown

Boys vs Girls Mean bias variance
2018/19 period compared to Post Lockdown

Figure 3

Figure 4

4.2. **Some increased risks are temporary and specific to lockdown**

Some risks peaked in lockdown and are declining. Figures 5 and 6 compare the percentage incidence of a psychological pattern called Hidden Vulnerability pre, intra and post lockdown for boys and girls. Figure 5 shows girls and Figure 6 boys.

Girls % Hidden Vulnerability
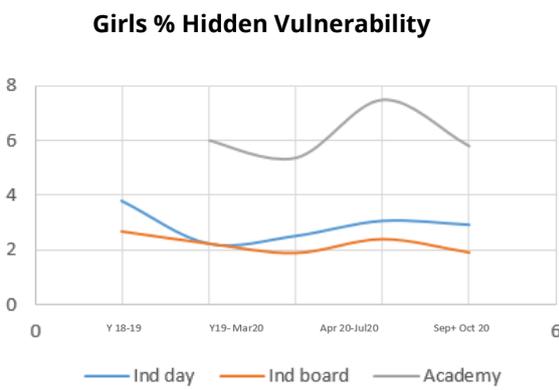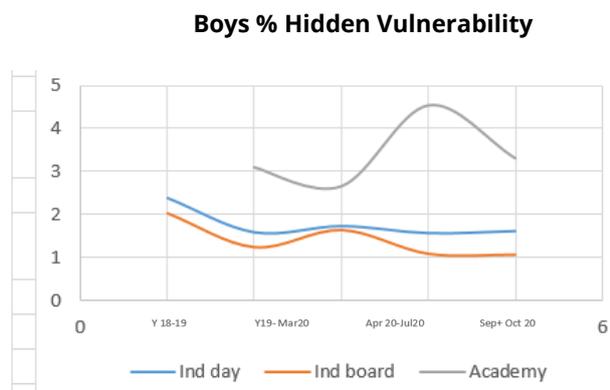
Boys % Hidden Vulnerability

Figure 5

Figure 6

Both genders from state academy schools exhibit a steep rise in percentage of Hidden Vulnerability during lockdown. For girls the rise is from 5.3% to 7.4%; for boys from 2.6% to 4.5%. The equivalent rise is not seen in the independent school cohorts.

Hidden vulnerability is a pattern associated with a lack of agency in the face of threat or hostility. It is a kind of psychological retreat combined with a fearfulness and lack of personal agency, confidence or self-efficacy

to address the external threat. It depicts a response, we suggest, to the perceived threat of the lockdown environment and wider pandemic situation.

However, post-lockdown data indicates that this rise in Hidden Vulnerability was temporary. By September-October, Hidden Vulnerability has reverted to the historic mean with a margin of error. The rise therefore appears to be highly contextual, driven by the temporary anxiety around that period. It is also noted from Figures 5 and 6 that it is sector-specific. Instances of Hidden Vulnerability are historically approximately twice as high in the state sector as the independent sector. The independent sector did not see any significant rise in Hidden Vulnerability during lockdown.

4.3. Some risks continue to increase beyond lockdown into school return

The emergence of a specific psychological risk pattern first during and then increasing after lockdown has been observed. Figure 7 shows the percentage of pupils, both genders, exhibiting a pattern of Internalised Control for both state academy and independent sectors, Pre-, Intra- and Post-Lockdown.

Internalised Control rises from 15.8% to 17.1 during lockdown in the academy sector. It then continues to climb to 22.3% post-lockdown, indicating that the ending of lockdown and the return to school has not mitigated the drivers pushing increased Internalised Control.
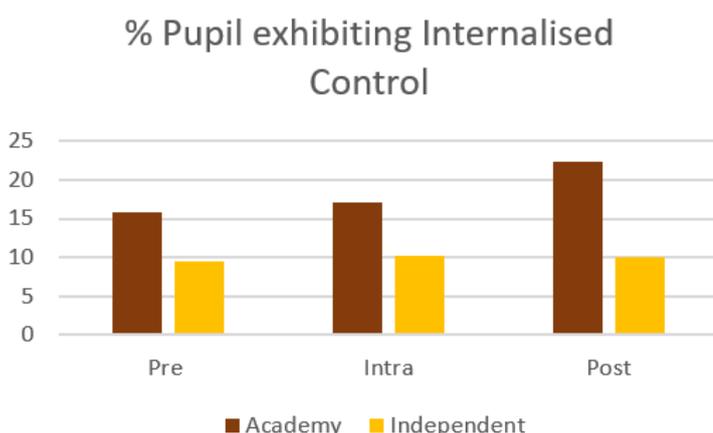

Figure 7

4.4. Risks are currently linked to the context of school rather than generalised experiences

There is evidence that this rise in Internalised Control is associated with the pupils' experience of post-lockdown return to school, rather than a generalised trigger from the pandemic. Figure 8 shows an increase in **in-school** polar biases. A polar bias is a steering bias which exceeds a score of either >12 or <3 on the AS Tracking scale. High or low polarity is linked to distinct social-emotional risks. Like a car whose steering is biased always to the right or left, there is a higher risk of the polar pupil psychologically crashing.

Whilst in-school polar biases have risen in lockdown and continued to rise after lockdown, generalised polar biases have only started to rise slowly post-lockdown. The flat trajectory of Generalised polar biases indicates that it is the context of school which is triggering the rise.
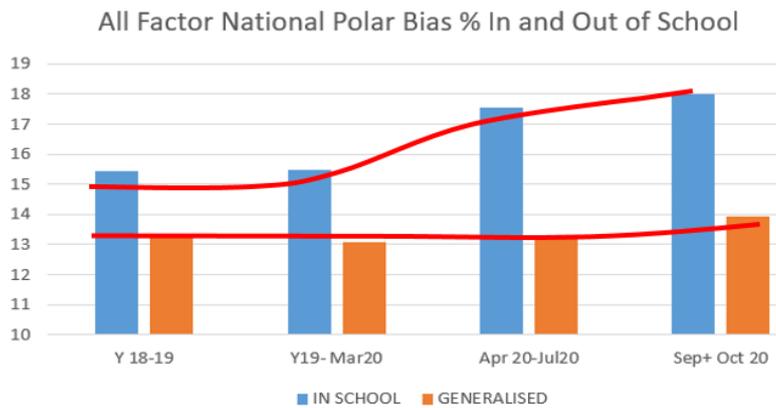
All Factor National Polar Bias % In and Out of School

Figure 8

It is postulated that the COVID-related disruptions of school life- face masks, social distancing, social bubbles, degraded teaching, loss of activities, unpredictable timetables- are all factors contributing to this rise. It is linked to the rise in Internalised Control.

5. **Discussion**

   5.1. **Why is Internalised Control rising?**

Internalised Control is a psychological response to an anxious, uncertain environment. Crucially, Internalised Control conceives of a person having both a front stage and a back stage. The back stage is the inner world of the person; the front stage is the public visible face of the person.

Figure 9 illustrates what kinds of inner mental scripts a young person, or pupil, may have on their front and back stage which lead to when exhibiting Internalised Control. The front stage script is shown in RED on the right. The back stage script is shown In GREEN on the left.

For example, *"I can't control what's out there"* (i.e.- a young person's feelings about the pandemic out there) leads to an inner backstage psychological response "*But I can control this…".* It is a strategy is to respond to uncertainty, change, unpredictability on the front stage by controlling one's own inner world.

World inside (backstage)

World outside me (front stage)

Figure 9 The inner scripts of Internalised Control

5.2. What are the psychological risks for pupils with Internalised Control?

Internalised control has specific psychological risks for a young person, in particular when established over time. See Figure 10. These manifest psychological problems arise from the steering bias of Internalised Control which, like a biased steering wheel of a car, mean that the car (person) tends to respond to the challenges ahead in a fixed and iterated way. For example, under pressure, they self-sooth through internalised control (controlling eating, self-harm, obsessive patterns of thinking, ruminating). In times, of anxiety, they do not reach out for help. They exert control through self-discipline and perfectionism. They become fixed and intractable in their thinking. They may be drawn to co-ruminating intense relationships.

Figure 10

6. What actions can be taken to mitigate these Internalised Control risks?

Action in schools by teachers can be taken to reduce the risks of Internalised Control. Whilst there are many practical restrictions preventing the school environment becoming more stable, predictable and available, teachers can still give specific messages to pupils.

Three key targeted messages are advised to be used in the coming weeks: *Acknowledge; Validate and Normalise; Scaffold and Signpost.*

1. ACKNOWLEDGE
   Acknowledging means expressing that "*Things are difficult right now...."* Acknowledging prevents worries being internalised. The opposite would be saying things like "Come on! We can get through it!

2. VALIDATE AND NORMALISE
   Validating means expressing "You might feel anxious, frustrated, disappointed …..it's okay to feel like this." Normalising means expressing "Lots of people may feel just like you." Validating and normalising reduce the sense of being isolated and unable to reach out to others. They facilitate openness and the ability to seek and receive support.

3. SCAFFOLD AND SIGNPOST
   Scaffolding means expressing "This is tough, but we can get through this together." Scaffolding is when teachers come alongside pupils to accompany them on the journey. It involves teachers and pupils walking together. Signposting means expressing concrete steps that can help i.e. "One thing we can do is……." Signposting means providing clear, specific, achievable in-school steps that pupils can take.

These steps may in themselves be generalised good practices for mental wellbeing. However, in contrast to generalised wellbeing messages which are broadcast to all at any time, signposts are specific to a situation, targeted for a reason and to an audience.

For example, in this context, the signpost for Internalised Control should be targeted to state school pupils (as opposed to independent); in the coming weeks or months (because the risk is currently rising); to reduce the negative effects of disrupted schooling (the source is disrupted school).

Specific targeted signposts for Internalised Control can be discussed with STEER Education or other professional wellbeing support professionals.

7.   How will we know if this strategy is working?

Ongoing steering bias tracking in the coming 3-9 months, within schools where the targeted signposts are used may provide comparative data about the efficacy of this approach. In particular in the forthcoming tracking phase labelled Wellbeing Recovery in Figure 11, a reduction in the blue in-school polar biases will indicate a positive impact.
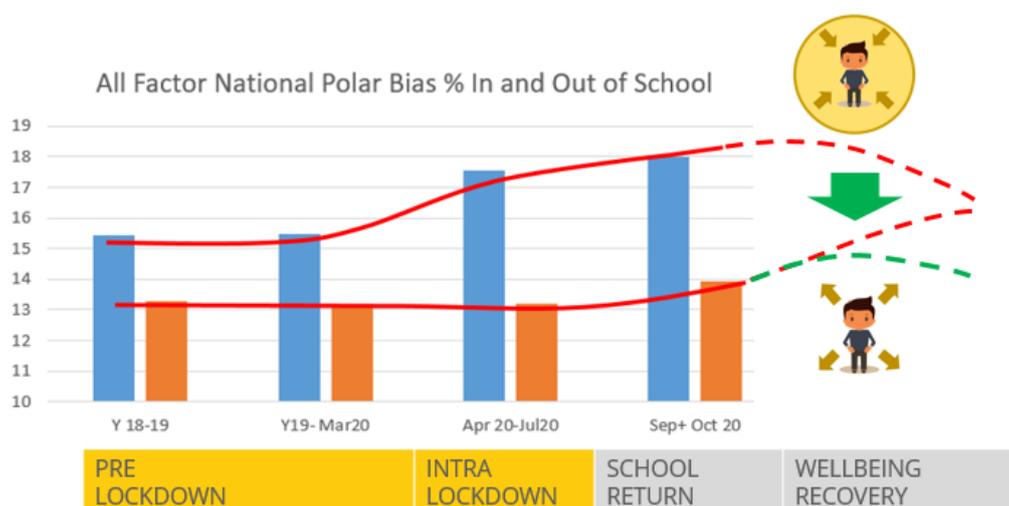

Figure 11

Conversely, a corresponding rise in this Figure 11 in-school bias, or indeed a rise in the brown Generalised steering biases over the same period, will indicate that the problem may be becoming more entrenched. It is predicted that there may be a lag in the efficacy of any strategy of several months. A longer tracking period will be required to fully identify the future risk pathway.

However, to conclude on a note of optimism, the data in Figure 11 suggests that there is now a window of opportunity to act to reduce the risks of Internalised Control. This is because the brown Generalised polar biases have yet to rise to the same degree as the in-school biases. This suggests that the steering biases linked to disrupted schooling may yet be prevented from becoming a generalised phenomenon embedded more deeply and lastingly into the psychology of this generation of Y7-13 children and young people. How long that window remains open for, depends on the action of schools taken next.

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Disclosure

The author acknowledge a commercial interest in STEER Education.