

National Collaborative Outreach Programme

*Year one report of the national
formative and impact evaluation,
including capacity building with
NCOP consortia*

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Executive Summary

NCOP aims to boost higher education (HE) participation rates amongst disadvantaged young people in England in order to contribute to the achievement of current Government goals to double the proportion of disadvantaged young people going in to HE and increase by 20 per cent the number of students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds by 2020. In addition, the Government has highlighted concerns about the continuing gap in HE participation rates between men and women, with particular reference to boys from disadvantaged backgrounds.

NCOP funds 29 consortia formed of HE institutions (HEIs), further education colleges (FECs), schools and other organisations such as employers, third sector bodies and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) to deliver focused activity to pupils living in areas with low absolute levels of HE participation and where participation is lower than expected given GCSE attainment. All except three of the 29 consortia have built on pre-existing partnerships. However, in some cases the exact composition of consortia has changed due the scale of activity and the number of schools and FECs engaged with.

Aims and objectives of the national evaluations

CFE Research, in partnership with Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT), Professor Jennifer Roberts and Dr Shqiponja Telhaj, was commissioned by HEFCE to undertake the formative and impact evaluations of NCOP. The key objectives of the *formative evaluation* are to examine the effectiveness of the processes involved in the design and implementation of collaborative approaches to outreach and to contribute to a fuller understanding of what works, in what context and why. The principal aim of the *impact evaluation* is to assess the consequential changes resulting from the diversity of NCOP interventions, by using a range of experimental and quasi-experimental methodologies. In addition, the team is helping to develop the capacity of consortia to evaluate their activities at the local level.

Across the evaluations, we have implemented a mixed-methods approach which involves: a survey of consortia staff and six field visits, a baseline survey of NCOP learners, two flagship randomised controlled trials (RCTs) and desk research of programme documentation and monitoring information. In addition, we have delivered a programme of capacity building which involved two workshops, two webinars, associated good practice guides and case management.

Key findings

This report draws on evidence from the desk research, survey of staff and participants, and field visits to consortia. It explores: how consortia partnerships are working and which approaches appear to be most effective; the barriers and enablers to school and FEC engagement and perceptions of engagement with NCOP learners; progress with local evaluations and the extent and nature of the measures that are in place to capture NCOP outcomes and impacts at the local level; and learners' aspirations, knowledge of HE, and

intentions to progress to HE prior to their involvement in NCOP. The report concludes with a summary of the emerging lessons and next steps for the evaluation.

Consortia partnerships

- A key impact of NCOP to date is enhanced collaboration between diverse partners and the benefits this brings. Collaboration across a range of partners helps to enhance expertise, generate fresh ideas and ensure a varied offer of experiences and opportunities for learners. FECs in particular offer different insights and an alternative pathway to HE that is potentially very beneficial to the NCOP.
- Establishing partnerships with appropriate staff, processes and a collaborative ethos takes time. Staff recruitment in particular can be very time consuming. Where consortia have built on existing partnerships this has been helpful, but it is vital that structures and processes are fit for purpose and that the important ways NCOP is different to previous collaborative outreach initiatives is clearly communicated.
- A degree of central control from consortia is needed to ensure the NCOP offer is coherent and coordinated. More effort is needed in highly-devolved funding models to ensure overarching aims and objectives are effectively communicated, understood and adhered to.
- Employing all staff centrally helps ensure consistency and focus. Consortia are better able to direct staff and ensure they remain assigned to NCOP activity. Team members have the same terms and conditions, removing potential areas for disharmony.
- This does not necessarily mean all staff need to be centrally located. Community-based outreach teams are effective in building local relationships, understanding needs and developing tailored responses. Embedding staff in a variety of locations helps consortia to cover often wide geographic areas. Staff embedded within other organisations need to ensure they maintain their NCOP identity so that they are seen as providers of impartial information and advice.
- There is scope to improve communication between the different lead and partner institutions and between strategic and operational teams, in particular, ensuring that all understand the targeting of learners and the rationale for this.

School and FEC engagement

- To date over 1,200 schools have been actively engaged with the programme.
- A major barrier is that some schools and FECs do not have the time and resource to prioritise and engage with NCOP. This can be helped by aligning outreach activity with the school curriculum and other priorities, allowing lead-in time to plan activity and providing funding or other resources to support schools and FEC engagement.
- Building new relationships with schools and FECs can be time-consuming. In particular, FECs can be more challenging to engage. Consortia may benefit from greater involvement of FECs as part of their core partnership.
- Outreach staff may require further support to communicate effectively to schools and FECs the ways NCOP is distinct from other outreach activity and the rationale for this. There is a strong perception among some outreach staff that the targeted nature of NCOP is problematic and could present a barrier to school and FEC engagement. These same concerns were not expressed by schools and FECs.

- The consortia we visited are delivering a combination of generic activities and programmes tailored to individual school/FEC needs. Bespoke programmes are seen to be more effective in addressing particular needs and complementing other outreach activity. Generic approaches have been used to deliver activity quickly and engage schools and FECs.
- Engaging parents of target learners is recognised as key, but how to do this effectively is a challenge. Undertaking activity in the community rather than in educational settings is one promising approach.
- It is too early to strongly evidence the impact of the NCOP activities, although there is some emerging evidence of positive effects on IAG and on school and FEC cultures of aspiration and progression.

Evaluating NCOP at a local and national level

- The review of consortia evaluation plans identified a number of common areas that could be improved to ensure alignment with the national evaluation. Some evaluation plans would be significantly strengthened by providing further clarity on the underpinning theoretical framework/model that has been used (e.g. more detail about the logic chain) and the addition or clarification of commentary about the intended outreach and evaluation activities that will take place.
- Specifying and quantifying objectives, targets and detailing success indicators would further improve some consortia evaluation plans. A number of plans did not include outcomes beyond the broader NCOP aims and objectives as set out by HEFCE. Evaluation plans and activities would be strengthened if plans could break down overarching outcomes into more discreet, measurable, shorter-term outcomes. Quantifying the intended improvement, either by number or proportion, would strengthen evaluation plans and ensure that consortia have clear markers of success by which to assess their outreach activities.
- Employing a dedicated evaluation role as part of consortia staffing models is important. Consortia should view this as integral to their staff model. In the absence of a dedicated evaluation post, it will be challenging for consortia to appropriately plan, implement and analyse evaluation activities and ensure that there is alignment with the national evaluation. Drawing upon evaluation expertise from other academic departments or commissioning specific elements of local evaluation plans can be beneficial, but should be viewed as supplementary to a dedicated evaluation post.
- Implementing and maintaining effective communication of local evaluation aims and objectives. Effective evaluation largely depends on the extent to which evaluation plans are fully embedded. Developing a local evaluation plan is a crucial step towards embedding effective evaluation procedures. A coordinated approach should be taken to communicate evaluation plans to all consortia staff to ensure a consistent and coherent evaluation approach is adopted. Involving consortia staff in the design and delivery of evaluation activity is important to secure consortia and school/FEC buy-in and transparency of approach.
- Evaluation should be viewed as an iterative and on-going activity, of critical importance. To achieve this, it is important that evaluation plans and progress are regularly reviewed and updated in light of changes to approach to ensure that they are aligned with the NCOP objectives and the national evaluation. Maintaining a risk-log to mitigate against potential challenges and time slippage should also be considered.

- Considerable progress has been made to use experimental methods to evaluate NCOP activity. Two flagship RCTs are in field to evaluate the effectiveness of a text-based intervention and e-mentoring programme on student aspirations, knowledge, intentions and actual progression to HE. A third RCT to evaluate summer schools is planned for later in 2018. Several consortia have expressed plans to employ quasi-experimental methodologies as part of their local evaluation activity. The meta-review of local evaluation evidence in 2018 will enable progress to be mapped out.
- Establishing school engagement with evaluation activities has been challenging for some consortia. Some consortia highlighted that it has taken significant resource to engage with, and secure school/FEC buy-in for evaluation activities. Schools have limited time and competing priorities, which has prevented some from engaging in the participant baseline survey. Ensuring all consortia outreach staff are fully briefed about evaluation aims and establishing key points of contacts in schools/FECs may help to secure engagement.

NCOP learner perceptions of HE

- A baseline of aspirations, knowledge of HE, and intentions to progress to HE has been set with over 28,000 NCOP learners in Years 9 to 13 studying in schools, sixth form colleges (SFCs) and FECs across 27 consortia.
- Learners' knowledge of how HE can benefit those who study at that level and their confidence in their ability to cope with the demands of HE is high and increases with age; the closer a young person gets to the transition point aged 18, the greater their self-reported confidence and knowledge of the benefits of HE are. Black and Asian learners report the highest levels of knowledge and confidence; disabled students are typically less positive about the likely benefits of HE for them and their ability to cope with the demands of studying at a HE.
- A third of NCOP learners are aware that they would be the first in their family to attend HE should they progress. Interestingly, a similar proportion do not know whether anyone else in their immediate family has HE experience. Despite their relative lack of direct HE experience, family is one of the strongest influences on learners' decision-making. Reaching out to parents/carers to ensure they are equipped to help their child make an informed decision about whether HE is right for them could be one way NCOP consortia could impact progression rates.
- Learners are, overall, less knowledgeable about the practical elements of HE, including the costs, funding available, and accommodation options. Information for parents, as well as young people, on the costs of HE and the funding available may be particularly impactful given this is an area learners report they know least about and there is existing research¹ to suggest that the perceived cost of HE can (negatively) influence parental views, particularly amongst disadvantaged groups.
- The majority of younger students who know what they want to do post-16 aspire to remain in education. Years 12 to 13 learners studying at sixth form are twice as likely to aspire to study at a university away from home as those currently studying at an FEC. Conversely, FEC learners are more than twice as likely to aspire to full time work as those

¹ For example BMG Research and CFE Research (2017) *Understanding the changing gaps in HE participation in different regions of England*. London: DfE.

in sixth form. Interestingly, a similar proportion of Year 11 and FEC Level 2 learners aspire to an apprenticeship. This suggests that the transition aged 16 is crucial, often setting learners on a path to either work or further study. Influencing learners at this stage may therefore be more impactful than post-16 when plans appear to become more fixed. This also suggests that the type of support required by learners on different routes may vary. It is important that students make the right decision for them, up to and following GCSEs, whether that be an academic or technical route (perhaps via a higher or degree apprenticeship). This highlights the importance of aligning outreach activity with that of the Careers & Enterprise Company.

- Learners in sixth form are more likely to have applied or report that they intend to apply to HE than those studying in FECs. The majority of older learners who have not applied to HE report that they are unlikely to do so in the future, irrespective of where they are currently studying. Male learners, in particular, are more likely to aspire to full-time work, driven by a desire to earn money, rather than HE. This suggests there is a group of learners who believe HE is not for them and underscores the importance of engaging learners earlier in the student lifecycle in order to influence their attitudes and aspirations, in order to ensure they consider all the options available to them.

Emerging lessons and next steps

- Many consortia have required much of the first year of the programme to recruit staff teams, develop effective partnership working and engage schools and FECs. Pressure to deliver activity and engage learners quickly means it is less likely to be strategic and tailored to meet local needs.
- Consortia have expended a great deal of time, effort and resource in developing their partnerships and outreach offers and are beginning to see the benefits. It is important that consortia have the opportunity to capitalise on this initial investment and realise the full benefits. This opportunity is limited if the programme is not extended beyond the initial phase (December 2018).
- The substantial funding available through NCOP has helped to engage stakeholders, including organisations that HEIs may not have worked with previously, such as employers, community groups and third-party providers of outreach activity. The NCOP funding also allows consortia to create highly tailored packages of support for individual schools and FECs.
- Collaboration with a diverse range of partners is a key feature and benefit of NCOP. To ensure that programmes of activity are coherent and that staff understand consortium aims, objectives and priorities, there does need to be *some* degree of central control and coordination within consortia.
- The baseline survey of NCOP learners has offered a positive glimpse that young people do recognise the benefits of HE. Overall, NCOP learners aspire to progress to HE and are confident in their ability to do so. However, there are certain groups that do not reflect this overall trend. Disabled learners have lower levels of knowledge about the benefits of HE and are less confident in their ability to fit in and cope with student life. White, working-class learners, and in particular young men, are less likely to aspire to HE. They are more likely to want to move into the labour market quickly and are more attracted to

full-time work or apprenticeship routes that offer opportunities to earn and learn. Consortia should consider developing tailored outreach activity for these specific groups.

- There is a stark difference in attitudes between post-16 learners in sixth-forms and those in FECs. Many NCOP learners located within FECs see their future progression taking place locally. Once learners progress to sixth form, many appear to be on a clear trajectory to participation in HE. This is not typically the case for FEC learners, although HE options may be available to them locally. Therefore, there is a case for consortia focusing on engaging FECs. It will also be important for consortia to focus their efforts on engaging young NCOP learners (pre-16) and providing a progressive programme for them that builds each year.
- Parents are a huge influence on the decisions that young people make about careers and education, yet a substantial proportion of NCOP learners know of no-one in their family who has experience of HE. Consortia recognise the importance of engaging parents but this is challenging and there is yet little evidence that they have plans for how they will achieve this. However, some are seeking to reach out to parents in their communities in recognition of the fact that not all parents are willing to engage in a school/educational setting.
- This report is necessarily limited and tentative in its findings. NCOP has been planned as a four year programme, and it will take a number of years before its impact can be evidenced through any increased participation rates in HE. It is therefore too soon to offer much evidence of impact. A good understanding of which approaches are most effective in engaging and supporting different groups will be crucial to inform the ongoing development of consortia programmes. Resource for local evaluation is finite, so it may be more useful for consortia to focus on understanding what works with regard to supporting specific groups, such as disabled students and white working-class boys, and/or on evaluating approaches that are genuinely new and untested. Some of the consortia are planning to take such an approach to their evaluations. This would complement the national evaluations, which are working on a broader scale to understand the overall impact.

Next steps

Year 1 of the evaluation has identified a number of issues which warrant further exploration as the evaluation progress in year 2. These include:

- Examining the prevalence of the different models in operation across the consortia and how they are evolving in response to the experience of delivering NCOP during year 1. A particular focus will be placed on the effectiveness of governance arrangements.
- Exploring the extent to which consortia are working with schools and FECs to up-skill staff in order to ensure the sustainability of the activity post-NCOP.
- Investigating effective approaches to engaging parents and ensuring the learner voice informs the ongoing development of the programme and individual activities.
- Evaluating the extent to which consortia develop genuinely innovative approaches as they become more established and the effectiveness of these activities.

- Further exploring learners' aspirations, knowledge of HE and future plans through a follow-up survey of participants. The primary survey data will be linked to longitudinal tracking data to begin to explore the impact of the programme.
- Ongoing review of local evaluation plans and findings to ensure robust evidence and synergy between the national and local evaluations.
- Assessing the challenges of designing and implementing RCTs in the context of NCOP and how these can be addressed to ensure experimental methods can be used to best effect to demonstrate the impact of outreach activities.