

The National Collaborative Outreach Programme

End of Phase 1 report for the national formative and impact evaluations

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Report to the OfS by:



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Contents

Glossary	1
Executive summary	2
Programme implementation and delivery.....	2
The emerging impact of NCOP	4
Strengthening the evidence base	6
Looking forward to Phase 2	8
01. Introduction.....	9
Background.....	9
National evaluation of NCOP.....	10
Impact evaluation	13
Report structure.....	15
02. Programme implementation	16
Key findings	16
Partnership structure.....	17
Operating models.....	20
Strategic and operational oversight of NCOP	25
Meeting targets and milestones.....	28
The added-value of collaboration	30
03. Programme Delivery	34
Key findings	34
School and FEC engagement	35
Engaging learners	40
Engaging parents	43
Engaging teachers.....	45
04. Emerging evidence of effective approaches to outreach	47
Key findings	47
Introduction.....	48
05. The impact of NCOP on learners.....	63
Key findings	63
Learner survey	64
Impact on knowledge of and attitudes to HE	66
Future plans and aspirations	76
Value for money of NCOP.....	84
06. Evidencing the impact of NCOP	86
Key findings	86
Introduction.....	87

Barriers to effective evaluation.....	88
Enablers of effective evaluation.....	91
Moving from process to impact evaluation	93
o7. Conclusions and recommendations.....	94
Programme implementation and delivery.....	94
The emerging impact of NCOP.....	97
Strengthening the evidence base	99
Appendix 1: National Evaluation Framework & Indicator Bank.....	103
Appendix 2: Original research questions	111
Appendix 3: Characteristics of partnership survey respondents – Year 2.....	113
Appendix 4: Analysis of the call for evidence survey responses.....	115
Appendix 5: Strength of evidence coding framework.....	118
Appendix 6: Assessment types of impact evaluation	119
Appendix 7: Summary of RCTs.....	120

Glossary

BAME	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
BIT	Behavioural Insights Team
FE	Further education
FEC	Further education college
FTE	Full-time equivalent
HE	Higher education
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEP	Higher education provider
IAG	Information, advice and guidance
ILR	Individual Learner Record
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
LSE	London School of Economics
NCOP	National Collaborative Outreach Programme
NNCO	National Networks for Collaborative Outreach
NPD	National Pupil Database
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
OfS	Office for Students
OA	Opportunity areas
RCT	Randomised control trial
SHU	Sheffield Hallam University
TASO	Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education
WP	Widening participation

Executive summary

The National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) was launched in January 2017 with the aim of increasing progression to higher education (HE) among certain under-represented groups. To achieve this, 29 partnerships were funded by HEFCE and by the Office for Students (OfS) from April 2018 to deliver a ‘sustained, progressive and intensive programme of support’ to pupils in Years 9 to 13 living in areas with low levels of HE participation and where participation was lower than expected given GCSE attainment.

This report presents the findings from the national formative and impact evaluations of Phase 1 of NCOP, which ended in July 2019. It explores the effectiveness of collaborative approaches to the governance, implementation and delivery of outreach, and emerging evidence of the impact of the programme on target learners. The report draws on evidence from an annual survey of partnership staff, 12 field visits to individual partnerships, a baseline and follow-up survey of over 4,000 learners who took part in the programme, three randomised control trials (RCTs) and a qualitative review of the partnerships’ evaluation evidence. On the basis of learning from Phase 1, we make recommendations on how the programme could be enhanced and evaluation practice strengthened in Phase 2.

Programme implementation and delivery

There is a long tradition of collaboration between further education (FE) and HE in England in support of access and participation goals. While NCOP has built on this work, its highly-targeted nature has challenged many established ways of working and provided the impetus for the development of new operating models and wider stakeholder engagement, including with employers, local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and the voluntary and community sector. It has taken time to establish and cement strategic relationships, secure the buy-in of schools and colleges to the programme, and develop the necessary systems and processes to support its delivery. However, as Phase 1 comes to a close, good progress has been made and solid foundations are now in place to ensure the continued success of NCOP in Phase 2.

Key achievements

- The collaborative approach is successfully addressing ‘cold spots’ in outreach provision. As a result of NCOP some schools and further education colleges (FECs) are engaging in outreach for the first time ever, or after a number of years.

- Partnerships are delivering a wide range of activities that combine to form a sustained and progressive programme of support for NCOP learners over the course of their journey through Years 9 to 13.
- The NCOP offer comprises well-established interventions as well as new and innovative approaches that have been developed in response to the opportunities, as well as the unique challenges, presented by the highly-targeted nature of NCOP.
- Partnerships are moving away from offering fixed menus of activities and increasingly providing programmes that are tailored to the age and circumstances of learners, school/college type and the local context.
- NCOP is facilitating access to high-quality, impartial information, advice and guidance (IAG) for target learners, in support of the achievement of the programme's objective to help ensure post-16 and post-18 decisions are better informed. There is a chance that increased knowledge of the range of options available may lead some to consider alternatives to HE, which may be the right decision for them, but which could negatively impact on the achievement of NCOP's long-term goal to increase progression amongst the NCOP target group.
- Notable progress has been made in addressing the challenge of engaging parents as key influencers on young people's aspirations and decision-making. Partnerships have drawn on the skills and experience of practitioners recruited from outside the field of access and participation to successfully reach out to parents and convey messages about HE in creative and engaging ways.
- Locating NCOP staff within schools and FECs to co-ordinate and/or deliver outreach activities boosts the capacity of the schools/FECs to engage with the programme. It also helps to support the professional development of teaching staff by raising their awareness of the routes to, and opportunities in, HE.

Areas for improvement

- Some partnerships' governing bodies do not reflect the core membership of the partnership they oversee and some lack strategic focus.
- Schools, colleges and young people are best placed to articulate their needs and the challenges they face, but they are not always represented at a strategic or operational level within partnerships and, as such, have limited opportunity to shape delivery plans.
- Good communication between the strategic and operational groups is imperative, as is communication between the lead institution and partners and between partners themselves. Although communication has improved, some partnership staff still report that it is not as effective as it could be.
- Some confusion about the aims and objectives of NCOP and the difference between NCOP and other outreach activities remains amongst schools and FECs, which is acting as a barrier to engagement in the programme.

Recommendations for partnerships

- Ensure *all core partners* are represented at a strategic and operational level through membership of the governing body and/or operational group or sub-group.
- Consider inviting wider stakeholders to join the group responsible for setting the partnership's strategic vision to ensure synergy with other initiatives, such as Opportunity Areas (OAs), so that NCOP contributes to wider social, cultural and economic goals in the medium-to long-term.
- Consider ways to move beyond simply taking account of learner feedback on activities to put learner voices at the heart of planning and delivery (i.e. to include the views of students or to involve them in decision-making).
- Continue to work collaboratively with schools and FECs to develop delivery plans and outreach activities that are tailored to their needs.
- Consider how communications mechanisms could be further developed and refined so that all partnership staff, including those who are new to the partnership, are kept fully informed.
- Refresh marketing materials and consider undertaking a Phase 2 launch event to ensure schools and FECs understand NCOP's aims and objectives and how the offer is distinct from outreach delivered by individual providers.

Recommendations for the OfS

- The OfS may wish to consider strengthening the national brand for NCOP and/or introducing a degree of consistency across local branding (e.g. a common strap line) to create a national identity that differentiates NCOP from other outreach.

The emerging impact of NCOP

NCOP is providing an important test-bed for new and innovative approaches to outreach as well as for trialling more established interventions with different groups and in different contexts. The impact of these interventions is being evaluated at the local level and the evidence synthesised by the national team to develop an understanding of the relative effectiveness of different types and intensities of activity. The impact of the programme will not be fully understood for some time and an important caveat is that in the absence of a comparison group, no conclusive claims of attribution about the impact of particular interventions can be made. Despite this, current evidence provides encouraging signs that the sustained and progressive nature of the NCOP is benefiting the learners who take part. In particular, NCOP is challenging misconceptions about who HE is for and developing learners' self-belief and confidence in their ability to progress and succeed in HE.

Key findings

Intensity of interventions

- Engagement in multiple interventions is more likely to deliver positive outcomes than one-off interventions. There is a positive correlation between the number of NCOP activities learners take part in and improvements in their self-reported knowledge, attitudes and intentions towards HE. Therefore, a sustained and progressive programme of engagement with learners is crucial.
- Workshops and IAG are often key parts of multi-activity programmes which are reported to have a positive effect on intentions to progress to HE.
- A higher level of engagement in NCOP activities is associated with greater knowledge about HE, graduate careers prospects and learner confidence in where to find information about courses, financial support and university accommodation.

Outcomes of different interventions

- Mentoring is shown to be an effective way to improve learners' knowledge and awareness of HE, including the academic demands involved. It helps ensure learners know where to get information about the options available to them post-18 and boosts their confidence in their ability to make the right choices.
- Evidence regarding the impact of summer schools on intentions to progress to HE is inconclusive. However, the opportunity to develop social and cultural capital through engagement in this type of activity is perceived by NCOP staff to be a key benefit.
- Campus visits give prospective students a taste of university life. Those that take part report increased knowledge of the courses available, how to apply to HE and what student life is like, as well as the likely career prospects for graduates.
- IAG is delivered both as a standalone activity and as an integral part of other interventions. As a result, its impact on learner outcomes is hard to discern based on current evidence.

Impact on different groups of learners

- NCOP is having a positive effect on male perceptions of their ability to succeed in HE, but overall NCOP is having a more positive impact on females.
- NCOP is having a more positive effect on older year groups, those without a disability, white learners, those who know someone at university and those living in areas of relatively low deprivation.
- While there has been a positive shift in knowledge, attitudes and intentions towards HE amongst NCOP target learners overall, more needs to be done to ensure NCOP is effectively supporting key under-represented groups and those who are most disadvantaged, including Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME)

and disabled learners. The analysis reveals that these groups are less knowledgeable and confident about their ability to progress to HE than other groups.

Maximising the impact of interventions

- The benefits of interventions are enhanced if the activity is targeted and tailored to specific groups, such as older year groups, learners with an interest in a subject/discipline or demographic groups, such as disadvantaged students.
- When activities are delivered is critical to success, both in terms of time of year (e.g. to avoid exam clashes) and stage in the student lifecycle (e.g. at a key decision/transition point). Get the timing wrong and there is the potential to have a negative effect, including on intentions to progress to HE.
- Outreach activities that provide a fuller understanding of the demands of degree-level study can lead to a dip in learner confidence in their ability to succeed in HE. While it is important to ensure learners understand what will be expected of them, it is equally important to ensure their confidence is not dented as this could deter them from progressing to HE and adversely affect the achievement of NCOP's aims.
- A high proportion of learners already express an intention to progress to HE at the start of the programme. NCOP may have limited impact on the aspirations of these learners.

Focus for future evaluation

- Further research is required on: the impact of IAG on learners' intentions towards HE; effective approaches to supporting the progression of disabled and BAME learners; and the barriers to progression experienced by male learners and the reasons for the differential impact of activities on males and females.
- Learners' intentions towards HE should be tracked over time to identify when and why dips in confidence occur and effective ways to address these.
- Research is required to understand the impact of NCOP on which providers learners intend to apply to and what subject they intend to study, in addition to whether they apply to HE.

Strengthening the evidence base

A central objective of NCOP is to strengthen the evidence base by improving the volume and quality of research on the impact of different types and levels of outreach. Although providers have been encouraged to evaluate their widening participation (WP) activities in the past, NCOP represents a step change for many in the sector. This has presented some challenges. In addition to developing and maintaining evaluation capacity internally, gaining the necessary support from

schools and colleges for evaluation activity has presented particular issues. The time and resources required to secure their buy-in, and the burden evaluation places on them, have presented barriers to engagement. As such, there is an imperative for sufficient resources to be set aside for this, in addition to front-line engagement.

Key achievements

- Evidence on the effectiveness of delivery (process evaluation) along with evidence of the impact of different interventions on outcomes for learners (impact evaluation) is starting to emerge at the local level, contributing to a fuller understanding of what works, in what context and why.
- Partnerships have developed the capacity to undertake evaluation with the support of the national evaluation team. Each partnership has an evaluation plan in place that has been reviewed to ensure synergy with the national evaluation framework.
- Each partnership has an evaluation lead charged with the implementation of their local evaluation plan. A number of partnerships have bolstered their evaluation capacity by recruiting evaluation officers and administrative staff, drawing on academic expertise within partner institutions and, in some cases, outsourcing elements of their evaluations to external consultants.
- Effective strategies for securing the co-operation of schools and FECs with evaluation include providing financial incentives and staff resources to support data collection.
- Partnerships have developed toolkits to ensure the quality, consistency and timeliness of data collected.

Areas for improvement

- More could be done to improve both the volume and strength of the evidence by moving from a focus on developing an understanding of *process* to capturing more robust evidence of the *impact* of NCOP and the relative effectiveness of outreach activities on learner outcomes.
- Limited use is currently being made of RCTs and quasi-experimental methods that compare the outcomes achieved by NCOP learners to a suitable comparison or control group to strengthen the attribution of impact.
- Reporting of local evaluation could be improved to ensure consistency in the information provided and greater transparency in terms of the methodological approach, sampling and response rates, and strength of the findings and conclusions.

Recommendations for partnerships as they refine and implement their evaluation plans for Phase 2, along with recommendations for the development of the national evaluation, are provided in the main report.

Looking forward to Phase 2

NCOP will maintain its focus on widening access in support of the OfS's strategic objectives to reduce access (and participation) gaps and achieve equality of opportunity in HE. Although increasing progression to high tariff institutions is not an explicit objective of the programme, the evaluation presents a valuable opportunity to capture insights into *where* and *what* subjects NCOP learners choose to study as well as the reasons why they progress to HE (or not). Expectations of the volume and quality of the evidence produced on the impact of the programme at the national and local level will increase, underpinned by an enhanced capability building programme led by the University of Exeter. In addition, the programme will be affected by changes in policy, most directly, the introduction of Outreach Hubs, which will be led by NCOP partnerships to ensure *all* the schools and colleges in their area have a point of contact for and access to outreach, irrespective of whether they are attended by target NCOP learners. These, and any other changes, will need to be taken into account in the planning and delivery of Phase 2 of NCOP as well as in the context of the local and national evaluations.¹

¹ The OfS guidance is designed to drive improvements for Phase 2:
<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/national-collaborative-outreach-programme-phase-two-guidance/>

01. Introduction

This report summarises the findings from Phase 1 of the national formative evaluation of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme and sets out recommendations for Phase 2 of the programme.

Background

The National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) was launched in January 2017. Phase 1 runs until July 2019. Phase 2 will commence in August and run for two academic years until July 2021. NCOP was originally commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to increase the progression of under-represented groups to higher education (HE) and contribute to the achievement of the dual goals to double the proportion of disadvantaged young people going into HE and to increase by 20% the number of students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds by 2020.

In Phase 1 of NCOP, 29 partnerships led by higher education providers (HEPs) were funded to deliver a ‘sustained, progressive and intensive programme of support’ to pupils in Years 9 to 13 who were living in areas with low absolute levels of HE participation and where participation was lower than expected given GCSE attainment. While NCOP has maintained its focus on widening access to HE for under-represented groups over the course of this first phase, the objectives of the programme evolved in Year 2 to align with the strategic objectives of the Office for Students (OfS), the new regulator for HE in England.

Aims and objectives of NCOP

The OfS replaced HEFCE and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) in April 2018. It aims to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of HE that enriches their lives and careers.² A new outcomes-focused, risk-based approach to access and participation will fulfil a central role in achieving this aim by challenging HEPs to eliminate the gaps across the student lifecycle and achieve equality of opportunity in HE within 20 years. NCOP is contributing to the achievement of these wider strategic objectives by:

- reducing the gap in participation between the most and least represented groups,

² OfS (2018) *Office for Students Strategy 2018 to 2021*, published online at: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/465d993d-daa8-42d2-a875-4a5fe63b211b/ofs-strategy-2018-21.pdf>

- supporting young people to make well-informed decisions about their future education,
- supporting effective and impactful, local collaboration between HEPs, schools, colleges, employers and other partners, and
- contributing to a stronger evidence base around ‘what works’ in HE outreach and strengthening evaluation practice in the sector.³

National evaluation of NCOP

NCOP represents a significant public investment. As such, a number of activities designed to monitor progress towards the achievement of the programme’s objectives, evaluate its impact on progression to HE, and establish value for money are being undertaken by the OfS, tracking organisations, NCOP partnerships and the national evaluation team. Some of this work will continue beyond the life of the programme to establish the long-term effect on progression to HE by under-represented groups.

This report presents the findings from the national formative evaluation and impact evaluations. CFE Research (CFE), an independent social research company, was commissioned to undertake both these aspects, in addition to a programme of capacity building. CFE worked in partnership with Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) to deliver the formative evaluation and capacity-building programme and with the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) and academics from the University of Sheffield and London School of Economics (LSE) to deliver the impact evaluation.

Capacity building

The capacity-building programme comprised four webinars on survey design, quasi-experimental methods and the development of control groups, developing evaluation frameworks, and the learner voice (which means the inclusion of the views of students or their direct involvement in decision-making). A fifth webinar was hosted to share the early findings from Phase 1 of NCOP on the impact of the programme at local and national level. Associated materials and resources were produced following the webinars, which also featured contributions from partnership staff.

Partnerships also received feedback on their evaluation frameworks to ensure synergy with the national evaluation framework (see [Appendix 1](#)) and one-to-one support to engage with the national evaluation from the team and nominated case managers. Following the formal call for local evaluation evidence, the national research team invited the evaluation leads at each of the partnerships to take part in

³ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/national-collaborative-outreach-programme-ncop/how-ncop-works/>

an interview to discuss their reflections on their local evaluations. They also discussed their interactions with the national evaluation, including the barriers and enablers to evaluation. In total, 27 out of 29 partnerships took part in these discussions.

Formative evaluation

The formative evaluation set out to explore the effectiveness of collaborative approaches to outreach and contribute to the development of a fuller understanding of ‘what works, in what context and why’. While the overarching aim and research questions for Phase 1 remained unchanged (see [Appendix 2](#)), the effectiveness of governance arrangements and the ways in which partnerships are embedding the learner voice, together with examples of innovative practice, provided an additional focus in Year 2.

Partnership survey and field visits

A wide range of partnership staff have been consulted over the course of Phase 1 through an annual online survey and in-depth field visits. The survey was administered by NCOP Leads (i.e. those with responsibility for leading a partnership) for dissemination to all partnership staff. There were two parts to the survey. Part A asked for information about the composition of partnerships, including the number of NCOP-funded staff in different roles, and was completed by partnership Leads only. Part B was completed by all respondents. It asked for staff views and experiences of the set-up and implementation of NCOP and perceptions of the emerging benefits for learners and wider stakeholders. A total of 325 partnership staff responded to the survey in Year 1 which was administered in July 2017. A total of 506 staff responded to the survey in Year 2 which was administered in May 2018. At least one response was received to each part of the survey from each partnership. Further details of the profile of respondents is provided in [Appendix 3](#). A wide range of staff involved in the governance, management, delivery and evaluation of NCOP were consulted during 12 two-day field visits to a cross-section of partnerships. The experiences of staff in schools and colleges where NCOP activities have been delivered were also captured during the visits.

Review of local evaluation evidence

A review of local evaluation evidence produced by partnerships on the impact of NCOP-funded activities and interventions⁴ was conducted by the national evaluation team in order to develop of a fuller understanding of ‘what’s working, in what context and why’. Partnerships were encouraged to share outputs detailing the findings from

⁴ Partnerships are also conducting process evaluations to understand the effectiveness of programme delivery at the local level. Partnerships have been encouraged to focus their *impact* evaluation on a sub-set of activities, for example, new and innovative activities, well-established activities that are being delivered to new groups or in new contexts, strategically important interventions, and/or interventions requiring a substantial financial investment.

their local evaluation activity throughout Phase 1 via email, the NCOP JISCmail mailing list, the capacity-building webinars and various NCOP events and internal meetings.

A formal call-for-evidence survey was administered between February and April 2019. The aim of the survey was to develop a consistent approach to collating the evidence, including a detailed understanding of the interventions being evaluated, costs, methodological approaches, the outcomes being measured and impact. Partnerships were asked to submit a separate survey response for each of the interventions evaluated, together with supporting evidence in the form of final or interim reports and a summary outputs. The survey was disseminated to evaluation leads at all 29 partnerships and 20 of the 29 partnerships submitted at least one piece of evaluation evidence for assessment. The survey collected evaluation information for 67 activities offered by 20 partnerships. The number of survey submissions varied, with nine partnerships submitting information relating to one evaluation and one partnership submitting 12. Analysis of the consultation survey responses is provided in [Appendix 4](#).

Documentation review

A total of 185 documents were submitted in response to the various calls for evidence. Following an initial review, 68 were identified for detailed analysis. Documentation not included in the review included reports that focused on monitoring as opposed to evaluation activity, marketing and promotional outputs, and reports containing insufficient detail to enable the evaluation team to assess the strength of the evidence.

A coding framework was devised for the documentation review, informed by the OfS's standards of evidence guidance⁵ and the evaluation self-assessment tool.⁶ The framework comprised a set of criteria to enable the evaluation team to determine the following:

- type of outreach intervention evaluated,
- key research objectives,
- details of the target groups involved,
- sample sizes,
- evaluation methodology adopted,
- main findings,

⁵ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluating-impact-of-outreach/>

⁶ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation-and-effective-practice/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluation-self-assessment-tool/evaluation-self-assessment-tool/>

- early indicators of success against outcomes,
- challenges encountered during evaluation,
- assessment of the strength of evidence and
- strengths/areas for further development in future evaluation activity.

The coding framework templates are provided in [Appendix 5](#) and [Appendix 6](#).

Impact evaluation

The principal aim of the national impact evaluation is to measure the extent of the changes in learners' knowledge, attitudes and aspirations towards HE that result from their engagement with NCOP. The primary mechanisms for measuring impact are (i) a national longitudinal survey of learners in NCOP target schools and colleges designed by the national evaluation team and administered by partnerships using a mixed mode approach⁷ and (ii) three randomised control trials (RCTs) designed and administered by partnerships with support from the national evaluation team.

Longitudinal learner survey

During Phase 1, a baseline and follow-up (Wave 1) survey were administered to pupils attending NCOP target schools and colleges. The responses from pupils who completed the baseline and Wave 1 follow-up survey have been linked at an individual level. This data has been matched with information on the number and type of outreach activities the pupils have taken part in, which is collected by three tracking organisations – HEAT,⁸ EMWPREP⁹ and AWM.¹⁰ At this stage in the impact evaluation, it has been possible to measure the changes in learners' self-reported knowledge, attitudes and aspirations that have occurred between the two waves and explore the relative impact of different types and intensities of intervention on learners' outcomes. Details of the profile of NCOP learners and outreach activities are provided in a separate technical annex to accompany this report.¹¹ The annex also includes details of the data matching process and the results of the regression analysis.

During Phase 2, the linked survey data will also be matched to national administrative data, including the National Pupil Database (NPD) and Individual Learner Record (ILR). This will enable us to compare the outcomes of those who take

⁷ Online and paper-based

⁸ Higher Education Access Tracker

⁹ East Midlands Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Partnership

¹⁰ Aimhigher West Midlands

¹¹ Download the Technical Annex here: http://cfe.org.uk/app/uploads/NCOP_Phase_1_Technical_Annex.pdf

part in NCOP with those achieved by other young people with similar characteristics. At that stage, we will be in a position to better understand the impact of the programme by identifying what is likely to have happened in the absence of NCOP.

Randomised control trials

Three RCTs were designed and implemented by five partnerships with the support of CFE and the BIT. The trials involved both light-touch and more intensive outreach activities:

- **Light-touch nudging text-based technique** with Year 11 and 13 learners (NEACO). The aim of the first trial was to test whether a light-touch nudging text message intervention could encourage Year 13 learners to apply to HE. The second trial was carried out with Year 11 learners to understand whether the same type of intervention could help to improve their understanding of post-16 options.
- **E-mentoring**, a higher-intensity, outreach activity with Year 12 further education college (FEC) learners (SUN). The aim of this trial was to test whether an eight-week e-mentoring programme could encourage students to apply to HE and improve their knowledge about HE options.
- **Summer school**, high-intensity activity with Year 10 learners (GHWY, HOP and LiNCHigher). The aim of this trial was to test whether a residential university summer school for Year 10s could increase learners' knowledge about HE, their motivation to attend and their belief that it was possible. The trial combined data from across two summer schools run by three NCOP partnerships. The sample of learners across all three partnerships was combined to analyse the effect of attending a multi-day residential in summer 2018, on a range of outcomes.

Trial rigour: padlock rating for NCOP trials to date

The EEF (Education Endowment Foundation) assigns an evidence security rating to each of the trials that it conducts.¹² Security ratings are awarded based on research design, minimum detectable effect size (MDES), attrition (drop-out of participants from initial sample) and threats to internal validity. The final score is based on the lowest padlock rating of any constituent element, and may be adjusted (lowered by one or two padlocks) where threats to internal validity are identified. We can use this approach to evaluate the NCOP trials. All the NCOP trials score highly on design because randomised designs were adopted, which are associated with a padlock rating of five out of five. However, padlock ratings are lower for MDES and attrition. Further details of the sample sizes, design, timeline and outcome measures for each RCT are provided in [Appendix 7](#).

¹² <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/help/projects/the-eeef-security-rating/>

Report structure

This report summarises the key findings from the all aspects of the national evaluation of NCOP undertaken in Phase 1. It builds on the End of Year 1 report,¹³ drawing mainly on new evidence captured during Year 2.

- **Chapter 2** explores partnerships' operating models, along with their governance, leadership and management structures. It considers the extent to which these are enabling partnerships to deliver against their key targets and goals, and explores the perceived value of collaborative approaches to outreach.
- **Chapter 3** considers the ways in which partnerships have overcome the challenges of engaging schools/FECs in order to deliver activity to target learners, including through new and innovative approaches.
- **Chapter 4** explores the range of provision being delivered through NCOP. It draws on local evaluation evidence (including the RCTs) along with insights from the staff survey and field visits to partnerships to identify emerging examples of effective practice.
- **Chapter 5** summarises the evidence to date regarding the impact of NCOP at the programme level, drawing on the findings from the first two waves of the learner survey. It also examines monitoring data in order to begin to explore the value for money of the programme.
- **Chapter 6** outlines the mechanisms that are in place to evidence the impact of NCOP. It also examines the issues and challenges encountered by partnerships, including when undertaking RCTs.
- **Chapter 7** summarises the progress that has been made during Phase 1 of NCOP. A series of recommendations to inform the ongoing development of the programme are made, along with recommendations on how local and national evaluation practice could be further strengthened in Phase 2.

¹³

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180405115436/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2018/ncopyear1/>

02. Programme implementation

This chapter explores the effectiveness of governance, leadership and management structures and the extent to which these are enabling partnerships to deliver against their targets. Staff perceptions of the benefits of collaboration are also explored.

Key findings

- In spite of early challenges, most partnerships are now working effectively and delivering a collaborative offer. Partnerships have learned from their experience over Phase 1 and are evolving their size and shape, including expanding their membership. This demonstrates that partnerships are able to be agile and responsive to the needs of the programme as well as their local context.
- A number of operating models are in place which reflect the composition of partnerships and the local context. Approaches range from ‘highly centralised’ to ‘highly devolved’. Although each is recognised for its relative strengths, partnerships appear to be operating effectively whichever model is in place.
- Partnership staff perceive that governance is most effective when separate bodies set the strategic direction and develop operational plans. Some partnerships have taken steps to ensure their strategic bodies comprise senior leaders from *all* partners. Senior leaders are often also engaged with wider policy and initiatives, such as Opportunity Areas (OAs), and this helps to ensure NCOP contributes to wider social, cultural and economic objectives.
- There is limited evidence that partnerships are engaging the ‘learner voice’ at a strategic level – either by representing their views or including them in decision-making.
- In the main, lead organisations are perceived to provide effective leadership and communicate well with partnership members. However, communication between strategic and operational teams and between partners could be further improved in some instances.
- Additional staff have been recruited to support targeting and provider engagement as well as delivery of outreach in community and educational settings.
- A number of the schools and FECs are engaging in outreach for the first time ever or after a number of years. As a result, NCOP is extending outreach to learners who may not otherwise have access to, or the opportunity to benefit from, support.

- Partnerships have engaged almost a quarter-of-a-million NCOP learners to date and the programme is perceived to be largely on track to achieve its targets at a local and national level.
- The focus on collaboration is supporting partnership development and joint working, facilitating knowledge sharing and continuing professional development (CPD) of partnership staff, and encouraging the development of innovative approaches to outreach.
- Collaboration is perceived to help in minimising the burden on schools/FECs by reducing the number of approaches from different providers. There is the potential for engagement with schools and FECs to be further streamlined as the new Outreach Hubs become established.

Partnership structure

All except three of the NCOP partnerships evolved from existing collaborative networks. However, the highly-targeted nature of NCOP distinguishes it from previous initiatives and, as a result, partnerships have needed to evolve in order to address the specific aims and objectives of the programme. In some respects, this has presented a greater challenge for the partnerships that were already established, as they have had to work to modify their membership and the roles and responsibilities of their delivery staff, adapt existing systems and processes, and develop a new shared vision and ethos. Rather than speeding up the process, pre-existing relationships, systems and approaches have acted as barriers to partnership working in some contexts, at least initially, resulting in partners working in parallel rather than in collaboration. Although new partnerships took longer to establish, they had the advantage of being able to design structures, systems and processes specifically for NCOP from the outset.

Although there is evidence to suggest that one or two partnerships are still working to overcome the challenges of joint working, most are now operating as effective partnerships and are delivering a collaborative offer. Importantly, partnerships have learned from their experience of managing and delivering such a targeted programme, and are continuing to evolve the size and shape of their partnership in response. This demonstrates that partnerships are able to be agile and responsive to the needs of the programme as well as their local context.

Composition and reach of consortia

In the period between the first and second wave of the partnership staff survey (August 2017 to May 2018), there has been a 43% rise¹⁴ in the total number of *core partners*¹⁵ in partnerships overall. This includes a substantial increase in the number of FECs, Local Authorities (LAs) and community and voluntary organisations. In addition, there has been a 19% increase in the number of *wider partners* engaged with partnerships - principally schools and FECs.

Partnerships are making extensive use of third-party delivery organisations. However, insights from the field visits suggest that the extent and nature of this relationship has changed in some instances. Some partnerships have reduced the proportion of delivery by third parties as they have become more established, increased their own capacity for delivery and developed their understanding of the needs of the schools and FECs they are working with.

According to the consortia survey findings, 25 out of the 29 consortia are engaged with other national organisations, programmes and initiatives where there is synergy between their overarching objectives. These include European Social Fund and Careers & Enterprise Company-funded initiatives, and programmes targeted at specific groups, such as The Service Children's Progression (SCiP) Alliance that is focused on improving outcomes for children of military families. A total of 10 partnerships¹⁶ are located within OAs. There is evidence from the field visits that partnerships are working with wider partners in the OAs to share local and national intelligence. This is helping to inform the development of partnerships' operating plans, including measures to address 'cold spots' in outreach provision.

National initiatives, like NCOP and OAs, are often characterised by ambitious and complex objectives which can overlap. However, by maintaining clear communication channels, they can successfully operate in parallel, so avoiding duplication and delivering greater efficiencies by pooling resources where appropriate. In this context, these collaborations are enabling the provision of high-quality information for both young people and parents, and the creation of networks with schools, colleges and the wider community. If these can be sustained beyond the

¹⁴ This finding should be interpreted with care. Due to the significant increase, this number may include schools and FECs, and not just those directly involved.

¹⁵ A core member is defined as any partner organisation that is actively involved in the management, design and/or delivery of NCOP. Organisations, such as schools and colleges that are only in receipt of activities being delivered by NCOP partners are not considered core members.

¹⁶ West Somerset: Next Steps South West; Fenland and East Cambridgeshire, Norwich, Ipswich: NEACO; Blackpool: Future U; North Yorkshire Coast: Higher York; Derby: DANCOP; Oldham: Greater Manchester Higher; Hastings: Sussex Learning Network; Bradford: GHWY; Stoke on Trent: Higher Horizons+; Doncaster: HeppSY.

life of the programme, NCOP has the potential to contribute to the achievement of wider social, cultural and economic objectives in the regions in which they operate.

Partnership working across programmes is also beneficial for schools and FECs as it helps to minimise the number of organisations they need to liaise with, as well as the number that approach them with offers of provision. It is hoped that engagement with schools and FECs will be further streamlined as the new Outreach Hubs become established. The Hubs are designed to act as a single point of contact, facilitating access to HE outreach for schools and FECs and providing a platform for wider collaboration.¹⁷

Expansion in partnership staff

The evidence suggests that some partnerships initially under-estimated the level and diversity of skills and expertise required to effectively manage, deliver and evaluate the impact of a large and targeted programme such as NCOP, as well as the volume of administrative support needed. As NCOP has become more established, partnerships have developed a greater appreciation of the skills and capacity required. Most have undertaken recruitment to address skills and capacity issues, reflected in a 23% increase in the number of Full-time equivalent (FTE) posts and a 31% increase in the number of new FTE posts funded through NCOP between the first and second wave of the partnership survey. In particular, partnerships have recruited additional staff to support three key areas.

- **Targeting and provider engagement:** During Year 1, the targeted nature of NCOP presented a challenge for many partnerships, particularly those with less well-established links with target schools and FECs, and those with relatively small and/or dispersed populations of NCOP learners. In these contexts, targeting was reported to be a barrier to securing school/FEC buy-in to the programme. In response, partnerships have recruited additional staff to enhance their ability to communicate and engage with schools and FECs and access target learners.
- **Outreach:** Community engagement has not been a focus of previous access and participation programmes and, as such, NCOP has challenged traditional ways of working for many outreach officers. In response, partnerships have recruited staff from different sectors with a broader range of outreach skills in order to engage young people and their parents in different settings. This includes staff with youth work, community development and LA backgrounds.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Partnerships have recruited staff specifically to manage and co-ordinate the collection of monitoring and other data (e.g. tracking data) from NCOP target learners and partners. This reflects a growing recognition

¹⁷ See: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/national-collaborative-outreach-programme-ncop/how-ncop-works/>

of the scale and importance of these activities and the distinction between monitoring and evaluation within some partnerships.

Most staff are employed on fixed-term contracts which reflect the funding period for NCOP. Although the funding extension to Phase 1 (from December 18 to July 19) and confirmation of the funding for Phase 2 (to July 21) provided some stability, staff turnover remains an issue, particularly among evaluation staff (see Risk Management below).

Operating models

Despite the expansion of partnerships overall, they continue to vary in terms of the number and type of partners involved, the number of schools/FECs and target pupils they engage with and their geographical coverage. A range of operating models have consequently been developed in response to local circumstances. In all cases, there is a central team located within the lead organisation, although this ranges in size depending on the model in operation. The 29 partnerships operate on a continuum from 'highly centralised' to 'highly devolved' models.

At one end of the spectrum, a relatively large central team maintains control over the majority of funding, staff recruitment and the co-ordination and delivery of outreach activities. In some 'centralised' models, a 'bidding system' is in operation whereby partners apply for more substantial amounts of funding to support specific activities. Where funding applications are reviewed by a strategic body, such as a steering group, this ensures alignment with the partnership's objectives for NCOP.

At the other end of the spectrum, the central team is relatively small and a proportion of funding, as well as responsibility for programme design and delivery, is devolved to partners to shape their offer in response to local need. In some instances, an equal amount of funding is distributed to each partner while, in others, funding is proportionate to the size of the provider, number of schools/FECs engaged and/or the number of target learners.

Case study of a devolved model

London NCOP combines three pre-existing networks: Linking London, AccessHE and Aimhigher London. Kingston University acts as the NCOP lead institution and also assumes overall responsibility for evaluation activities across the partnership. NCOP income is split evenly between the three networks, with Kingston retaining a proportion to offset the costs of managing and co-ordinating the partnership.

Geographically, the partnership covers 13 NCOP wards located on the outskirts of the capital. AccessHE covers Barking and Dagenham, and Havering in the north east of London; Aimhigher London covers the south London wards of Bexley, Bromley, Croydon, Greenwich, Hounslow, Merton and Sutton. Linking London covers colleges across all 13 NCOP wards. Within these areas, sub-regional hubs of schools have been set up. Outreach priorities and activities are co-ordinated at hub level, as were bids from schools and colleges in the first year in order to identify specific needs. However, while bottom-up bids are still encouraged, as the partnership has evolved, the aim has been to deliver a 'sustained average' project-based offer to schools with similar circumstances wherever they are in the London NCOP area. This is partly to enable sustainability beyond the NCOP programme in the form of core programmes, for example in Continued Professional Development (CPD) for teaching staff.

This operating model has several advantages: The Networks are long-established. Kingston has a long involvement with all the partners, having also led on the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) and Aimhigher London. As such, all four partners are able to have an overview of the capital's specific needs and good connections at most London Higher Education Institutes (HEIs). Resources can be devolved to the schools and colleges in the locale of the outreach along with other intervention work, which helps to develop ownership and engagement at this level. However, one disadvantage of this model is that not all London HEIs are as engaged with the consortium as they might have been under a funding model that distributed income to each of them.

Strengths and limitations of different operating models

There are strengths and limitations of the different operating models which present different risks for the development of effective approaches to collaboration and the ability of partnerships to achieve NCOP targets and milestones.

Centralised models

The key *advantages* of more centralised models are:

- A consistent and co-ordinated approach is developed which helps to ensure duplication is avoided and effective use is made of available resources.
- All staff are employed on the same terms and conditions.

- Even if staff are based/co-located within partner organisations, staff are accountable to the lead organisation. This helps to ensure they remain independent of institutional widening participation (WP) teams and are focused on NCOP activity.
- A shared vision and objectives are developed and strategic direction is more easily maintained.
- Central control is maintained over the budget and expenditure, which reduces the need for additional accountability measures.
- A coherent monitoring and evaluation strategy can be developed and implemented.

The key *disadvantages* of more centralised models are:

- Additional infrastructure is required to manage and support the partnership.
- Partners can have less ownership and influence over strategic and operational priorities.
- Staff at partner organisations have less autonomy. As a result, this approach can be less responsive to localised issues.
- There is less flexibility compared with devolved models.
- Partnership working can be inhibited as individual partners take direction from the central team rather than working collaboratively within and across organisations.
- NCOP staff who are employed by the central team but located within partner institutions can feel isolated from colleagues.
- Tensions can arise as a result of staff based within partner institutions being supervised by their host organisation but line managed by the central team.
- Partners can be reluctant to take risks with innovative approaches or activities.

Devolved models

The key *advantages* of more devolved models are:

- Devolved approaches provide greater freedom and flexibility to enable partners to tailor their offer to the needs of learners and the local context.
- Partners are more agile, able to respond and implement activities in a timely way.
- The need for additional infrastructure is negated as existing infrastructure within partner organisations can be used.
- Partners have more ownership and influence over the strategic and operational priorities at the local level.

The key *disadvantages* of more devolved models are:

- Co-ordination of the programme at the partnership level, along with communication between partners, is more challenging.
- It is more challenging to achieve a shared vision and understanding of the programme across partners who are working more autonomously.
- NCOP staff at partner institutions can feel disconnected from the central team.
- There is a risk that some local activity is not aligned to NCOP objectives and targets, particularly where there are tensions between partners' priorities and the priorities of the partnership.
- Implementing a coherent monitoring and evaluation strategy can be more challenging as different partners may deliver a different offer.
- Additional systems are needed to monitor and account for expenditure at the local level.

Case Study: Evolving from a highly devolved to a more centralised model

HOP (re-named from FORCE to Humber Outreach Programme) is unique, in that it comprises just one university – the University of Hull – which acts as the lead institution, and 6 FECs. It is a newly-formed partnership, established to deliver NCOP, although the partners in the partnership have a history of collaboration. A very small central team was established during the first year of NCOP, which commissioned most of the delivery to third-party providers. HOP has expanded the central team during Year 2 in addition to providing funding for 0.6 FTE staff in each of their partner institutions. Partner institutions have been afforded the autonomy to hire their own staff. However, the central team provided advice on the salary level to ensure consistency with the university's salary band and structures. The funding has enabled partners to second existing staff to the role in some instances and recruit new staff in others. The central team has also provided guidance on job descriptions, roles and responsibilities. However, this has not been prescriptive and partners have been able to tailor the roles to fit with their local vision for NCOP.

HOP perceives that this model is working effectively and having a positive impact for a number of reasons. Devolving the funding for the posts within partner providers has resulted in a more equitable partnership, stronger engagement from partners and more joined-up working. It has enabled partners to tailor their outreach offer to meet the needs of learners in different locations. This is particularly important for a region such as Humberside where the target schools and colleges are geographically dispersed and the challenges facing learners vary according to their locality.

Each partner institution is allocated a small amount (£10k) of funding for activities. They, along with third-party organisations, are also invited to apply for additional funding for more substantial interventions from the budget held by the central team. During Year 1, funding applications were reviewed and approved on an ongoing, ad-hoc basis. In Year 2, those wishing to apply for funds have been required to submit an application in one of two submission windows. The funding available in the second window is dependent on the remaining budget following the first window.

This new system has streamlined the funding allocation process by eliminating the need for the central team to review funding applications prior to them being submitted to the Operational Group for approval and speeding up the decision-making process. The Operational Group is made up of representatives from each of the college partners and the lead institution. Funding requests receiving fewer than 4 positive responses are rejected; funding requests that are approved by 4 or more members of the group are put forward for more detailed consideration at a selection meeting. The Operational Group makes the final decision on bids of £20k and under. Partners' applications for more than £20k are reviewed by the NCOP Board. The Board also arbitrates if the Operational Group is unable to reach a decision. Scrutiny at this level ensures that funding is only awarded for outreach activities that contribute to the achievement of NCOP's strategic aims and objectives and have evaluation plans embedded.

Strategic and operational oversight of NCOP

Effective collaboration and operational delivery is contingent on good governance as well as effective leadership and management. NCOP brings together a range of FE and HE providers (as well as wider stakeholders) in a partnership, which otherwise may be competing for student numbers. In this context, strong governance ensures fairness and transparency between members. Effective leadership and management also ensures each member has the opportunity to contribute to the success of the programme as well as benefit from its involvement.

Leadership and management

There is consistent agreement among staff who responded to the partnership survey that lead organisations are providing effective leadership of NCOP (74% agreed in Year 1 and 76% agreed in Year 2). Strong communication between partnership members at both the strategic and operational level is central to effective leadership and management. It ensures partners develop a shared vision and understanding of the strategic priorities of NCOP and understand the contribution their organisation is expected to make towards the achievement of the partnership's targets and milestones. It also ensures that partnerships and the schools and FECs they are working with understand the distinction between NCOP and wider outreach work.

Most partnership staff agree that lead organisations are communicating effectively with members and, as a result, the majority perceive they have a detailed understanding of the strategic priorities of NCOP (82–97% agreement at Year 2). Initial confusion about the role that NCOP was fulfilling in relation to other activities designed to widen access to HE appears to be a thing of the past, with twice as many respondents to the survey reporting that they understand the distinct role of NCOP at Year 2 (90%) compared to Year 1 (41%).

There is, however, a minority of staff who perceive that communication between the lead and partner institutions presents a challenge. Others also report communication between their strategic and operational teams and/or between partners is problematic. This could be an ongoing problem as the proportion of respondents who agree that communication is effective is the same in Year 2 (76%) as in Year 1 (77%). There is a risk that if partnerships continue to expand during Phase 2, this challenge could be exacerbated. In this context, therefore, it will be important for partnership leads to consider how best to ensure new members are fully informed about the programme's objectives and mechanisms for ongoing communication.

Governance

Governance arrangements vary between partnerships, depending on the local context. While two-thirds of staff who responded to the Year 2 survey agree that effective governance arrangements are in place within their partnership, one-third do

not agree or are unsure. Analysis suggests that the partnerships with the least confidence in their governance tend to be those that faced challenges during the implementation stage of establishing effective operating models, including collaborative working relationships and communication strategies.

The majority of partnerships have set up a body, such as a board or steering group, to provide strategic direction and hold partners to account for expenditure and progress towards their targets and goals.¹⁸ It is also common for partnerships to establish an operations group to oversee day-to-day delivery, which then reports into the steering group.

Governance is perceived to be most effective when the steering group comprises senior leaders, such as vice chancellors (VCs), pro vice-chancellors (Pro VCs), principals and deputy principals. Senior leaders are one step removed from the day-to-day operations of the partnership and this helps to ensure that the group remains focused on the strategic issues affecting NCOP. One partnership visited during the first wave of field visits reflected that, initially, the membership of their steering group was too operational and, as a result, lacked strategic focus. The lack of a clear strategy can result in poor funding decisions and fragmented delivery which have serious implications for the achievement of the programme's longer term objectives. Addressing this issue by ensuring a clear demarcation between the steering and operations groups was a key priority for this partnership.

When NCOP was first getting off the ground, the steering group meetings were really quite operational. We asked for volunteers from the partners to be on the steering group and lots of really keen WP practitioners wanted to join, but it was being driven in a more operational direction because of their backgrounds, which is why we made the decision to pull that out into a project board. We just try and take strategic stuff to the steering group now. (Partnership lead)

Senior leaders often sit on other strategic groups (e.g. LEPs) and are consequently able to bring their knowledge to bear on the development of NCOP strategic plans. This helps to ensure connections between NCOP and other programmes and initiatives are made and duplication is minimised. These were identified as further benefits of appointing senior leaders to NCOP steering groups.

I think the programme has impacted on the work that exists outside and alongside it, and that's altered the space in which those pieces of work have to operate. I think the other bit that we've learned over the last eighteen months is how this programme needs to interplay with other initiatives, particularly strategic policy initiatives that are taking place within the same space. (NCOP board member)

¹⁸ Two partnerships reported that they did not have an operational steering group in place in the Year 2 survey.

The size of the governing bodies in place ranges from 5 to 31 members, with an average of 12. Insights from the field visits suggest that smaller governing bodies are more likely to ensure strong leadership and effective co-ordination. Ensuring that each of the core partners is represented at both a strategic and operational level, while also ensuring the number of members of each group is manageable, presents a challenge for larger partnerships. In order to overcome this, partnerships have established a series of sub-groups. All partners are represented across these groups which report into the overarching governing body.

Case study: Effective governance structures

HeppSY, based in South Yorkshire, has drawn upon experience and learning from its existing collaborative partnership, HEPP, to enable it to hit the ground running in setting up effective governance structures. Developing its own branding ensures that its governance and outreach offer is distinct to its core admissions and recruitment. This is enabling HeppSY to effectively address its NCOP objectives and remain impartial to the wider institutional A&P objectives. The HeppSY board has been kept small and ‘quite tight knit’ with just nine key representatives on the governing board and several operational sub-steering groups. Ensuring college representation on the board is perceived to be one of the key benefits of its effective governance structure.

“From my perspective [our governance structure has] worked well. It is small and tight-knit and it’s got the key representatives round the table. It’s got the majority of the colleges present, which I think is an added strength compared with some NCOPs. Then, underneath that, [we have] the sub-groups where we have representation from business, schools and colleges...” (Partnership lead)

A recent review of the HeppSY and HEPP governance structures was prompted by changes in the approach to the delivery of NCOP and concern that the existing board did not fully align with the needs of the local area. As a result, governance structures have evolved to ensure the right membership of its strategic board and the establishment of sub-steering groups. The steering groups include representatives from other stakeholder organisations, including local businesses and schools/FECs, who understand the specific needs of the young people living in the region. Termly networking events bring the steering groups together in one place, providing opportunity to celebrate successes and learn from best practice. Twilight, monthly meetings are offered to those schools/FECs that do not have a graduate intern, to communicate NCOP updates and provide support where required. Task and finish groups have been created to consider specific NCOP sub-groups, including white working-class males and BAME groups. One board member reported that, as a result of the recent review, the governance arrangements were working even more effectively.

Improvements to strategic and operational oversight

There is scope to improve leadership and governance arrangements ahead of Phase 2 of the programme.

Strategic group membership

It was not the case that all core partners were represented on the governing bodies in every partnership in Year 1. Encouragingly, there is evidence that partnerships are reviewing their existing governance arrangements and that this is being addressed in Year 2. Some are going further and addressing wider gaps in the membership of their governing bodies by inviting representatives from the LA, schools and/or colleges to join.

Learner voice

Whether and how partnerships are embedding the learner voice into all aspects of the design, implementation and evaluation of NCOP was explored in more detail in Year 2. This included the ways in which partnerships have engaged students in the governance of the programme. One partnership visited in Year 2 had learner representation on their governing body. In contrast, two others had concluded that it was not appropriate to include learners on their strategic body. Although these partnerships recognised the importance of the learner voice, members of the board expressed concern that learners in the NCOP target age group may lack the skills and confidence to make a meaningful contribution in a strategically-focused meeting comprised of senior leaders. While they recognised the importance of embedding the learner voice in the programme, they were considering alternative ways to engage learners in shaping the strategic direction of the partnership. A further partnership had concluded that its governance structures would be strengthened by the inclusion of learner voices and it was considering ways to prioritise learner voices during Phase 2.

“In terms of the governing board, I think we’re aware that [learner voice] is something that’s been missing actually. We had a discussion about that at our last meeting and agreed that we absolutely want to invite at least one, maybe two, learners from one of the wards to be a member of the governing board and help us to shape what we’re doing moving forward. We’ve already put a call out and there’s a lot of interest as I understand. Our next meeting will be in the new year, so we will hopefully have a member then”. (Partnership lead)

Meeting targets and milestones

NCOP targets were derived from gap analysis based on historical data. Accurately determining which schools/FECs those currently living in NCOP target wards attend and maintaining contact with individual learners as they progress through the student lifecycle (potentially moving to a non-NCOP target ward and/or school/FEC) presents a key challenge for partnerships. To overcome this challenge and mitigate the risk of failing to achieve their NCOP targets, partnerships have prioritised schools/FECs where data suggests there is a high proportion of target learners (at least initially) and worked closely with them to identify specific groups of pupils.

Partnerships have been tasked with engaging a minimum of 20% of NCOP learners in their target wards in a sustained and progressive programme of outreach. The latest monitoring data suggests that partnerships are making good progress towards this target at the programme level, having engaged almost a quarter of a million NCOP learners to date. This has been facilitated, at least in part, by the increased priority being afforded to NCOP activities by senior leaders within partner organisations: two-thirds of survey respondents (66%) now agree that senior leaders within their organisation are prioritising NCOP in Year 2, compared to 56% in Year 1. This level of strategic buy-in is essential if NCOP's aims and objectives are to be achieved and is perhaps a reflection of the programme becoming more established and embedded within core and wider partners' organisations.

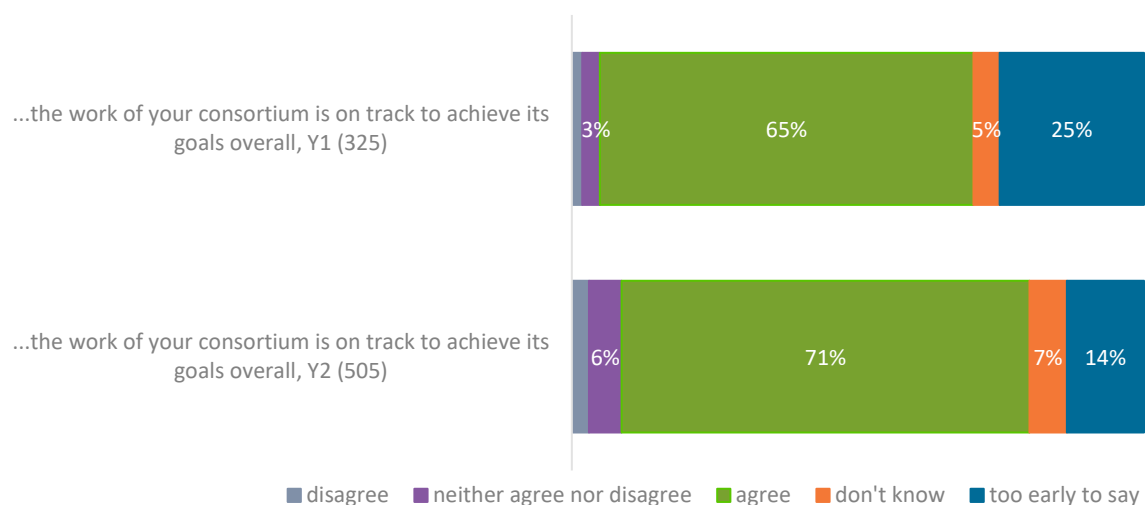
Locating a member of NCOP staff on a full-time or part-time basis within the target school/FEC has been an effective way to achieve close working. In addition to facilitating the development of a strong relationship with school/FEC staff, this approach has provided NCOP staff with direct access to pupils and insights into the challenges they face. This has enabled them to develop tailored programmes that address the specific needs of the school/FEC and the pupils which, in turn, is more likely to achieve the level of buy-in required to achieve the targets.

At the programme level, targeting and engagement have proved less problematic in Year 2 as partnerships have developed more effective strategies (see Chapter 3). However, some providers remain harder to engage, and progress towards individual milestones has continued to present a challenge for some partnerships. For example, those serving different sub-regions with diverse populations (e.g. aspirational immigrant populations or white working class groups) and a range of associated needs (e.g. lack of knowledge and experience of the English HE system, lack of aspiration or positive attitude towards HE and strong preferences for alternative routes) have found it challenging to develop an overarching strategy and operating model that meets the needs of all learners. Devolved models of operation have typically evolved in these partnerships which afford individual providers or clusters of partners working in local hubs with the autonomy to devise delivery plans that address the specific needs of the area and the populations they serve.

I think the big challenge for us as an NCOP is that we're split into three areas and they're so diverse that actually it's not a 'one size fits all' approach. I think that is a really big challenge for us, so I think the strategy is different in all three. So, for us, even though we do the same job, I think our roles are really vastly different. (Outreach officer)

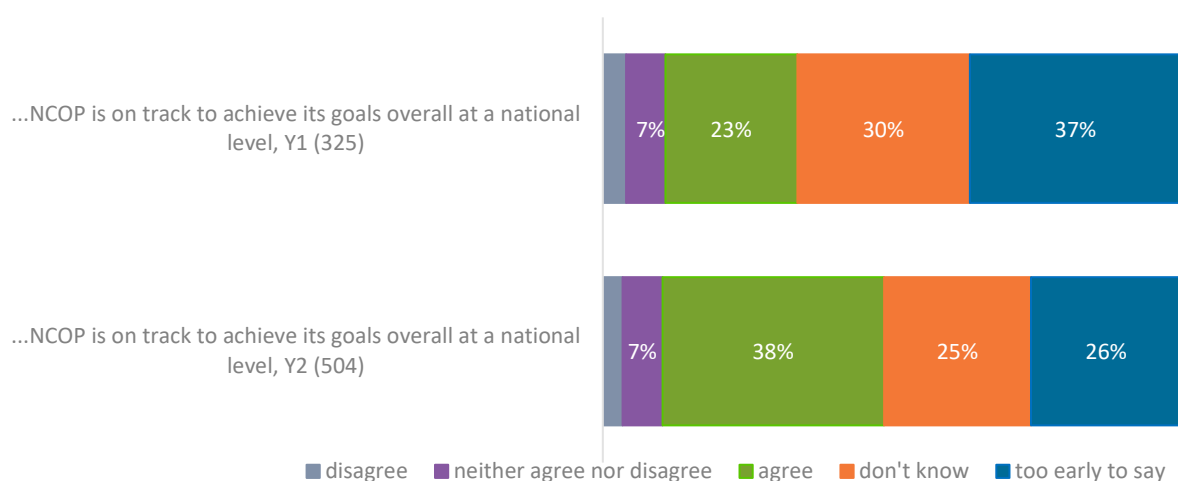
Partnership survey responses demonstrate a positive shift in perceptions of the progress being made towards the achievement of NCOP milestones and targets over the course of Phase 1. A higher proportion of staff agree that the work of their partnership is on track to achieve its goals overall, and fewer perceive it is 'too early to say' at Year 2 compared with Year 1 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Partnership perceptions of impact towards achieving NCOP goals overall for Year 1 and Year 2 (bases in parentheses).



Partnership staff are, however, less confident that NCOP is on track to meet its national targets and goals. A quarter of respondents perceive that it is ‘too early to say’ and a similar proportion ‘don’t know’ at Year 2 (Figure 2). This is, perhaps, not surprising as staff are less likely to be aware of the progress being made by other partnerships to make a judgement about the collective progress towards the national targets and goals set by the government.

Figure 2. Partnership perception of impact towards achieving NCOP goals at the national level for Year 1 and Year 2 (bases in parentheses).



The added-value of collaboration

Recent reforms to HE, including the lifting of the student number cap, have resulted in increased competition between providers in the sector. This presents a challenge in the context of NCOP, as providers who may otherwise be competing for students are required to work in partnership. There was a risk that members would be reluctant to collaborate fully because of a concern that NCOP would ‘distract’ from

their core outreach offer and have a detrimental effect on institutional targets and goals.

It was important that individual members were able to strike a balance between their institutional objectives and the objectives of NCOP. Most partnerships have achieved this by ensuring NCOP activity operates separately to institutional access, participation and recruitment. In some instances, they are physically separated, in others they are co-located to ensure the two offers are complementary and duplication is avoided. As the programme has become more established, partnerships are increasingly recognising the unique contribution that each partner makes to the partnership as well as to the HE landscape in the local area. Rather than viewing each other as competitors, partners are working collaboratively to support the achievement of the programme's objectives in ways that are mutually beneficial.

I don't think you would have got these five universities delivering a joined-up way of thinking without NCOP, because despite the fact that we're not, in most cases, competitors, we all kind of are as in we're all fishing in the same pool. That's always harder to get people to work together. I really feel like we've put that aside and it's not about recruitment, it is about supporting the young people in the best way you can. I don't think that would have happened without NCOP. (NCOP steering group member)

Despite these initial concerns, the formative evaluation has identified a number of ways in which NCOP is fostering collaboration and adding value to the existing outreach offer, irrespective of the operating model and the governance arrangements in place. The principal ways in which NCOP has added value over the course of Phase 1 are set out below.

NCOP has fostered the development of new partnerships as well as strengthened existing relationships between diverse partners from within and outside the education sector. This has enabled partnerships to extend their networks. Relationships with different schools and FECs, as well as with other stakeholders such as employers, community groups and third-sector bodies have been established. Individual providers have been able to access target learners under the auspices of NCOP in schools and FECs that they have not previously engaged with.

NCOP has been a real catalyst for universities and colleges to work together. This has never happened before in the region for historical reasons. That's a very good thing to happen. It breaks down some barriers. (Evaluation lead)

Working in partnership and embedding staff in a variety of locations, including in communities, schools and FECs, has enabled partnerships to cover wide geographic areas which would not have been possible otherwise. The targeted nature of NCOP has meant that, in some cases, partnerships have had to build new relationships with schools and FECs. The fieldwork identified examples of innovative approaches to the development of partnerships with NCOP target schools and FECs. These included

launch events that brought schools and FECs together with partnership members at the outset to raise awareness and secure buy-in to the programme (see Center Parcs case study in Chapter 3).

Although there is scope to further strengthen the 'NCOP brand' (see section on 'differentiating NCOP from other outreach provision' in Chapter 3), it does help to facilitate access to schools and FECs for partnerships by reassuring them of the impartiality of dedicated NCOP staff and their independence from individual provider's wider outreach, marketing or recruitment activities.

Engaging new schools and FECs has been time consuming and resource intensive, but the investment is starting to pay off. Insights from the field visits suggests that NCOP is extending outreach to target learners who may not otherwise have access to, or the opportunity to benefit from, support by addressing 'cool' and 'cold' spots in provision.

NCOP has facilitated access to knowledge and expertise for partnership members that is not available in some individual institutions. In spite of wider policy drivers to increase competition between providers in the HE sector, NCOP has enabled partners to work together and develop a greater appreciation of the unique contribution each makes to the 'education ecosystem'. Partners in the FE sector bring a different perspective and approach to outreach which those in the HE sector can learn from. The involvement of FECs has also helped to ensure that providers in the HE sector are developing a better understanding of the needs of young people following different, predominantly vocational, routes.

NCOP has challenged established ways of working for some WP professionals, particularly outreach officers, who have been required to engage young people and their parents in their communities as well as in more familiar educational contexts. Collaboration between staff with different professional backgrounds has facilitated the development of more innovative, tailored interventions that successfully engage harder-to-reach groups. The sharing of expertise through collaborative delivery, along with strategies to diversify the outreach workforce, are also helping to build capacity within the WP sector.

Collaboration has led to the provision of a varied offer that can be tailored to the needs of schools/FECs and individual pupils. A range of approaches to delivery have been developed. In some instances, a substantial proportion of delivery is outsourced to third parties while, in others, the majority of delivery is undertaken by core staff. Irrespective of the approach, however, NCOP has enabled partnerships to draw on a range of skills and expertise to develop a tailored offer. In many instances, NCOP has enabled the development of community-based outreach teams which are effective in building local relationships, understanding needs and developing tailored responses to local issues - drawing on the skills and resources of the partners within the wider

partnership. They are also building the capacity of staff (e.g. teachers) within the schools/FECs they work in to sustain the work in the longer term.

Collaboration facilitates the development of fresh ideas and innovative approaches to engaging target groups and other ‘influencers’ such as parents. Generic and well-established approaches to outreach were used initially by partnerships to enable them to ‘hit the ground running’ and deliver activity in the schools and FECs that were easy to engage. During Year 2, partnerships are engaging with a wider range of schools and FECs and developing a fuller understanding of their needs. In response, they are developing a more tailored offer, including new and innovative approaches.

Partners are working across partnerships and initiatives to develop and deliver joint activities, particularly in schools and FECs that draw learners from a large geographical area covered by more than one partnership. There is also evidence of intra-partnership sharing of ideas and good practice both in relation to targeting and delivery, and evaluation. In addition, there is evidence of joined-up working with other programmes and initiatives, such as OAs, which is ensuring NCOP contributes to the achievement of wider social, cultural and economic objectives in the regions in which they operate.

03. Programme Delivery

This chapter explores how partnerships are overcoming challenges in order to successfully engage schools and FECs and deliver activity to target learners.

Key findings

- Overall, the strategies that have been put in place to address delivery challenges, such as the limited funding period, differentiating NCOP from the existing outreach offer and tensions between the priorities of schools/FECs and NCOP's objectives, have been effective. These include:
 - locating dedicated staff within FECs and allowing them to determine the way in which funding and resources are used,
 - offering activities that support schools to raise attainment while also addressing NCOP's objectives, and
 - providing support to overcome practical challenges, including providing transport to activities.
- Partnerships are moving away from standardised, menu-led approaches and developing tailored offers for learners in particular year groups and bespoke activities.
- Identifying the specific needs of the school/FEC, and working in partnership to develop an offer that addresses them, helps to sustain engagement and embed NCOP.
- A lack of understanding of the aims and objectives of NCOP and the difference between NCOP and wider outreach continues to present a challenge. A weak national brand, compounded by a proliferation of local brands, is perceived to be contributing to this issue.
- In the main, schools/FECs are able to identify the young people that NCOP is designed to support and most are able to facilitate access to target learners for NCOP staff.
- There is limited evidence of the learner voice at the programme level but pockets of good practice are emerging. Misconceptions about what it means to engage the learner voice prevail. Although staff recognise the benefits, there is uncertainty about how best to embed it at a strategic and operational level.

- Partnerships are making effective use of new technology (e.g. virtual reality) and social media (e.g. Facebook) in the design and delivery of their offer, as well as more traditional methods (e.g. board games).
- Partnerships are increasingly working with parents as key influencers on young people's decision-making. Imaginative, community-based activities have been developed to overcome the challenges of engaging parents, such as comedy evenings.
- NCOP is perceived to be having a positive impact on teachers' knowledge and understanding of HE. Upskilling teachers could help to sustain activities beyond the life of the programme.

School and FEC engagement

Establishing effective working relationships with the schools and FECs attended by NCOP target learners is integral to the success of the programme. In some instances, pre-existing links between partnership members and some of their target schools and FECs were in place, established through previous programmes, such as the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) or institutional outreach programmes. In others, NCOP provided the impetus to establish new relationships, and as a result, some schools and colleges have engaged in outreach for the first time ever, or in a number of years (e.g. since the closure of Aimhigher). In both cases, fostering school/FEC links in the context of NCOP presented challenges, which posed potential risks to the delivery of programme.

The limited funding period, the break clause after Phase 1 and the targeted nature of NCOP presented challenges for partnerships when engaging schools and colleges. Embedding NCOP into the curriculum and timetable, and putting systems in place to collect the data for the monitoring and evaluation, requires an investment of time and resources on the part of schools and FECs. Partnerships were concerned that schools and colleges would not be willing to make this investment for a programme that would potentially only last for less than two academic years.¹⁹ They sought to overcome this challenge through the development of clear funding guidelines and by clearly communicating the progressive and sustained nature of their offer. The schools and FECs themselves also fulfilled a role in overcoming this issue, with the 'early adopters' helping to bring on board other target schools/FECs by advocating the NCOP and sharing the ways in which their students have benefited.

Ensuring schools and FECs understand the difference between the collaborative and targeted nature of NCOP and individual providers' outreach provision is important, as a lack of understanding could act as a barrier to engagement and the achievement

¹⁹ Phase 1 of NCOP was originally scheduled to run from January 2017 to December 2018.

of the objectives of the programme. The evidence suggests that differentiating the two offers has proved challenging, particularly for providers with pre-existing relationships with target schools/FECs. Fewer than two-thirds (62%) of partnership members reported that schools and FECs understood the aims and objectives of NCOP in the Year 2 staff survey and just 40% agreed that schools/FECs understood the difference between NCOP activities and other activities delivered by partnership members. While this may have been expected in the early stages of the programme, it is concerning after 18 months.

A weak national brand for NCOP, and a proliferation of local brands for NCOP partnerships, are perceived to be contributing to the confusions and the lack of understanding amongst schools and colleges.

“One of the biggest challenges we’ve faced is that, when [NCOP] was originally proposed and launched, there wasn’t enough of a national buzz about it. That’s meant that each partnership has had to basically start from scratch with every single school. By the time you get to the real benefits of it, you’ve already lost them.” (Outreach officer)

In order to improve understanding, two partnerships have employed graduate interns to represent the programme within schools and FECs and help them to understand the differences between NCOP and wider university outreach and recruitment activities. Other partnerships, such as NEACO, focused on increasing brand awareness and developing schools’/FECs’ understanding of NCOP through engagement activities from the outset (see Center Parcs case study).

Over the course of Phase 1, as awareness of the programme has grown and communication has improved, this issue and the associated risks have diminished but are still present. Now that funding for Phase 2 has been approved, there is a clear role for the OfS in increasing awareness of NCOP at the national level and an understanding of how it differs from other outreach initiatives. This could be achieved through further development of the NCOP brand and/or greater standardisation of local branding. There are, however, risks associated with the latter, as many partnerships now have well-established brands. Altering local brands at this stage risks causing more confusion and also has cost implications.

Case Study: Breaking down barriers at Center Parcs

NEACO held a formal launch at Center Parcs in November 2017. The event was attended by partner institutions, schools and FECs in the region. Partnership staff delivered presentations about the different elements of the programme. The event was used as a platform to promote the various activities that partner organisations could gain funding for and to emphasise the importance of collecting and using data to evaluate the impact. As a consequence, NEACO has achieved exceptionally high levels of engagement in evaluation activities, including the text-based RCT. During the event, attendees were given the opportunity to network with colleagues from different providers and were encouraged to share their experiences of implementing and delivering WP outreach activities. Following the event, NEACO received overwhelmingly positive feedback from those who attended which, in particular, alluded to the engaging and collaborative environment that the event had created.

Engaging FECs

Challenges unique to FEC engagement were identified by partnerships during Year 1 of NCOP. Principal among these were the small proportion of NCOP learners relative to the size of FECs' student populations, the number of staff involved in supporting NCOP target learners within a college context and the diversity of FECs' learning provision (including HE provision).

Partnerships have sought to overcome these challenges through a range of activities designed to develop and strengthen FEC partnerships. Creating dedicated roles and basing staff within FECs has proved a particularly effective way to secure their co-operation and buy-in. It has also enabled NCOP staff to more easily identify and target NCOP students studying at the provider. Affording FECs more autonomy to determine the way in which funding and resources are used has also helped to address a lack of engagement in some partnerships. However, this approach has not been successful in every instance. To address lack of engagement, one partnership plans to appoint a member of the central team to work more closely with their partner colleges to provide strategic guidance and ensure that a shared vision is developed and maintained.

Engaging schools

There was a concern that schools in challenging circumstances, including those in OAs or in special measures, would be unwilling, or unable, to engage in the programme. There is evidence that this was a barrier to engaging some providers. These schools are understandably focused on improving performance against national measures, particularly pupil attainment. As a result, they can be less willing to engage in a programme focused on progression to HE which targets a sub-set of relatively high-attaining students.

Although attainment raising is not an objective of NCOP (as target pupils are already on track to achieve the required level of attainment to progress to HE), schools are increasingly recognising the potential impact of the programme on motivation and attitude to learning and the indirect impact this has on attainment. Demonstrating the synergies between NCOP and schools' wider strategic objectives has helped partnerships to overcome this challenge in some cases. For example, one partnership has overcome this barrier by developing outreach activities that serve to address NCOP's objectives as well as the schools' need to raise attainment.

"Definitely one of the things we've had to work very carefully with [schools] on is showing, quite discreetly, how you can make something that isn't attainment-focused fit the bill. That's not to say we're bending any rules, it's just to say that, actually, you need to think out of the box. Don't just make it a revision session, think about how you can make it aspirational in terms of looking at HE progression and career pathways."
(Outreach officer)

In addition, where possible within the terms of the NCOP funding, non-NCOP students whom schools believe would benefit from support have engaged in NCOP activities. This flexibility is recognised and valued by schools and has helped to secure their engagement.

Engaging with schools/FECs in remote, rural locations has been particularly problematic for some partnerships and has presented practical challenges.

"There are different challenges, as there are with every region. [...] and the challenge here is around transport. It is about the geography and not the best road system in the world. You might think that's a small thing, actually it is a big thing. To do activities, you've got to find those central places where they can come to." (Outreach coordinator)

One partnership has overcome this geographical barrier by organising transport for students living in remote locations to enable them to attend outreach activities in the city. To address the contextual differences in the needs of rural and urban learners, another partnership has implemented a supplementary project targeted at learners within rural and coastal areas. The project was designed to help explore the specific barriers and challenges to WP that these learners face.

These findings suggest that partnerships are successfully overcoming the challenges associated with the targeted nature of the programme and are maintaining relationships with schools and FECs. By Year 2, eight out of ten respondents to the survey (81%) agree that target learners are benefiting from a sustained, progressive and intensive programme of support through NCOP.

Sustaining engagement with schools and FECs

Successfully engaging a school or FEC is just the first step. Understanding the specific needs of the school/FEC is then essential, for both sustaining the

relationship and informing the design and delivery of a progressive and intensive programme of support capable of delivering the desired outcomes for students and achieving the objectives of the programme.

It was common for partnerships to offer a standard range of well-established interventions in the early stages of the programme. However, evidence suggests that delivery plans have evolved over the course of Phase 1 as the relationship between partnerships and their target schools and FECs has developed. In order to identify specific needs in relation to access and participation, some have undertaken ‘scoping studies’ to understand the practical, personal and situational barriers to HE progression for learners in particular contexts and the challenges schools and FECs face as a result,. They have then drawn on these insights, their early experiences of delivering NCOP and feedback from school/FEC staff and the young people who have taken part in NCOP activities, to develop more tailored approaches.

Over three-quarters (77%) of survey respondents indicate that their partnership continues to adopt a menu-led approach to their outreach delivery. However, there is evidence that menu-led approaches are being nuanced and increasingly tailored to individual year groups and/or stages.

“We asked them to come up with what they thought the focus should be for each year group, and then asked them to come up with specific ideas they thought would address those issues for each year group, which could either be HEP-based, or they could be anything else. We compiled all the stuff that we got from those four groups into a single programme.” (Outreach coordinator)

‘Hybrid approaches’, which deliver bespoke provision alongside a menu of activities, are also evolving to address the specific needs of schools/FECs and their young people. In this context, partnerships are working in close collaboration with schools/FECs from the design stage to ensure their needs are met.

“In terms of the activities, we really tried to have that discussion with the school where we said, ‘Look, this is what we can possibly provide, what really works for you?’ We’ve not tried to give them a top-down offer, but rather to really bring them in to shape what they have within a certain framework. I think that’s the right approach but also maybe a more difficult approach to take because you’re supporting the school to understand what the needs of their learners are in this area.” (Evaluation officer)

This shift is reflected in the partnership survey findings as, by the second wave of the survey, eight out of ten respondents (81%) agreed that their outreach offer was bespoke to the requirements of the schools/FECs. An additional benefit of this collaborative approach is that schools and FECs have the opportunity to develop a thorough understanding of the needs of their students, including the issues that may act as barriers to progression to HE. This depth of understanding helps to ensure effective support is embedded more widely and maintained beyond the life of NCOP.

Engaging learners

Findings from the partnership survey suggest that, once successfully engaged, the majority of schools/FECs are able identify the young people that NCOP is designed to support (74% agreement at Year 1 and Year 2). Amongst the minority of partnerships who disagree, interviews with staff suggest that it is not always practicable or ethical for schools and colleges to differentiate between NCOP and non-NCOP target learners.

Most schools and FECs are also facilitating access to target learners for NCOP staff to allow them to deliver their work. However, a smaller proportion of respondents agreed with this statement in Year 2 (69%) than in Year 1 (76%), indicating that access for NCOP staff is an issue in some contexts. Again, evidence from interviews suggests these challenges mostly relate to the sensitivity and practicality of dividing classes into groups on the basis of NCOP target category. As a consequence, most partnerships are not requiring schools and colleges to do this.

The NCOP funding, as well as the opportunities for collaboration fostered through the programme, has enabled partnerships to think creatively and develop new ways to engage under-represented groups in outreach. This is reflected in the high level of agreement among partnership members that NCOP has enabled new ideas to be tried out (82%).

“There was a sense this was an opportunity to do something clearly big but we didn’t want to innovate for the sake of it, and if we felt there were some tried and tested things that worked, we’d do that.” (Consortium lead)

“The critical challenge is for young people progressing to level 4, whether that’s degree or apprenticeship. NCOP has given us a way to take a targeted approach to that, and that’s what I really like about it, that it’s targeted but it’s also innovative. That’s what I’m truly impressed by.” (Management team member)

As a result, more partnerships have designed and delivered some genuinely innovative²⁰ activities during Phase 1, developed in response to the specific needs of NCOP target learners. For example, technology is enabling NCOP learners in the HOP partnership to experience student life on a range of different campuses that they would not experience in the ‘real world’ because of practical and personal barriers, including travel (distance and cost) and lack of confidence.

²⁰ As identified in our Year 1 report, innovation can be difficult to define and identify. We also highlighted that ‘new’ and ‘original’ are often used as proxies for innovation, but they are not necessarily the same. Some activities may be new to the partnership, but not necessarily innovative. The partnership survey was designed in such a way to capture perceptions of the extent to which well-established outreach activities are being delivered to new target groups or learners through NCOP.

Immersive campus tours

A project to develop 3D videos and virtual reality tours of university campuses is being developed by the HOP partnership. A downloadable smartphone app will make the virtual tours more accessible to students. There are also plans to use virtual reality headsets at events to allow students to access the virtual campus tours. This approach will enable students to compare and contrast different campuses without having to attend costly open day events and it is hoped this will help to alleviate any concerns around university campus life.

Social media and mobile technology is also playing a key role in engaging and supporting learners in the SUN and NEACO partnerships. Whilst NEACO has run a text-message based RCT, SUN is harnessing the power of Facebook to provide support with GCSE maths revision. While attainment raising is not a direct aim of NCOP, some partnerships are delivering activities because of perceived benefits, including learner confidence and motivation, which can indirectly impact on aspirations to progress to HE.

Facebook GCSE maths revision

Facebook live GCSE maths revision sessions were hosted by the SUN consortium, receiving over 11,000 views and widespread coverage from partner schools using the hashtag “#SUNGCEMathsRevision”. The sessions were part of SUN’s wider campaign of promoting maths revision through the use of social media. Equipping learners with different revision techniques and solutions in order to answer practice exam questions was the main focus of the sessions. Delivering revision sessions via Facebook offers a range of benefits including: flexible scheduling (e.g. evening), confidentiality for learners who find face-to-face classroom situations challenging, collaborative learning, and access to recorded materials.

Other ‘low tech’ innovations include a new monopoly-style board game developed by the HOP partnership, designed to increase student engagement with HE.

Access and participation board game

The game is built around the concept that the player who achieves the highest qualification, and earns the most amount of money as a consequence, wins. Players choose whether they would like to pursue employment, an apprenticeship or FE after their GCSEs. This approach to enhancing learners' knowledge of post-16 choices is perceived to offer several benefits including:

- flexible delivery method suitable for both small and large groups of students,
- staff are able to develop more detailed insights into learners' awareness of post-16 choices by observing the way they play the game,
- questions posed to players throughout the game help to encourage debate, and
- it provides an engaging visual representation of how a learner's career journey could progress, depending on which route they choose to take.

Embedding the learner voice

The ways in which partnerships are embedding the learner voice in the design and delivery of NCOP provided a particular focus for the formative evaluation in Year 2. Engaging with the learner voice is an effective way to determine the issues that are important to students and to develop creative solutions that address their specific needs.

Our Year 2 findings suggest that current levels of engagement with the learner voice are limited and less than one-third (31%) of respondents to the partnership survey agree that learners are involved in the design of their NCOP activities. In many contexts, engagement is limited to learner feedback on activities using post-activity surveys. While this insight is useful in helping to improve the quality of delivery, it is not sufficient to claim the programme is truly learner-driven. Qualitative reflections from learners on the activities they have engaged in is not the same as learner voices. Misconceptions about what constitutes 'substantive engagement' with the learner voice prevail, along with uncertainty about how best to ensure learners' voices are reflected at a strategic and operational level, including evaluation. The greater emphasis being placed on the importance of learner voices by OfS is, therefore, presenting challenges for some partnerships.

Despite limited evidence of engagement with the learner voice at programme level, pockets of good practice are starting to emerge. Learner voice provided the focus for the fourth webinar delivered through the NCOP capacity-building programme in November 2018. HeppSY, GHWY and Cumbria Collaborative Outreach Programme each presented examples of their creative approaches to identifying learners' needs.

Approaches to engaging learner voices

The approach taken by HeppSY's was based on the 'Listening Rooms' method, inspired by the BBC's Listening Project. Peer-to-peer interviewing involving friendship pairs in schools provided insights into learners' views of HE. These insights were used to shape and inform future outreach activities.

'Learner Voice Live' is one of a number of learner voice programmes undertaken by GHWY as part of its broader participatory approach. A dynamic event offered learners the opportunity to showcase their work across a range of projects/interventions via a TV show format.

In Cumbria COP, learner interviews and focus groups informed the design of the 'Hello Future' programme. The programme involved a four-day residential, where students developed the skills to undertake interviews with their families, a visit to Lancaster University and a research conference and celebration event involving learners, their families and teachers. The feedback from the family interviews provided valuable insights into parent/carers attitudes to HE and helped to inform subsequent delivery.

Benefits of engaging the learner voice

The benefits of learner engagement for partnerships and the learners themselves are recognised by partnership staff. For learners, the opportunity to contribute their views to shape the design, implementation and delivery of a programme for young people is perceived to be empowering. It is also perceived to help equip learners with transferable skills and attributes (e.g. confidence, teamwork, communication, planning) that will be useful as they progress through education into work. The opportunity to co-produce and validate a programme is perceived to create a sense of ownership which can help to increase learner engagement with outreach activities as well as the objectives of the programme overall.

For partnerships, engaging with the learner voice is perceived to help to ensure their outreach programme is focused on the issues that are important to young people and that are acting as barriers to their progression. Activities informed by this insight can be tailored to meet the specific needs of different groups of learners. By tailoring activities in this way, partnerships are more likely to achieve a positive impact. Partnerships also recognise the value of learners bringing fresh, new ideas about how best to engage 'young people like them', as this can inform the development of more innovative and creative approaches and activities.

Engaging parents

Parents are key gatekeepers and have a significant influence on young people's decisions, including the likelihood that they will progress to HE. While partnerships understand the importance and value of engaging parents, it can be challenging.

“Parents can be part of that transformational change towards young people’s education, the community outreach side. If it’s coming from them then I think that sends out a great message to the communities.” (Management team member)

“They are one of our main barriers, the parents. As a gatekeeper, if we can engage them and get them to change their perspective, it’s a massive leap forward.” (Consortium lead)

Partnerships are increasingly focused on developing innovative community-based approaches to engage parents, who may themselves feel alienated from educational environments as a result of their own experience of school or college. Just under three-quarters of partnership staff (74%) report that NCOP activities are now being delivered in their communities and evidence of this was captured during the field visits.

HeppSY has developed targeted community-based activities for parents. Specially-trained ambassadors have been used to support parents at a wide range of outreach activities, including open days and parents’ evenings. This partnership has also developed IAG sessions for parents about apprenticeships and finance.

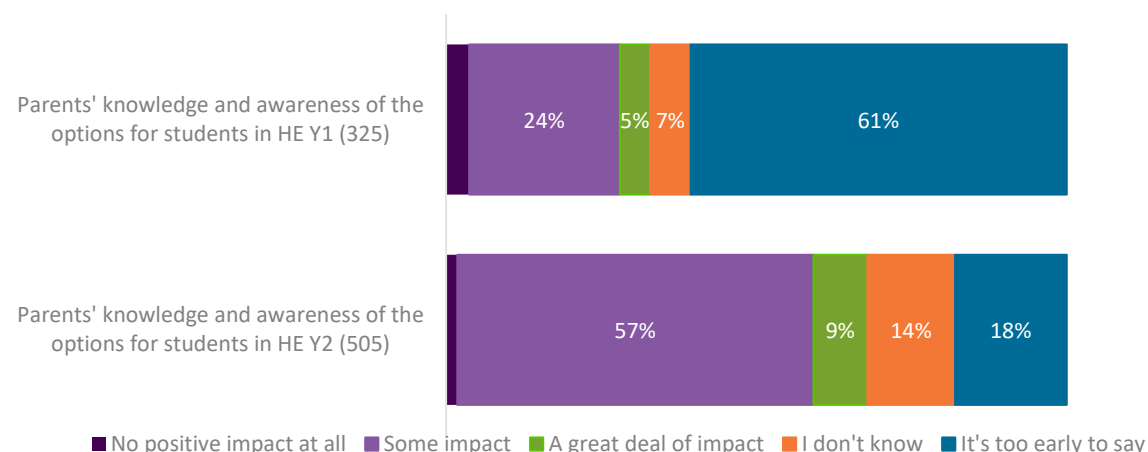
Some partnership staff reported that, in their experience, the most effective strategies for parental engagement are those that pitch activities as entertainment. Rather than emphasising the focus on progression to HE, these activities seek to challenge negative attitudes and misconceptions and convey useful information about HE in indirect and humorous ways. Successful community engagement programmes include the ‘street games sports programme’ and comedy events, such as the evening organised by HOP.

Although robust evidence of the impact of these activities is yet to become available, there is a growing perception among partnership staff that these activities are starting to have a positive influence on parents. Figure 3 demonstrates a shift in staff perceptions over the course of Phase 1 of NCOP, with almost three-fifths (57%) agreeing that NCOP has impacted on parents knowledge and awareness of the options for students in HE after 18 months of the programme, up from a quarter (24%) after the programme had been running for six months.

Parent comedy events

A comedy event to engage parents of NCOP learners was hosted by the HOP partnership. The event included a Q&A session with a comedian who had recently started studying at university, providing the opportunity to communicate key information about HE. This fun and engaging event offered parents the opportunity to increase their knowledge of HE in a relaxed, informal and friendly environment. As the event was hosted on campus, it meant that parents were also provided with a ‘snapshot’ experience of campus life.

Figure 3. Perceptions of impact on parents' knowledge and awareness of the options for students in HE in Years 1 and 2 (bases in parentheses).

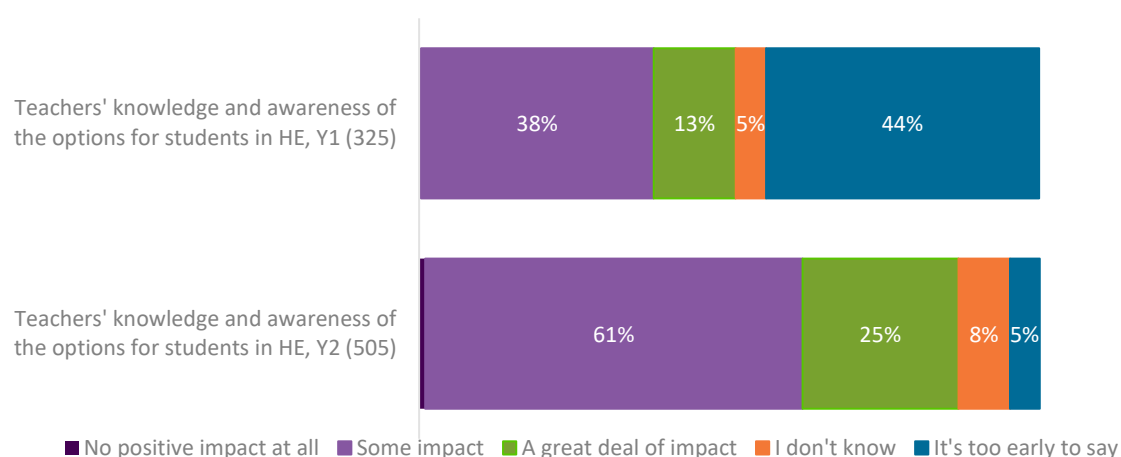


There is also anecdotal evidence that learners are cascading their positive experiences of engaging in NCOP activities to their parents, which is also helping to break down barriers towards HE.

Engaging teachers

A similar proportion of partnership staff agree NCOP is having a positive influence on teachers' knowledge and awareness of the options available to students in HE (61%) (Figure 4 below).

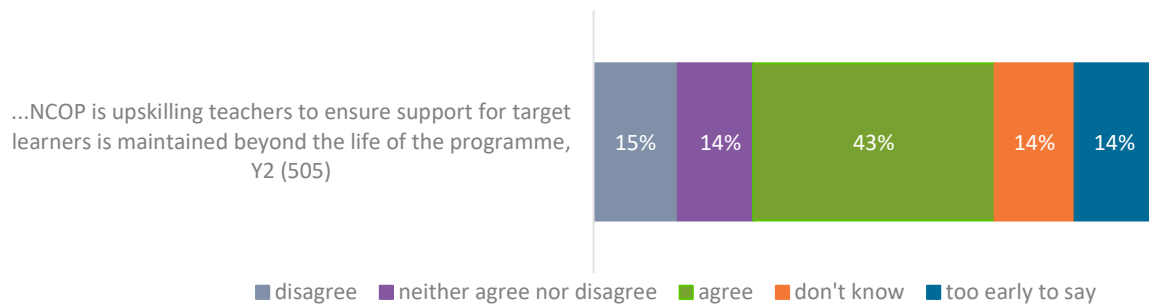
Figure 4. Perceptions of impact on teachers' knowledge and awareness of the options for students in HE (bases in parentheses).



Providing teacher continuing professional development (CPD) can enhance the impact of NCOP and ensure best practice is sustained beyond the programme. Just over two-fifths (43%) of respondents to the survey perceive that NCOP is enabling them to upskill teachers to support target learners beyond the life of the programme (Figure 5 below). A minority of respondents from 23 out of the 29 partnerships

disagree that NCOP is enabling them to upskill teachers (15% of respondents overall) and a further 14% neither agree nor disagree.

Figure 5. Perceptions of impact on upskilling teachers to support target learners beyond the life of the programme (base in parentheses).



Exploring the ways in which partnerships are supporting the development of school/FEC staff, delivering benefits for participating schools and colleges, and ensuring the sustainability of the programme would provide a useful focus for the national and local evaluations in Phase 2.

04. Emerging evidence of effective approaches to outreach

Here we draw on local evaluation evidence, including the RCTs, insights from the staff survey and field visits to partnerships, to identify emerging examples of effective practice.

Key findings

- A key strength of NCOP is that it is providing a ‘test bed’ for different approaches to outreach. The impact of well-established activities on different target groups is being examined, along with the impact of new and innovative approaches. Robust evidence of the impact of interventions is, however, limited at this stage.
- There is qualitative evidence to suggest that IAG activities can have positive benefits in terms of raising awareness of post-16 options, raising aspirations and changes in attitudes to HE. However, because NCOP-funded IAG is often delivered as part of a larger intervention, and alongside school/FEC-based careers education and guidance, it is difficult to attribute impact.
- Campus visits and summer schools/residential activities appear to be most effective when they are tailored to the subject or career interest of learners. Partnership staff perceive that these activities help to support the development of participants’ social and cultural capital by exposing them to organisations and experiences that they may not otherwise encounter. However, the longer-term effect on learner behaviour is yet to be established.
- Targeted mentoring programme (e.g. older year groups, disadvantaged males) are more likely to achieve positive outcomes compared to programme-wide initiatives. Mentoring can help to improve learners’ awareness, knowledge and intentions to progress to HE.
- Indicative evidence suggests that workshops influence learners’ awareness of post-16 choices and intentions to progress to HE. Along with IAG, workshops, are often constituent parts of multi-activity programmes which are reported to have a positive effect on intentions to progress to HE.
- Three RCTs – one light-touch text-based nudging intervention and two more intensive interventions (summer school and e-mentoring) – did not find any significant impact on the primary outcome to increase the likelihood of applying to HE. Some subtle (non-significant) differences in perceptions were identified between the treatment and control groups for the summer school, whereby the

treatment group were less likely to perceive that university is for ‘people like me’ but more likely to perceive that ‘university will broaden their horizons’ and that university will ‘help them to get a better job’ than the whole sample.

Introduction

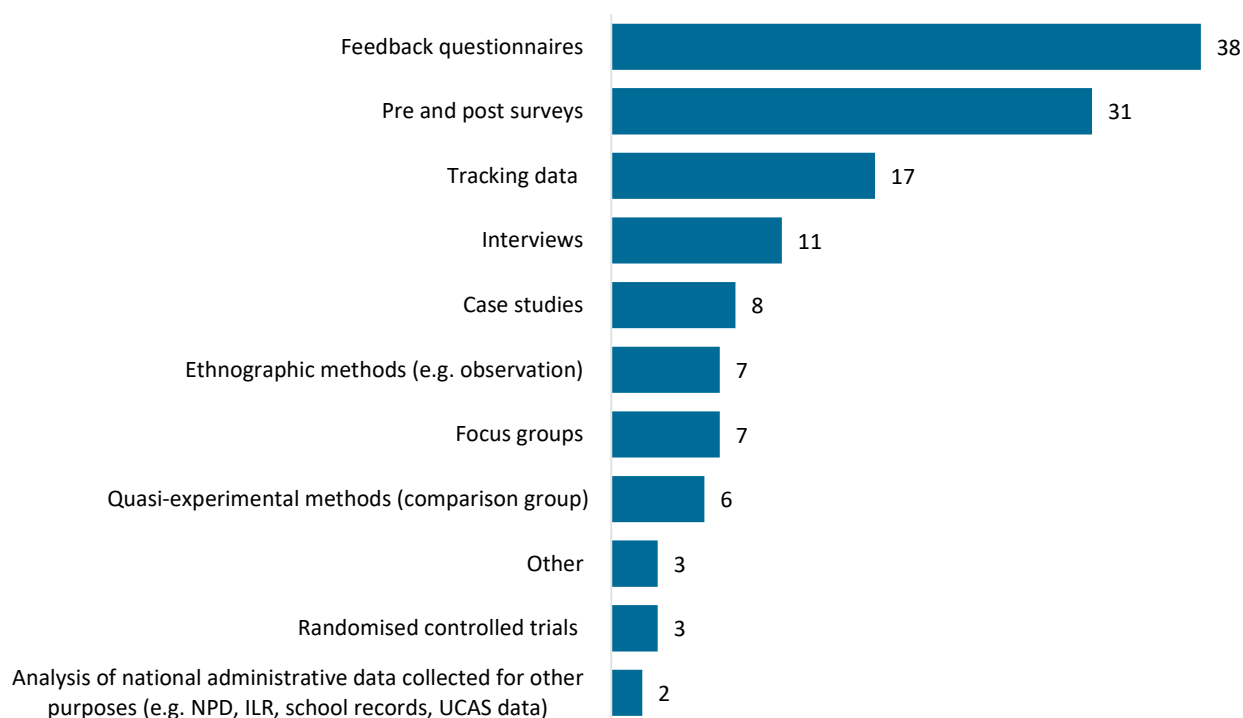
Partnerships are delivering a wide range of activities that combine to form a sustained and progressive programme of support for NCOP learners in Years 9 to 13. As noted previously, programmes comprise well-established methods along with new and innovative approaches that have been developed in response to the opportunities, as well as the unique challenges, presented by the highly-targeted nature of NCOP. The level of intensity of the activities that comprise the programmes also ranges from relatively ‘light-touch’ to ‘intensive’.²¹

A key strength of NCOP is that it is providing a ‘test bed’ for these different approaches to outreach. The impact of well-established activities on different target groups is being examined at the local level (including through the three RCTs, with support from the national evaluation team), in addition to the impact of new and innovative approaches, although this evidence is not available at this stage. Partnerships are using this evidence, including insights into the local context and the impact that this has on learner outcomes, to refine their portfolio of activities and inform future delivery plans. In the longer term, local evaluation findings will help to strengthen the evidence base regarding the relative effectiveness of different interventions, resulting in a fuller understanding of ‘what works, for who, in what context and why’.

Here we summarise the evidence generated through the local evaluations and the RCTs to explore the emerging impact of these activities on learners. Figure 6 (overleaf) summarises the methods used by partnerships to evaluate the impact of their activities. The most common methods are feedback questionnaires which capture self-reported impacts from learners and pre and post surveys that compare perceptions before and after an intervention. While insightful, it is not possible to attribute the impact of the change to the intervention with any certainty using these methods. Experimental and quasi-experimental methods are the most robust way to achieve this, but limited use of these methods has been made to date.

²¹ Research by Harrison & Waller (2018) suggests that a sustained programme of activity is beneficial for shifting learner expectations or raising attainment, as opposed to raising aspirations. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3475>

Figure 6: Method used to evaluate intervention. Base = 67



Information, advice and guidance (IAG)

To enable young people to make fully-informed decisions about their future education and employment, facilitating access to good quality, impartial IAG is a key objective of NCOP. NCOP-funded IAG is delivered both as a standalone activity and as an integrated element of an intervention or programme of activities such as campus visits and summer schools, as discussed below. Partnership staff perceive that over the course of Phase 1 NCOP has improved access to IAG for pupils in target wards Figure 7 (below) as well as enhanced the quality of the IAG that is available to them Figure 8 (overleaf).

Figure 7. Perceptions of impact on access to IAG for learners in target wards in Year 1 and 2 (bases in parentheses).

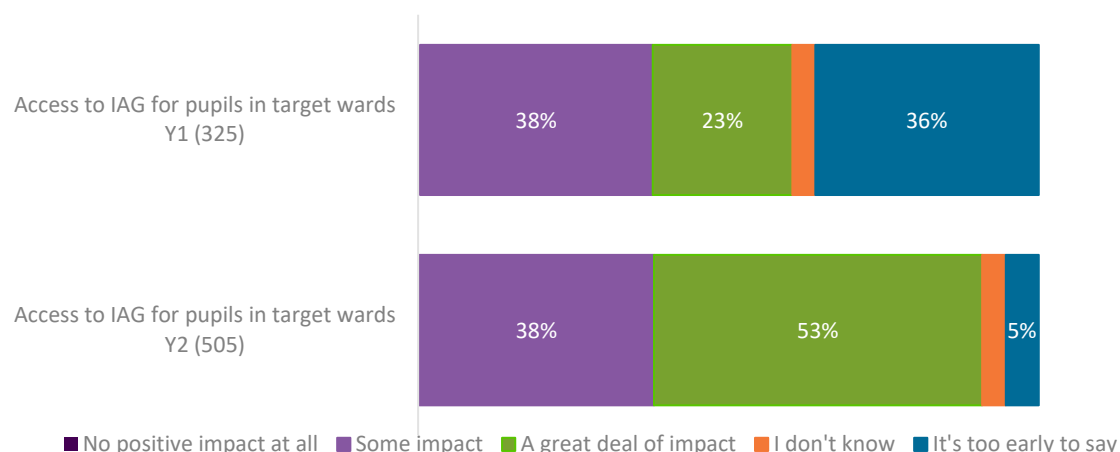
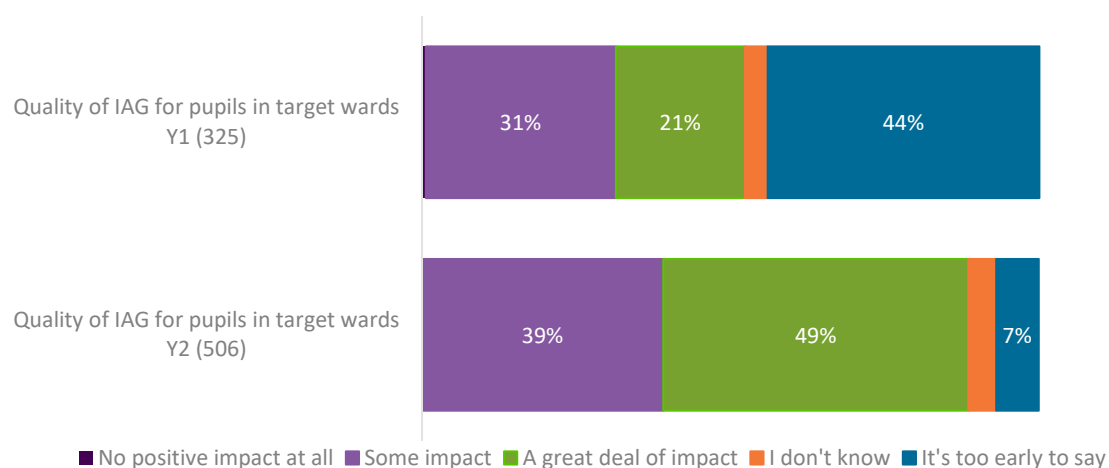


Figure 8. Perceptions of impact on the quality of IAG for learners in target wards (bases in parentheses).



However, it is important to note that IAG is often available to *all* learners in the context of the statutory duty on schools and colleges to facilitate access to impartial IAG for learners aged 13 -18. As such, it is more challenging to discern the impact of NCOP-funded IAG on learner outcomes and on the outcomes of NCOP learners specifically. Seven evaluations of IAG activities delivered by six partnerships were reviewed as part of the review of local evaluation evidence. This primarily qualitative evidence suggests that IAG activities can have a positive impact in terms of raising awareness of post-16 options HE and life at university. Assessment of the evidence also shows some short-term impacts on raising aspirations and changes in attitudes to HE. Further research is required to understand the relative influence of IAG and the specific impacts for NCOP target learners. There is, however, a potential paradox here. Providing access to high-quality IAG on the range of post-18 option could lead some target learners who were previously considering HE but who were unaware of alternative routes, to change their intended path. While this may be the right decision for them, this works against the achievement of NCOP's objective to increase the proportion of learners from target groups that enter HE. Any future

research and evaluation of NCOP-funded IAG must take account of the specific challenges and inherent tensions in assuring the impartiality of the provisions that are delivered through a programme designed to encourage learners to make a specific choice.

Light-touch nudging techniques

NEACO took advantage of the proliferation in the number of young people with access to a mobile phone to send information via text message. The messages were designed to enhance Year 11s' understanding of post-16 options and encourage Year 13s to apply to HE.

This text-based nudging intervention provided the focus for one of the RCTs. Year 13 learners assigned to the intervention group received a series of weekly text messages between October 2017 and January 2018 designed to support them in applying to HE. The messages contained specific information relevant to the HE application procedure, highlighted important preparatory steps (e.g. drafting a personal statement) and information about key deadlines. It also provided practical tips (e.g. navigating the UCAS website, finding out course codes). Year 11 learners in the intervention group received a series of weekly text messages over a period of 11 weeks. The text messages included video links to information and quizzes about post-16 options

Findings of the year 13 trial

The main statistical analysis²² of the Year 13 trial showed no significant effect of the text-messaging intervention on applications to HE. Further analysis²³ revealed a non-significant two-percentage point difference in applications to HE between the text-message intervention group and the control group (59% versus 61%, respectively). Variations of the analysis carried out for NCOP target learners only, compared to non-NCOP learners, reveal the same pattern. This demonstrates that the intervention had no statistically-significant impact on the likelihood of learners applying to HE.

Findings of the year 11 trial

Findings from the main analysis²⁴ showed no systematic difference between the text-messaging intervention group and the control group across all the outcomes measured, including perceptions about the different jobs that might be available to

²² Logistic regression was used to calculate the effect of the text messaging intervention on the outcome variables. Sex, NCOP target/non-target group and school/FEC were included as characteristics in the analysis.

²³ Ordinary Least Squares regression was carried out to assist in the interpretation of results.

²⁴ Ordinary Least Squares regression was computed to determine the effect of the text-messaging intervention on survey outcomes. Characteristics in the model included sex, NCOP target status, whether students would be the first in the family to go to HE, a dummy variable representing school, whether the school had a sixth form and baseline survey scores.

learners after their GCSEs and knowledge of where their favourite subject might lead. This means that the text messages did not have any beneficial effect on learners. In some instances, mean scores were lower for the text messaging group compared to the control group. For example, the text messaging group had lower mean scores of their knowledge of different education and/or training options compared to the control group. Despite the lack of positive findings, the RCT provided valuable learning that can be taken forward in future trials.²⁵ Indeed, NEACO has already applied this learning to a second trial, currently underway.

There are a number of possible explanations for the findings from the text-messaging trials. The trial protocol was robust and rigour for the trial implementation was maintained throughout. It could, therefore, suggest that the intervention itself was not effective in this context (for example, if the learners had access to high quality IAG through other channels), or is not effective as a light-touch communication method. However, it is important to note that a lower response rate to the follow-up survey was achieved. The reduced sample size could have reduced the power of the trial to detect any real, significant effects, particularly if the likely effect size was over-estimated at the outset.

A number of potential threats to the internal validity of the trials could explain the results. For example, neither trial considered whether learners had actually read and engaged with the text messages that they received, and were unable to measure the extent to which there was 'leakage' from the intervention group. It is possible that learners in the intervention group communicated with learners in the control group about the text messages they had received and/or forwarded messages to peers in the control group, thus diluting the effect. A future trial could consider ways to measure level of engagement with the text messages to overcome this issue as well as measures to prevent leakage and boost the sample size. Future trials could also explore using alternative forms of social media for the communication platform. Further details of the approach to the trials and the analysis are provided in the technical annex produced to accompany this report.²⁶

Campus visits and other visits

Campus visits are an opportunity for prospective students to get a taste of university life and for providers to convey information about the courses on offer, the academic, pastoral and financial support available, accommodation options, and student life, including clubs and societies. These true-to-life insights can help to demystify HE for

²⁵ EEF has published guidance on designing and running informative trials in an education context: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/eeef-blog-how-do-we-make-eeef-trials-as-informative-as-possible/>

²⁶ http://cfe.org.uk/app/uploads/NCOP_Phase_1_Technical_Annex.pdf

those with limited knowledge or experience to draw on, helping to reduce barriers to progression.

The learner survey findings suggest that campus visits do have a positive impact on learners' knowledge of the courses available, how to apply to HE and what student life is like, as well as the likely career prospects for graduates (see Chapter 5). As the following case study from the NEACO partnership illustrates, they can be particularly effective when they are tailored to a subject of interest to the learners who take part.

Loughborough University campus visit

The NEACO partnership organised a campus visit to Loughborough University, a specialist provider of sports HE, which was tailored to those with an interest in pursuing sport-related studies in HE. A total of 30 physical education students attended. The aim was to raise awareness of the opportunities to study subjects in sport at a prestigious HE provider. During the visit, students viewed the university's sports facilities and participated in taster sessions. For many, this was their first trip outside their local area.

Feedback from students taking part in this activity suggests that this is an effective way to broaden learners' horizons and increase their awareness of the opportunities available to them within a particular subject discipline in HE. It also helped to open up the possibility of HE to those who may not have otherwise considered it and helped to develop their confidence in the idea that HE could be an option for them.

"You find out that PE's about more than just physical activity. You learn about the psychological and nutrition aspects. [...] At first I wanted to do mechanics, but I wouldn't mind being a food nutritionist." (Participating NCOP learner)

The visit also had a positive impact on teachers' knowledge of sport and HE options and this knowledge has been cascaded to other school staff.

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds often do not have access to extra-curricular activities or professional networks that can influence aspirations, education and career decisions. Many learners, including some who took part in the Loughborough University visit, have never had the opportunity to leave their home towns to experience life in different parts of the country or different cultures. NCOP has enabled partnerships to provide a diverse range of experiences including cinema and theatre trips, residentials, visits to specialist HE providers (e.g. design and media focused Ravensbourne University, The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, and the Royal Veterinary College), historical sites (e.g. Bletchley Park), employers (e.g. Sizewell nuclear power station), and museums (e.g. Science Museum and National Space Centre). Partnership staff perceive that these activities help to support the development of participants' social and cultural capital by exposing them to organisations and experiences that they may not otherwise encounter. However, the longer-term effect on learner behaviour is yet to be established.

Summer schools and residential activities

A total of 19 summer schools and residential activities offered by partnerships are known to have been evaluated and the outputs were reviewed as part of the analysis of local evaluation evidence. Mirroring the campus visits, many of these residential activities were tailored to those with an interest in a particular discipline, such as an art and design or science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM). Others had a more generic focus on attainment and aspiration-raising. One had a work/industry focus. Eight activities were targeted at Year 10 learners and four at Year 11 learners. However, two were targeted at Year 12 and 13 learners and three targeted all learners.

Most (12) partnerships used pre and post surveys to evaluate their summer school and residential activities. Two also conducted a further follow-up survey to capture the medium-term impact on attitudes, knowledge and aspirations. Unfortunately, results are only available for one of the follow-up surveys, because the other did not achieve sufficient responses. Four partnerships undertook a mixed-method approach which also incorporated case studies, focus groups and interviews. One RCT was conducted as part of the national impact evaluation. Sample sizes varied from 10 to 220. The outcome measures and key findings from summer schools evaluations are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of outcomes measured and short term outcomes from 19 summer school and residential activity evaluations.²⁷

Methods	Outcomes measured	Short term outcomes achieved
Case Studies Pre/post survey Focus Groups RCTs	Increased knowledge of HE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre/post surveys show increased knowledge of HE post residential.
	Increased awareness of post-16 choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre/post surveys show an increase in awareness of the benefits of HE (increases range from 4% to 21%). Pre/post surveys show an increase in learners' awareness of what would be required of them if they wanted to go into HE (increases range from 12% to 21%). Pre/post surveys show an increased awareness of educational opportunities available after leaving school (increases range from 19% to 21%). Pre/post surveys show an increased awareness of, and interest in, courses available to study at university.
	Increased intentions in progression to HE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre/post surveys show an increase in learners' intention to apply to HE (increases range from 3% to 33%). Pre/post surveys show greater increases for females (33%) than males (9%).
	Increased learner self-efficacy and interpersonal skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre/post surveys show a large increase in learners' confidence (97%).

Positive change after participating in a summer school/residential activity is reported for most of the outcomes measures identified in Table 1. As the London Summer School case study demonstrates (overleaf), this intervention is perceived to deliver a range of benefits for those who take part. A particular strength identified in the case study model is the inclusion of student ambassadors. Many NCOP learners do not have a role model at home or as part of their direct peer group. Student ambassadors can act as role models for this group, and can have a powerful influence on them, particularly if learners identify with the ambassadors in terms of their background and prior experiences. Summer schools provide an opportunity to expose learners to student ambassadors, which can in turn help to positively influence target learners' aspirations and attitudes towards HE.

²⁷ The short term outcomes are based from the studies which were deemed detailed enough to report. Those which did not detail sample sizes or where non-NCOP learners were included in the analysis were excluded.

London Summer School at Liverpool universities

An issue for some London NCOP learners is the lack of awareness of HE opportunities and cities beyond the capital. To address this, Aimhigher London took a group of 30 Year 11 and 12 students to Liverpool Hope University for a four-day residential. A key aim of the residential was to encourage learners to reflect on their sense of 'place and belonging'. The summer school featured visits to the three universities in Liverpool and a Performing Arts College; sightseeing tour; museum visits; a visit to the cathedral and to Anfield (home of Liverpool Football Club); a theatre visit and a meal out. Learners observed London and Liverpool NCOP ambassadors discussing the differences between the two cities. The summer school offered several benefits, including:

- increased networking opportunities across year groups within and across south London schools, many of whom have subsequently come together for a reference-writing and personal statement workshop,
- renewed enthusiasm towards schoolwork and an interest in going to university, observed by the parents/carers of those who took part,
- enhanced social and cultural capital among the group, none of whom had stayed overnight outside London before, and
- stimulation of links between ambassadors, teachers and learners in London and Liverpool, sustained by a WhatsApp group.

The evaluation that conducted a second follow-up survey with summer school participants provides mixed results on the sustainability of the outcomes achieved. Immediate survey findings suggest summer schools greatly improve participants' knowledge on how to apply to university. While respondents to the second follow-up survey also reported improved knowledge of the application process, the proportion is lower compared with the responses provided immediately after the residential. Immediately following the summer school, learners reported that they knew more about how to find information on post-18 options. At the second follow-up, this knowledge had been maintained. By the second follow-up, participants reported a high level of understanding of their future career options and the choices available to them. However, as lower levels of understanding were reported immediately after the summer school, this suggests that learners had benefited from further interventions and/or had undertaken their own research in order to improve their knowledge.

Two of the evaluations suggest that summer schools could have a negative impact on male learners from disadvantaged backgrounds. One evaluation noted that summer schools had a negative impact on boys' intentions to progress to HE and another noted similar findings, with a 6% decrease in their intentions to apply to HE. The analysis of the learner survey (see Chapter 5) suggests that, with the exception of male perceptions of their ability to succeed in HE, NCOP is less likely to be having a positive impact on male learners overall compared with female learners. Further research into the barriers experienced by male learners and taking account of the 'male learner voice' in the development of partnerships' strategic and operational

plans would help to ensure interventions are appropriately tailored for this group and help to reduce the participation gap between the sexes.

Findings from the summer school trial

The summer school RCT combined data from across two summer schools run by three NCOP partnerships: Go Higher West Yorkshire, LiNCHigher and HOP. The aim was to test whether a multi-day residential university summer school for Year 10s could increase learners' knowledge about HE, their motivation to attend and the belief that it was possible. The total sample across all three partnerships for the trial comprised 130 NCOP learners who took part in the summer school (treatment group) and 50 NCOP learners who did not take part (control group).

The primary outcome on the likelihood of application to HE showed no significant impact of the summer school. On average, learners responded that they were 'quite likely' to apply following the intervention, irrespective of trial condition (treatment or control). Although learners in the treatment group were slightly less likely to report that they would apply compared to the control group, this difference is not statistically significant. There was no significant impact on secondary outcomes either, which included knowledge of courses, how to find information about applying to HE, whether university is for 'people like me', whether university will 'broaden my horizons' and whether it will 'enable me to get a better job'. However, some subtle (non-significant) difference in perceptions were identified between the treatment and control groups. For example, the treatment group of learners are *less likely* to perceive that university is for 'people like me' compared to the whole sample. In contrast, the treatment group are *more likely* to perceive that 'university will broaden their horizons' and that university will 'help them to get a better job' than the whole sample.

There are a number of possible explanations for the results. In addition to high attrition rate, the structure and content of the summer schools is likely to have varied between the partnerships, which could have impacted on the outcome findings. Furthermore, the age of the learners could have been a contributing factor. Consideration could be given to the age of the learners who participate in summer schools and their 'distance' from the transition point to HE. Previous work by CFE Research for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)²⁸ and more recently for the Department for Education²⁹ suggests that learners become clearer about their post-18 choices the closer they get to the transition point. The influence of parents and other informal sources of IAG diminishes at this stage and the

²⁸ CFE (2015) Understanding progression into HE for disadvantaged and under-represented groups. BIS Research Paper No 229: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/474269/BIS-15-462-understanding-progression-into-higher-education-final.pdf

²⁹ CFE with Hughes, D.M. (2017) User insight research into post-16 choices. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/user-insight-research-into-post-16-choices>

influence of IAG delivered through encounters with HE providers (e.g. websites, visits) increases. It is possible, therefore, that Year 10 learners may be too young to benefit from a summer school.

Mentoring

A total of 14 mentoring interventions are known to have been evaluated by partnerships. These varied in terms of mode of delivery (online, face-to-face) and focus. Some examples had a subject-specific focus and others had a careers focus. The majority of mentoring activities were targeted at year groups. Just one partnership targeted their mentoring activity at working-class males only. Mentoring activities typically lasted 6-8 weeks, with regular contact between mentor and learner during this period. The sample sizes for the evaluations ranged from 4 to 43 learners. Most used pre/post surveys to evaluate impact while a minority adopted qualitative or mixed methodologies. The outcome measures and key findings from mentoring evaluations are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Summary of outcomes measured and short term outcomes achieved from 14 mentoring evaluations.³⁰

Methods used	Outcomes measured	Short term outcomes achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small group interviews • Focus groups • Pre/post surveys • Randomised control trials (RCTs) (as part of the national impact evaluation) 	Increased knowledge of HE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners feel more confident in knowing where to locate information about and routes into HE.
	Increased awareness of post-16 choices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learners are more informed about post-16 options. • Increases in knowledge about the different types of courses available at HE and awareness of post-16 options.
	Increased intentions to progress HE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An increase in intentions towards progressing to HE.
	Increased learner self-efficacy and interpersonal skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large numbers of learners agreed that conversations with their mentor helped them to think more clearly about their future. • Learners developed key skills, particularly decision- making. • Pre/post survey findings and interviews with learners show a positive change in over half of learners' self-efficacy.

A positive change directly after participating in mentoring is reported for the majority of impact outcome measures identified in Table 2. The evidence also

³⁰ The short term outcomes are based on the studies which were deemed detailed enough to report. Those that did not detail sample sizes or where non-NCOP learners were included in the analysis were excluded.

suggests that more positive outcomes are achieved from targeted mentoring programmes (e.g. older year groups, disadvantaged males) compared to programme-wide initiatives. However, while these findings are indicative of a positive impact on learners' awareness, knowledge and intentions to progress to HE, it is not possible to attribute the change to the intervention based on current evidence. This accords with the participant survey findings (see Chapter 5).

An online mentoring programme delivered to learners in the SUN partnership provided the focus for one of the RCTs implemented with support from the national evaluation team. This e-mentoring intervention matched learners to an undergraduate student mentor. Learners communicated with their mentor via a digital platform. The first six weeks of the intervention focused on goal setting and HE exploration. In the final four weeks students were able to opt for more detailed IAG on either traditional university pathways, HE in FE or higher/degree apprenticeships. Although 186 learners who expressed an interest in participating in e-mentoring were randomly allocated to the treatment (n=92) and control groups (n=91), just 38 (40%) of the treatment group went on to take part in the intervention.

Findings from the mentoring trial

It is important to note that a high trial attrition rate resulted in a small and imbalanced sample for the trial analysis and mitigated against any statistical analysis comparing the intervention and control group. The findings are, therefore, heavily caveated as there is a risk that the sample is not representative of the original treatment and control groups in terms of school/FEC, year group and age, as well as in terms of unobservable characteristics that cannot be accounted for in the analysis.³¹ The main analysis³² of the online mentoring RCT found no evidence that this intervention had a significant impact on students' self-reported intentions to progress to HE, nor does it appear to have had any positive impact on learners' propensity to think that HE is for 'people like them', that it will broaden their horizons or improve their job prospects.

There are some indicative findings that online mentoring has a positive impact on students' confidence in their post-college plans, knowledge of HE options, knowledge of where to find information about applying and confidence that they know how to get the qualifications/training they need to get the job that they want. This suggests that e-mentoring has the potential to help learners refine and strengthen their plans, including going on to HE. Although these findings failed to reach significance, they were further borne out in data captured through a series of focus groups with

³¹ Further details of the approach to the trial and the analysis are provided in the technical annex to this report: http://cfe.org.uk/app/uploads/NCOP_Phase_1_Technical_Annex.pdf

³² Logistic regression was used to analyse the effect of the treatment on the survey outcomes. Gender, school/FEC, year group and first in family to go to HE were included as characteristics.

learners after the trial. This is encouraging in the context of one of NCOP's principal aims – to support young people to make informed decisions.

Potential explanations for the high attrition rate were explored through focus groups. Communication difficulties between mentors and mentees and the timing of the intervention (it clashed with mock exams) were key presenting issues. Although programme length was not identified as a significant issue, attrition increased over its duration. Reducing the number of e-mentoring sessions may reduce the attrition rate without compromising on the quality of delivery. Most of the learners involved in the trial were based in colleges rather than schools. Differences in school and college learner characteristics and attitudes to mentoring could be a factor in the attrition rate. A future trial may wish to review the content and structure of the e-mentoring programme to ensure it reflects the needs and likely aspirations of college learners. To understand if mode of delivery is an issue for this group, a comparison between the outcomes of those who take part in online and off-line mentoring would be useful and add to the knowledge base.

Multi-activity interventions

Multi-activity interventions were delivered and evaluated by four partnerships. They comprised a range of activities, including workshops, work experience, university and employer visits, career guidance and residential trips. They were often delivered in collaboration with other stakeholders, such as employers and training organisations, and/or with other NCOP partnerships. One intervention targeted Years 12 and 13, one targeted Year 10s, another Year 9s and one was offered to all NCOP learners.

Partnerships used a range of methods to evaluate their multi-activity interventions, including pre/post surveys, exit surveys and interviews with learners. Some evaluation designs included interviews with teaching staff, mentors and employers who delivered interventions. The sample sizes for the evaluations varied between 10 and 86 learners. The outcome measures and key findings are summarised in Table 3, below.³³ The findings suggest that multi-activity programmes can have a positive effect on learners' intentions to progress to HE. This is borne out by the national impact analysis, which suggests that the more interventions a learner engages with, the greater the change in perceptions and the more positive the outcomes.

³³ Evidence presented is derived from two of the four interventions. One of the four reports presented anecdotal evidence and notes that findings will be detailed in a subsequent report.

Table 3: Summary of outcomes measured and short-term outcomes from 4 multi-activity evaluations.³⁴

Methods	Outcomes measured	Short term outcomes achieved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre/post surveys Exit surveys Interviews 	Increased awareness of post-16 careers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Female learners reported greater benefits around 'informed decisions', while male learners reported greater benefit around 'understanding courses and qualifications'.³⁵ Although learners did not express a preference or interest in a particular career, learners' general awareness of careers increased.³⁶
	Increased awareness of the benefits of HE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survey and qualitative findings show that learners gained a better understanding of HE and a better understanding of courses and qualifications.
	Increased aspirations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survey and qualitative findings show that learners felt better informed to make decisions about their future.
	Increased self-efficacy and interpersonal skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pre/post surveys show that learners reported higher levels of self-efficacy and development of interpersonal skills.
	Increased intention to apply to HE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survey and qualitative findings show that over half of learners were more likely to apply to HE.

Workshops

Workshops are an integral part of multi-activity interventions. Three partnerships are known to have conducted evaluations of this type of intervention,³⁷ which included a 'Business in Sport' workshop, a workshop delivered as part of a sports outreach offer, and drama workshops. One of the three workshops targeted Year 10 learners and two targeted Year 9s. The methods used to evaluate workshops included pre/post surveys, interviews and observations. Sample sizes for the evaluations ranged from 10 to 45 learners. Indicative evidence suggests that workshops have, in the short term, influenced learners' awareness of post-16 choices and intentions to progress to HE. However, it is important to note that these findings are based on small samples and participation in other outreach offers was not controlled in the

³⁴ The short-term outcomes are based from the studies which were deemed detailed enough to report. Those which did not detail sample sizes, or where non-NCOP learners were included in the analysis, were excluded.

³⁵ These differences were found not to be statistically significant.

³⁶ These differences were found not to be statistically significant.

³⁷ Reports submitted which evaluated workshops as a wider programme of activities were not included in our assessment nor were workshops delivered as part of other offers e.g. summer schools, careers events.

analysis. As such, it is difficult to attribute impact from the workshops on the outcomes specified.

A range of approaches to evaluating interventions has been adopted by partnerships to date, including pre/post survey design studies, case studies, interviews and focus groups involving learners. As partnerships move forward into Phase 2 of NCOP, it will be important to place an increased emphasis on establishing the impact of these interventions, including the new and innovative approaches, on the outcomes for target learners. Learning on the most effective way to deliver these interventions (process evaluation) as well as evidence of their impact, could be usefully shared with other partnerships to help shape delivery plans and enable good practice to be adopted.

05. The impact of NCOP on learners

In this chapter we summarise the evidence to date on the impact of NCOP at the programme level, drawing on the findings from the first two waves of the learner survey. We also examine monitoring data in order to begin to explore the value for money of the programme.

Key findings

- There is evidence of positive change in learner attitudes and knowledge about various aspects of HE between baseline and Wave 1.
- The analysis suggests that a sustained and progressive programme of support is more likely to deliver positive outcomes for learners than one-off or ad-hoc interventions. There is a positive association between the number of NCOP activities attended and changes in learner perceptions.
- High levels of learner agreement about the benefits of HE at baseline and Wave 1 suggest that a large proportion of NCOP target learners already recognise the benefits of HE, which limits the amount of change that can be detected.
- There is a slight reduction between baseline and Wave 1 in learner perceptions that HE will provide ‘valuable life skills’ and enable them ‘to get a better job’. Learners overall were also less positive about their ability to succeed at HE at Wave 1 compared with the baseline. This suggests that prior to NCOP learners did not fully understand the demands of HE and recalibrated their perceived ability levels after engaging in outreach activity.
- Learners who engaged in the greatest number of NCOP activities are more likely to report greater knowledge about HE and graduate careers prospects and a higher level of learner confidence in where to find information about courses, financial support and university accommodation.

There is emerging evidence that specific outreach interventions are associated with positive perceived learner outcomes:

- *Mentoring* is shown to be an effective way to improve learners’ knowledge and awareness of HE, including the academic demands involved. It helps ensure learners know where to get information about the options available to them post-18 and boosts their confidence in their ability to make the right choices.
- *Campus visits* give prospective students a taste of university life. Those who take part report increased knowledge of the courses available, how to apply to HE and what student life is like, as well as the likely career prospects for graduates.

Not all outreach interventions are associated with positive learner outcomes:

- Evidence on the impact of *summer schools* on intentions to progress to HE is inconclusive. However, this does not necessarily suggest that summer schools are not effective. There is qualitative evidence regarding the perceived benefits of this type of intervention from both staff and learners
- *IAG* is delivered both as a standalone activity and as an integral part of other interventions. As a result, its impact on learner outcomes is hard to discern. However, analysis suggests that *IAG* is associated with a negative change in learners' perceived knowledge of the UCAS application process and their ability to get on a good course.
- *Master classes* are associated with positive change in learners' perceived ability to get on a good course suggesting this is a more effective approach than *IAG* to building learner confidence in this area. However, the demographics of learners who access *IAG* may also differ from those who attend master classes, which could account for some these findings.
- There is emerging evidence that learner characteristics are differentially associated with their perceptions towards HE. Although NCOP is having a positive effect on male perceptions of their ability to succeed in HE compared with females, the analysis suggests that NCOP is having a more positive impact on females overall, as well as on older learners, those without a disability, white learners, those who know someone at university, and those from more advantaged backgrounds.

Learner survey

The learner survey forms a key part of the national impact evaluation of the NCOP. It is a longitudinal survey designed to capture NCOP target learners' aspirations, knowledge of HE and intentions to progress to HE as they move through from Year 9 to Year 13 and into post-18 options. The survey was developed through a collaborative process with all stakeholders involved in the national impact evaluation and partnerships. Where possible, questions were adapted from existing validated surveys (e.g. questions about educational aspirations from the Understanding Society Survey³⁸).

The survey is structured to enable standardised and comparable data to be collected for the national evaluation, while also allowing partnerships to add their own questions, to meet the needs of their local evaluation. The baseline survey, administered between September 2017 and November 2017, provided a snapshot of learners' knowledge, views and aspirations at the start of the programme. The first

³⁸ <https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/research/themes/education/questionnaire-grid>

wave of the follow-up survey (Wave 1) was administered between September 2018 and November 2018 and provides a further snapshot of learners' perceptions after participation in a range of outreach activities delivered by partnerships.

NCOP is a sustained and progressive programme which is designed to support learners as they progress through Key Stage 4 and 5 into post-18 options. Given the long-term nature of the programme, and time that will elapse before the younger cohorts in particular will enter HE, the results presented here are focused on the intermediate outcomes from the programme to date. The full impact of the programme will not be known for some time – for some learners, not until a number of years after the funding period has ceased – when Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data for target learners becomes available.

At this stage it is not possible to compare the outcomes for NCOP learners with a suitable comparison group. Responses from NCOP learners are, however, compared between the baseline and Wave 1 surveys to show whether there has been any change in perceptions and whether NCOP activities have had an impact during Phase 1 of the programme. What the analysis is unable to demonstrate at this stage is whether changes are unique to NCOP learners and are attributable to the outreach activities received.

Survey implementation and response rate

The Wave 1 survey was administered by partnerships, via schools and FECs. The survey was designed to be completed online or by 'paper and pencil'. Some partnerships administered the survey online using a survey link provided by CFE while others chose to include standard questions in their own surveys administered using their own online survey software. Data captured using the paper version of the survey was either entered by partnership staff directly into CFE's online survey software or into a database which was then shared with CFE. Twenty partnerships administered a version of the Wave 1 survey.³⁹ To reduce the survey attrition rate, some partnerships administered Wave 1 of the survey to Year 13 and Year 11 learners in June 2018, ahead of students commencing exam leave. A version of the survey was disseminated in September 2018 to the remaining Year 13 learners who consented to be contacted directly by the national evaluation team. The survey was disseminated to this cohort of learners via a text message that contained a survey link. A total of 98,201 responses to the Wave 1 survey was achieved. After initial data cleaning (non-consent, duplication of survey responses), the sample was reduced to 67,482 learners. Wave 1 survey responses were matched to the baseline survey data which resulted in a final matched sample of 14,871 learners. Of this matched sample, 9,357

³⁹ For inclusion in the W1 survey, partnerships had to meet the criteria of achieving a sample size of 400 or more NCOP learners at baseline and/or 30% of their 20% target population of NCOP learners.

(62.9%) were NCOP target learners, representing 8.9% of the 20% NCOP learner population target (105,627 learners). Details of the data cleaning and merging processes used to produce the matched dataset are found in the technical annex.⁴⁰

To understand the impact of outreach activity, the matched baseline and Wave 1 survey data were merged with tracking data collated by HEAT,⁴¹ EMWPREP⁴² and AWM,⁴³ resulting in a sample of 7,182 cases (5,148 NCOP learners) and representation from 25 partnerships. For some respondents, the gender or ethnicity reported at baseline was different to that reported at Wave 1 and these respondents were removed from the final analysis. After removing 608 cases where this discrepancy occurred, the matched dataset including activity data comprised 6,574 cases (4,694 NCOP learners). Whilst there has been considerable learner attrition between baseline and Wave 1, the matched data set of 4,694 NCOP learners is considered to be robust enough to undertake detailed analysis and in statistical terms provides a large sample size. Our sample of NCOP learners was compared with OfS data for the whole sample to determine whether there were any differences in learner characteristics. This analysis did not show any substantial differences. Similarly, no large differences emerged between learner demographics for the baseline and Wave 1 sample of learners. This provides confidence that the matched sample is not biased and that learners who dropped out between baseline and Wave 1 are not different to those that remain in the sample. The findings presented in this chapter are based on these 4,694 NCOP learners. The top line analysis of the baseline and Wave 1 surveys and tracking data is provided in the technical annex.⁴⁰

Impact on knowledge of and attitudes to HE

Knowledge of the impact of HE on career prospects and life skills

Overall findings, irrespective of learner characteristics, indicate high levels of agreement, between 76 and 86%, with all six statements about the benefits of HE on career prospects and wider life skills, at both baseline and Wave 1. This shows that a large proportion of NCOP target learners already value the benefits of HE and that there is little room for change over the course of the programme. It will be important for Phase 2 of the programme to ensure that positive learner perceptions about the benefits of HE are maintained and, crucially, whether a higher proportion of NCOP

⁴⁰ http://cfe.org.uk/app/uploads/NCOP_Phase_1_Technical_Annex.pdf

⁴¹ Higher Education Access Tracker

⁴² East Midlands Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Partnership

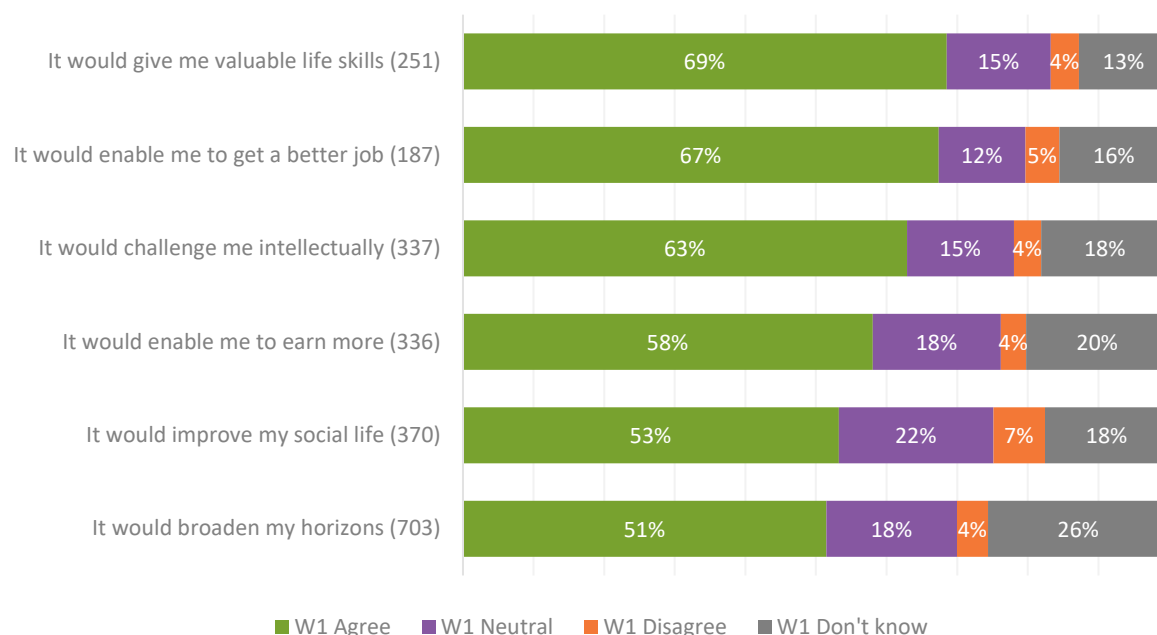
⁴³ Aimhigher West Midlands

learners progress to HE than would otherwise have done in the absence of the programme.

Despite high levels of learner agreement, there is evidence of positive change between baseline and Wave 1 in learner attitudes and knowledge about various aspects of HE. Figure 9 shows the baseline position for ‘don’t know’ learner responses and the proportion change to ‘agree’ at Wave 1 for each of the statements about the impact of HE on career prospects and wider life skills. Between 51 and 69% of learners who responded with ‘don’t know’ at baseline changed their response to ‘agree’ for statements about the impact of HE on career prospects and wider life skills. For those who gave a ‘don’t know’ response at baseline:

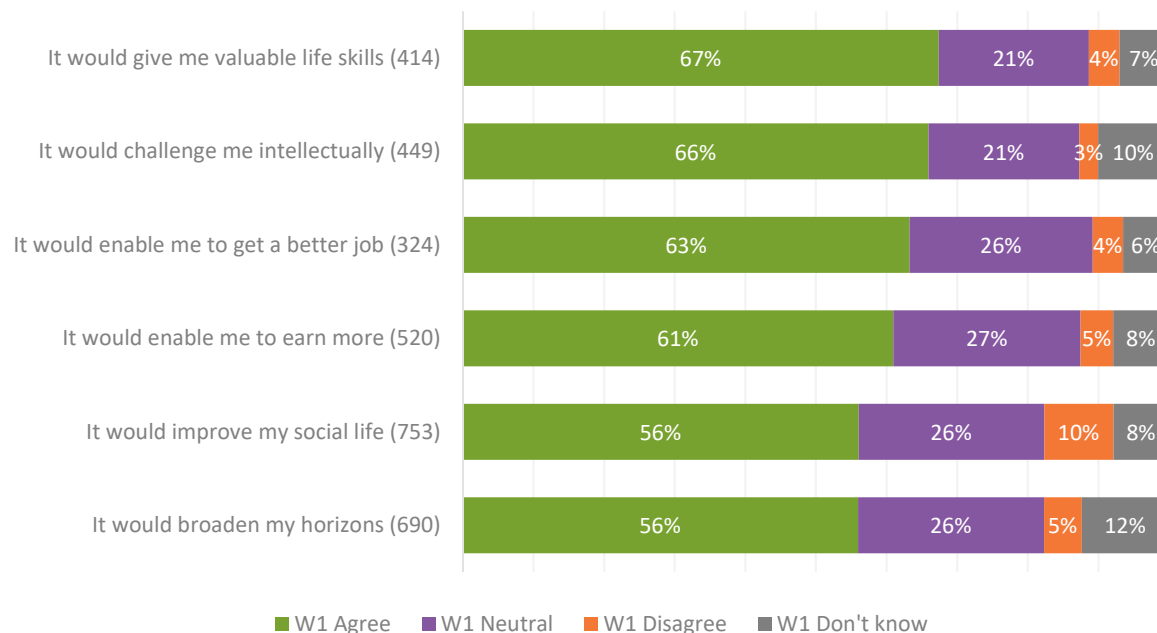
- 69% changed to ‘agree’ at Wave 1 for giving them valuable life skills
- 67% changed to ‘agree’ at Wave 1 for enabling them to get a better job
- 63% changed to ‘agree’ at Wave 1 for challenging them intellectually
- 58% changed to ‘agree’ at Wave 1 for enabling them to earn more
- 53% changed to ‘agree’ at Wave 1 for improving their social life
- 51% changed to ‘agree’ at Wave 1 for broadening their horizons

Figure 9. Number of learners who responded ‘don’t know’ at baseline to survey items about the impact of HE on career prospects and wider life skills, and the proportion change at Wave 1.



A similar pattern of findings is observed for learners who responded as ‘neutral’ at baseline, moving to ‘agree’ at Wave 1. Between 56 and 67% of the learners who responded ‘neutral’ at baseline changed their perceptions to ‘agree’ on all statements about the impact of HE on career prospects and wider life skills (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Number of learners who responded ‘neutral’ at baseline to survey items about the impact of HE on career prospects and wider life skills, and the proportion change at Wave 1.

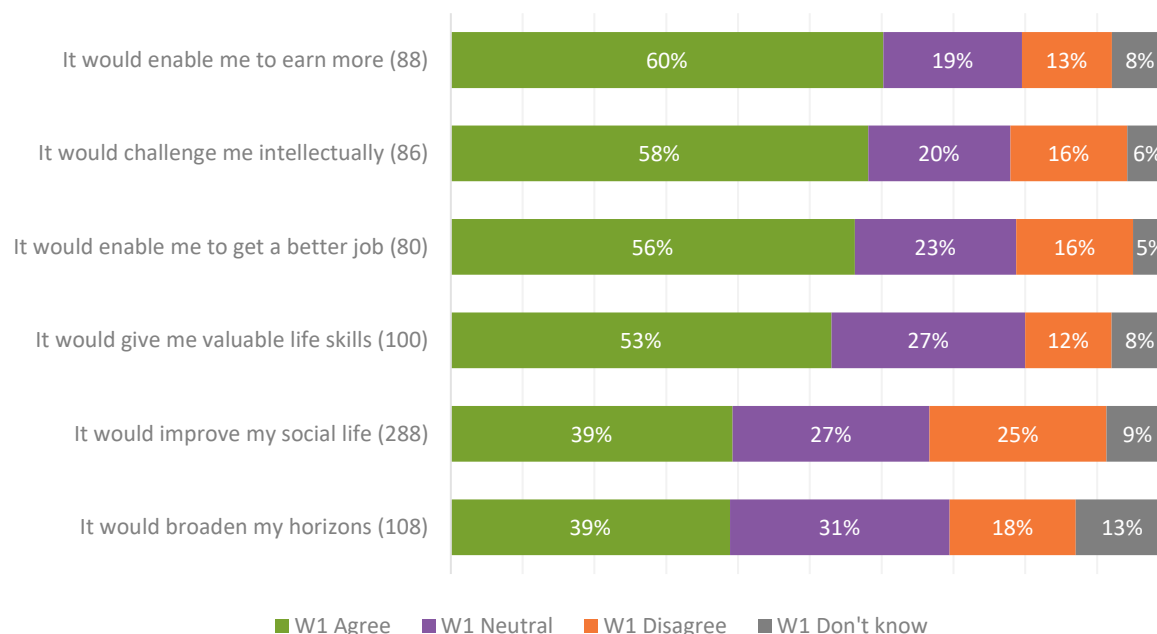


Mean agreement scores between baseline and Wave 1 show a positive change for HE ‘challenging them intellectually’ (baseline = 4.15, Wave 1 = 4.19). Conversely, slight

reductions in mean agreement scores between baseline and Wave 1 were found for HE ‘will give them valuable life skills’ (baseline = 4.19, Wave 1 = 4.15) and HE will enable them to get a better job (baseline = 4.36, Wave 1 = 4.28).

Positive change is shown for learners who responded as ‘disagree’ at baseline, with between 39 and 58% changing to ‘agree’ at Wave 1. Figure 11 shows the number of learners who responded as ‘disagree’ at baseline and the proportion change at Wave 1. These findings show that there are between 12 and 25% of learners who disagreed at both baseline and Wave 1 about the positive impact of HE on their career prospects and wider life skills. It will be important for Phase 2 of the programme to understand in more detail the characteristics of these learners who consistently ‘disagree’ about the potential benefits of HE to ensure they are able to engage in tailored outreach activity.

Figure 11. Number of learners who responded ‘disagree’ at baseline to survey items about the impact of HE on career prospects and wider life skills, and the proportion change at Wave 1.



To understand learner survey responses in more detail, analysis was carried out to explore what combination of learner characteristics and NCOP activity variables are associated with Wave 1 survey outcome scores, and score change between baseline and Wave 1. Small associations are found for Wave 1 outcome scores, accounting for between 1% and 3% of the variance (this means that learner attitudes and knowledge are largely accounted for by other characteristics not included in this analysis). The main characteristics positively associated with learner perceptions about the impact of HE on career prospects and life skills are, in order of importance:

- Knowing someone at university
- White learners

- Older students
- Female learners
- Higher number of NCOP activity sessions attended
- Mentoring

We find that knowing someone at university is significantly associated with better scores on all statements at Wave 1 (that HE would broaden their horizons, challenge them intellectually, give them valuable life skills, improve their social life, enable them to earn more and get a better job). White ethnicity is associated with more positive perceptions that HE would challenge them intellectually, give them valuable life skills and enable them to earn more and get a better job. Being older and female are associated with perceptions that HE would broaden their horizons, challenge them intellectually and provide valuable life skills. Being female is additionally associated with agreement that HE would improve their social life. Attending a greater number of NCOP activity sessions is associated with positive perceptions that university would broaden students' horizons and provide valuable life skills. NCOP activity sessions were also associated with positive perceptions surrounding earning more and getting a better job, although only in some of the analysis models.⁴⁴ Taking part in mentoring activities is associated with improved perceptions that HE would challenge them intellectually, although no other individual activities show a significant impact. It will be interesting to understand in more detail the key features of mentoring programmes that impact on learner perceptions about being challenged intellectually (see Table 2 in Chapter 4).

Perceptions of HE related to social identity and academic ability

There is a tendency for learners to agree at baseline and Wave 1 that HE is for people like them (65%) and that they would fit in well with others (70%).⁴⁵ Confidence in learner's academic ability to succeed is also high between baseline and Wave 1 (79%) and learners are generally positive about their own abilities to succeed at HE at both baseline at Wave 1 (69%). These findings show that for a large proportion of NCOP learners, high levels of social identification towards HE remain at Wave 1. It will be important over the course of Phase 2 that these positive perceptions are maintained.

Positive change in learner perceptions about their social identity towards HE is found between baseline and Wave 1. Figures 12 and 13 show the proportion of

⁴⁴ It is important to note that this is not a consistent finding across all the regression models. It was only shown in 2 of 6 models for enabling students to earn more, and in 1 of 6 in enabling students to get a better job. Perceptions about earning potential and getting a better job depends on career type and course. For example, students considering courses in nursing or occupational therapy are unlikely to be motivated by salary. Perceptions of earning potential do not necessarily indicate that NCOP activities lack information about careers.

⁴⁵ No mean differences were found between baseline and W1 for HE is for people like them and that they would fit in well with others.

learners who responded as ‘don’t know’ or ‘neutral’ at baseline and changed to ‘agree’ at Wave 1. Between 33 and 48% of learners who responded ‘don’t know’ at baseline changed their response to ‘agree’ at Wave 1. A similar pattern of positive change is also evident for learners who responded as ‘neutral’ at baseline with between 37 and 49% changing their response from ‘neutral’ at baseline to ‘agree’ at Wave 1. The largest positive change for learner perceptions is for ‘having the academic ability to succeed’ and the lowest change is for ‘it is for people like me’.

Figure 12. Number of learners who responded ‘don’t know’ at baseline to survey items about social identity and academic ability, and the proportion change at Wave 1.

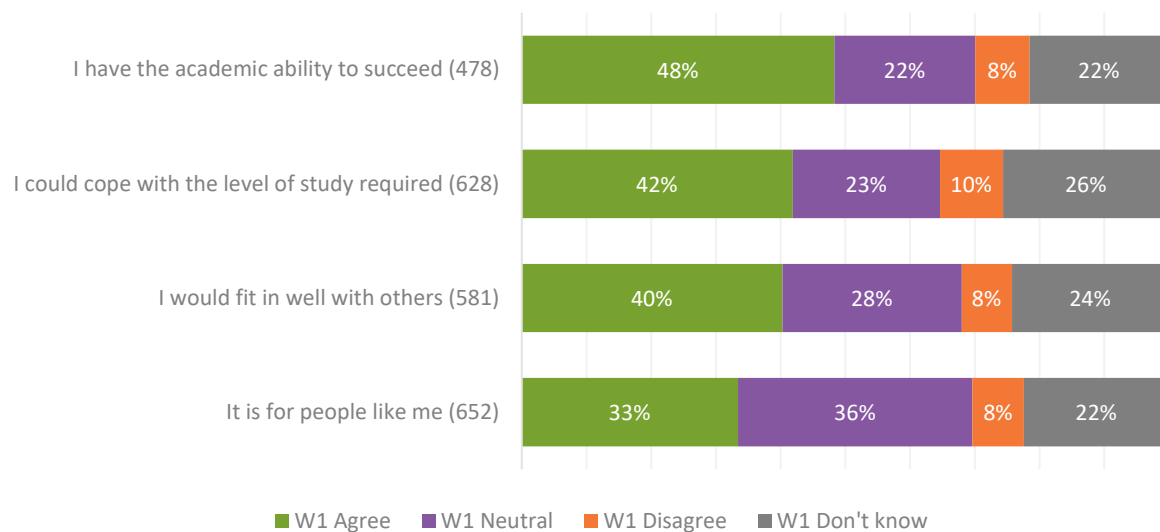
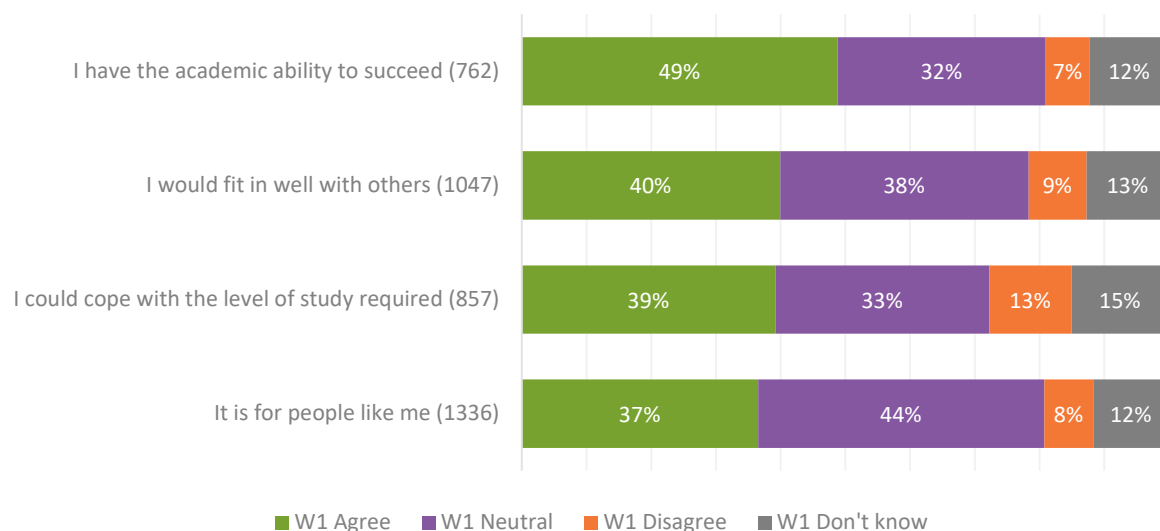


Figure 13. Number of learners who responded ‘neutral’ at baseline to survey items about social identity and academic ability, and the proportion change at Wave 1

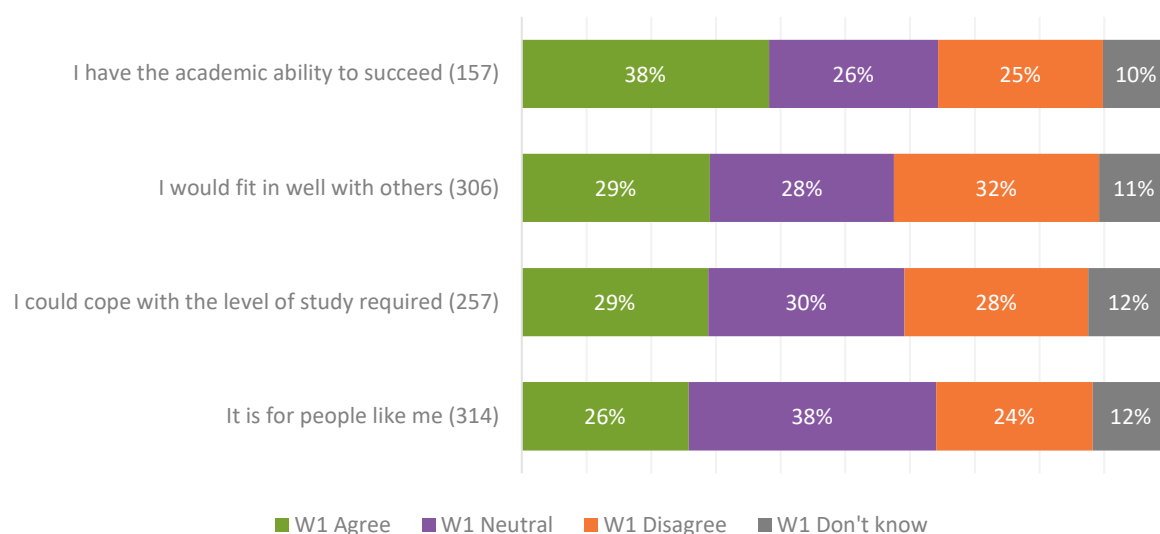


Positive change is evident for a proportion of learners changing their baseline perceptions from ‘disagree’ to ‘agree’ (26–38%%) (see

Figure 14). However, there is a proportion of learners at Wave 1 that still do not socially identify with HE, or perceive that they have the academic skills required. For those learners that gave a ‘disagree’ response at baseline:

- 32% still disagreed at Wave 1 that ‘they would fit in well with others’
- 28% still disagreed at Wave 1 that ‘they could cope with the level of study required’
- 25% still disagreed at Wave 1 that ‘they have the academic ability to succeed’
- 24% still disagreed at Wave 1 that HE ‘is for people like them’

Figure 14. Number of learners who responded ‘disagree’ at baseline to survey items about social identity and academic ability, and the proportion change at Wave 1



Nearly one-third of learners disagreed at both baseline and Wave 1 that they have the ‘academic ability to succeed’. In addition, mean agreement scores slightly decreased between baseline ($M=3.77$) and Wave 1 ($M=3.69$). This small reduction in mean scores could be due to increased information and knowledge about HE, enabling learners to make a more informed decision about whether it is for them.

These findings suggest that despite NCOP learners being on the pathway to achieving the necessary grades required for progression to HE, there is a cohort of learners that lack confidence in their abilities and who perceive that they would not fit in. Activities delivered by role models with whom learners can identify and who have successfully progressed to HE may be beneficial in changing perceptions and building confidence and social identity with HE. A focus on Phase 2 activities that seek to support these learners in building their confidence and resilience may also be beneficial.

Further analysis was carried out to explore what combination of learner characteristics and NCOP activity variables are associated with Wave 1 outcome scores and score change between baseline and Wave 1. Small associations are found

for Wave 1 outcome scores, accounting for between 2% and 3% of the variance (this means that perceptions about social identity with HE and academic ability are largely accounted for by other characteristics not included in the analysis). Characteristics positively associated with positive statements about HE and academic ability are, in order of importance:

- Higher number of NCOP activity sessions attended
- White learners
- Older students
- Non-disabled
- More advantaged⁴⁶
- Knowing someone at university
- Males

Attending more NCOP activity sessions is associated with positive perceptions on all outcomes (that university is for people like me, they would fit in well with others, they have the academic ability to succeed, and they could cope with the level of study required). White learners are more likely to agree university is for people like them, that they have the academic ability to succeed and they could cope with the level of study required. Students in older age groups and who are non-disabled feel that university is for people like them, they would fit in well with others and they could cope with the level of study. Being from a more advantaged background is associated with the perception that they would fit in well with others, have the academic ability to succeed and could cope with the level of study. Knowing someone at university is positively related with perceptions that university is for people like them. Being male is associated with more positive perceptions that they have the academic ability to succeed.

Attending summer schools is associated with decreased learner perceptions that they could cope with the level of study required. It is interesting to note that the summer school RCT found that learners in the summer school intervention group are less likely to state that they intended to apply to HE compared to the control condition. These findings suggest that NCOP target learners are a unique group of learners whose characteristics need to be carefully considered when designing outreach activities. Summer school are the only outreach activity type associated with learner outcomes related to social identity and academic ability (see regression results technical annex that accompanies this report⁴⁷).

⁴⁶ Measured using the IDACI (Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index)

⁴⁷ http://cfe.org.uk/app/uploads/NCOP_Phase_1_Technical_Annex.pdf

Knowledge of student life, financial elements of HE and career prospects

Learners were asked about their knowledge of the financial aspects of HE study, support available and career and accommodation options. Positive change in levels of knowledge between baseline and Wave 1 are shown for all aspects, particularly how it leads to careers that learners may be interested in and what student life would be like. The highest proportion change is the increased knowledge about how HE may lead to careers that students may be interested in. In contrast, the lowest proportion change is for knowledge about the financial support available, with half of learners stating that they still have no knowledge at Wave 1 (Figure 15).

Figure 15: Proportion and mean change in responses between baseline from 'knowing nothing' about aspects of HE to 'gaining some knowledge' at Wave 1 (*** = $p < .001$). **Error! Reference source not found.** To understand the findings in more detail, analysis was carried out to explore what combination of learner characteristics and NCOP activity variables are associated with score change between baseline and Wave 1. Very small associations are found, where the model accounts for between 0.7 and 1.4% of the variance (this means change in knowledge is largely accounted for by other characteristics not included in this analysis). The main characteristics associated with changes in knowledge about student living, careers and financial support are, in order of importance:

- Older students
- Campus visits
- Higher number of NCOP activity sessions attended
- Knowing someone at university

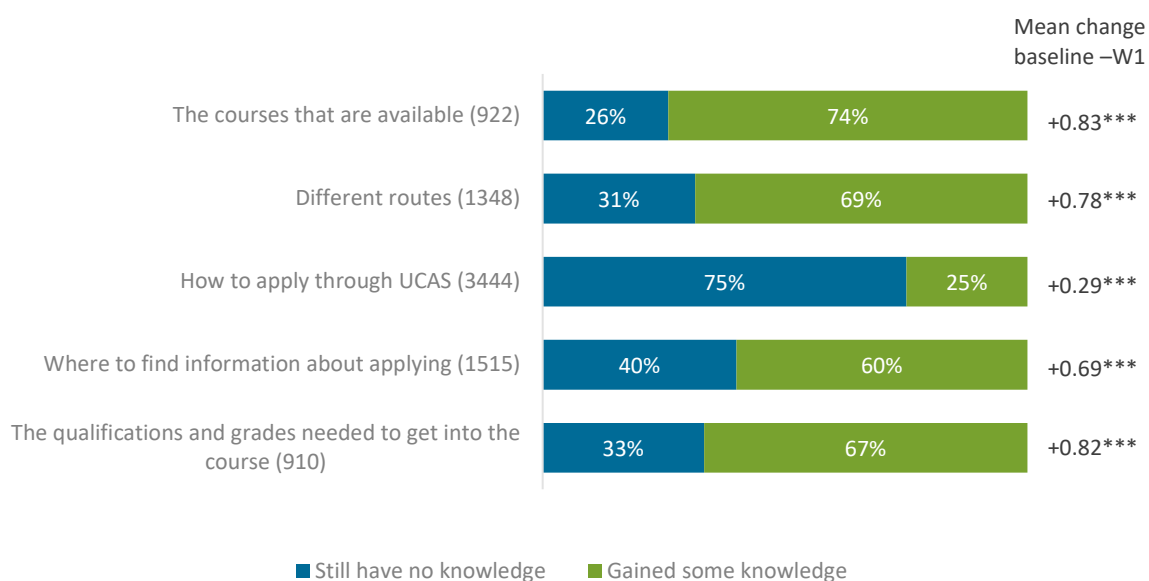
Being older is significantly associated with increased knowledge between baseline and Wave 1 on all statements (what student life would be like, how it leads to careers you may be interested in, the cost of study, the financial support available, the support available), and it is significant in some models for living options whilst studying. Attending campus visits is associated with increased knowledge on what student life would be like, how university leads to preferred careers, and the support available. Attending a greater number of NCOP activity sessions is associated with increased knowledge of living options and financial support. Knowing someone at university is associated with increased knowledge of the cost of study, which supports evidence that informal knowledge plays a role in student decision-making about the financial implications of HE. Ensuring that students are not solely relying on informal sources about the financial costs of HE will continue to be important for Phase 2.

Knowledge of applying to HE and courses

NCOP learners were asked about their knowledge of HE courses at baseline and Wave 1. There is a positive change for all areas, with the majority of learners going from knowing nothing to having at least some knowledge of the available courses, required grades and different HE routes. The highest positive change in knowledge between baseline and Wave 1 is for the courses that are available, with 74% of learners who reported having no knowledge at baseline reporting at least some knowledge at Wave 1. Learners still have low levels of knowledge about the UCAS application process, with only 25% of learners reporting gains in some knowledge at Wave 1. This finding is not surprising given the finding that being older is associated with increased knowledge about the UCAS application process.

Figure 16 shows the proportion change in learner responses between baseline from knowing nothing about aspects of the application process to university, to still knowing nothing, or knowing something at Wave 1. Mean change between baseline and Wave 1 is also shown.

Figure 16: Proportion and mean change in learner perceptions between baseline from ‘knowing nothing’ about aspects of applying to university to ‘still knowing nothing’, or ‘knowing something’, at Wave 1. (*) = $p < .001$)**



Further analysis was carried out to understand what combination of learner characteristics and NCOP activity variables are associated with score change between baseline and Wave 1. Small associations are found, where models account for between 1% and 5% of the variance (this means knowledge change is largely accounted for by other characteristics not included in this analysis). The main characteristics associated with increased knowledge on the application process and courses available are, in order of importance:

— Campus visits

- Older students
- Non-disabled
- Higher number of NCOP activity sessions attended
- IAG activities

Attending campus visits is associated with increased knowledge on available courses, where to find information about applying and how to apply through UCAS. Being an older student is associated with increased knowledge on how to apply through UCAS, where to find information about applying and the qualifications and grades needed to get on to preferred courses. This result is to be expected, given that activities about the practicalities of applying will be targeted at older learners. Being non-disabled is associated with increased knowledge of available courses, how to apply through UCAS, and where to find information about applying. Attending a higher number of NCOP activity sessions is associated with increased knowledge of different HE routes. In some of the models, attending more NCOP sessions is also associated with increased knowledge of the courses that are available, where to find information about applying and the qualifications and grades needed to get on to preferred courses. Receiving IAG activities is associated with a negative change in knowledge on the UCAS application process. This finding could be further explored in Phase 2 to understand whether it explains more accurate learner self-perceptions. Learners may have thought they knew more than they actually did at baseline and have re-calibrated their views after receiving detailed IAG about the UCAS application process.

Future plans and aspirations

Learners demonstrate high levels of agreement at baseline and Wave 1 in their aspirations for the future. Learners are particularly motivated to do well in their studies, with 93% agreement at both baseline and Wave 1. Over four-fifths of learners perceive at both baseline and Wave 1 that they could get the grades needed for further study (84 %) and could gain a place on a good course if they wanted (83 %), which may explain why there is so little apparent improvement between survey waves so far. These findings are in line with existing evidence that learners do not lack aspirations, but it may be that they do not have the practical abilities required to fulfil their aspirations. Learner and parent expectations could also play an important role in learners' future plans.⁴⁸ The crucial finding will be whether learners act on their aspirations and progress to HE, which can only be determined at a later stage in the programme.

⁴⁸ Harrison, N., & Waller, R. (2018). Challenging discourses of aspiration: The role of expectations and attainment in access to higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, 44(5), 914-938. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3475>

Positive change is found for learners who responded ‘don’t know’ at baseline and who changed their response to ‘agree’ at Wave 1. Over half changed their perceptions of aspirations towards HE from ‘don’t know’ to ‘agree’ at Wave 1 (Figure 17). A similar pattern of findings emerges for learners who responded ‘neutral’ at baseline and who changed to ‘agree’ at Wave 1 (Figure 18). A small minority of learners, between 12 and 15%, disagreed at both baseline and Wave 1 that they are not motivated to do well, could not get the grades required and could not gain a place on a good course if they wanted (Figure 19).

Figure 17. Number of learners who responded ‘don’t know’ at baseline to survey items about aspirations towards HE, and the proportion change at Wave 1

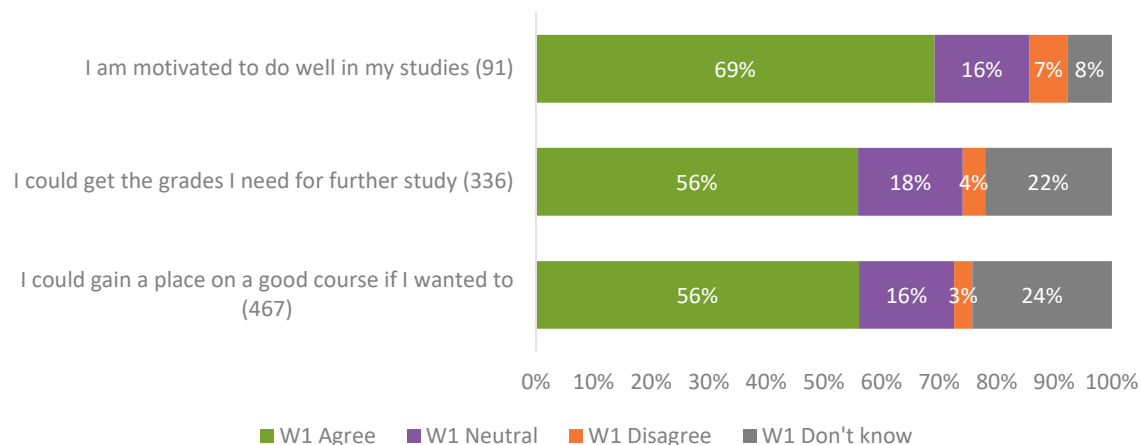


Figure 18. Number of learners who responded ‘neutral’ at baseline to survey items about aspirations towards HE, and the proportion change at Wave 1

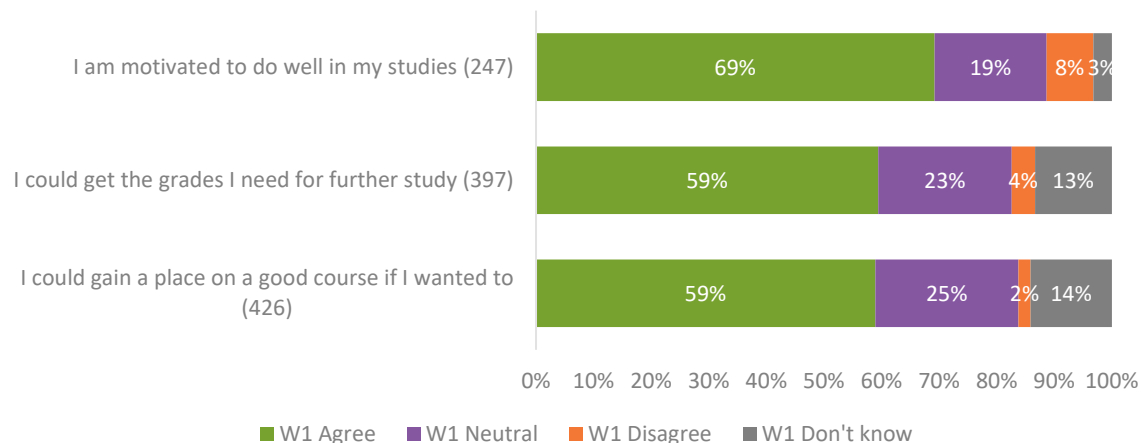
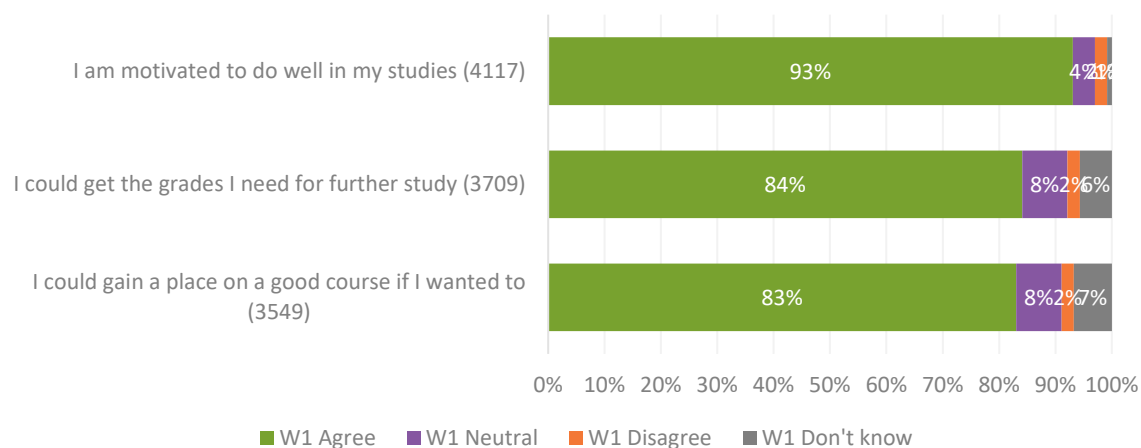


Figure 19. Number of learners who responded ‘disagree’ at baseline to survey items about aspirations towards HE, and the proportion change at Wave 1



Further analysis was carried out to explore what combination of learner characteristics and NCOP activity variables are associated with Wave 1 survey outcome scores and the score change between baseline and Wave 1. Small associations are found for Wave 1 outcome scores, accounting for between 1 % and 2.5 % of the variance (this means that aspirations are largely accounted for by other characteristics not included in this analysis). The main characteristics positively associated with aspirations are:

- More advantaged background
- Higher number of NCOP activity sessions attended
- White learners
- Older students
- Gender
- Knowing someone at university
- Masterclasses

Being from a more advantaged background is associated with better scores on perceptions that students could get the grades they need for further study and they could gain a place on a good course if they wanted to. Attending a greater number of NCOP activity sessions is associated with better scores on perceptions surrounding motivation to do well in studies, getting the grades needed for further study⁴⁹ and gaining a place on a good course.⁵⁰ Being a white student is associated with being motivated to do well in their studies and gaining a place on a good course if they

⁴⁹ This association is significant for 4 out of 6 regression models

⁵⁰ This association is significant for 2 out of 6 regression models

wanted. Being older and female is associated with better scores on being motivated to do well in their studies. Being male is associated with higher levels of confidence that students could get the grades they need for further study. Knowing someone at university is associated with improved perceptions over time that students could get the grades they need for further study. Attending masterclasses is associated with improved perceptions that students could get a place on a good course if they wanted. In contrast, attending IAG sessions is associated with decreased perceptions that they could get a place on a good course (see the technical annex⁵¹). This suggests that more intensive subject-specific activities such as masterclasses may be more beneficial in fostering learner self-belief in their abilities compared to lighter touch IAG activities that are likely to be more generic.

Future path after finishing current studies

Learners were asked about what they would most like to do next when they finish their current studies.

Table 4 shows learner's age at baseline and the change in learner intentions between baseline and Wave 1 as a percentage point difference about what they would most like to do next (blue indicates a percentage increase and red indicates a percentage decrease between baseline and Wave 1). The main findings show:

- Increased baseline Year 9 learner intentions to remain at school or 6th form and to get a part-time job between baseline and Wave 1. There is a decrease in their intentions to study at college and 'don't know' responses about what they would like to do next.
- There is little change for baseline Year 10 learners between baseline and Wave 1, with the exception of an increase for intending to study at college after they finish their current studies.
- There is a decrease for baseline Year 11 learners wanting to study at school or a sixth form after they finish their current studies, whilst there is an increase for intentions to start an apprenticeship.
- An increase for baseline Year 12 learners between baseline and Wave 1 for progressing to college, starting an apprenticeship and getting a full-time job. There is also an increase for 'don't know' responses about what they would most like to do next. It is concerning that there is a decrease (17.2 %) between baseline and Wave 1 in the proportion of baseline Year 12 learners who would like to study HE away from home as their next step.

⁵¹ http://cfe.org.uk/app/uploads/NCOP_Phase_1_Technical_Annex.pdf

- A decrease for baseline Year 13 learners between baseline and Wave 1 intending to go to college next (this is positive) and an increase in intentions to study HE in FE, study HE locally and go to university. There is a decrease in intentions to start a higher/degree apprenticeship, full-time job, part-time job and don't know responses.⁵²
- Baseline FEC level 2 learners show a decrease for wanting to study HE locally, study HE away from home, remaining in college and don't know responses. There is an increase for intending to continue with education, which is a positive outcome. In contrast, there is an increase for learners intending to get a full-time job and start an apprenticeship.
- Baseline FEC level 3 Year 1 learners show increased intentions to study HE locally and study HE in FE. A less positive finding is the decreased intentions to want to study HE away from home and increased intentions that would like to get full-time job.

⁵² Please note that the base for the Year 13 sample is very small

Table 4. Learner year group at baseline and the change between baseline and Wave 1 as a percentage point difference for intentions about what they would most like to do next.

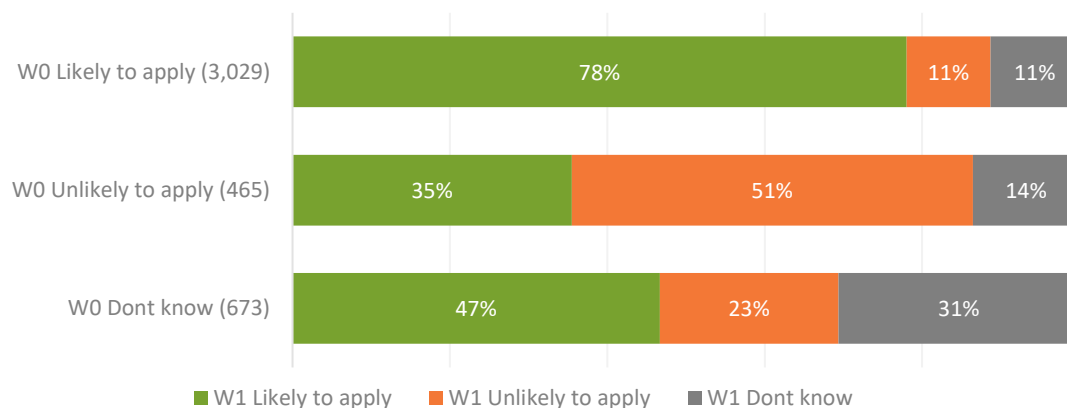
	Yr 9	Yr 10	Yr 11	6th form Yr 12	6th form Yr 13	FEC level 2	FEC level 3 Y1
School or 6th-form	12.6%	-0.8%	-7.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
FE college	-9.9%	3.4%	1.9%	3.1%	-25.0%	-3.2%	3.1%
Study HE in FE	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.7%	5.2%	0.0%	-1.4%
Study HE locally	0.0%	-0.1%	-0.2%	-0.1%	17.2%	-9.1%	11.2%
Study HE away from home	-0.1%	0.0%	0.0%	-17.2%	32.9%	-9.1%	-19.2%
Go to university	-0.3%	-0.1%	-0.2%	-1.8%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Continue education	-1.1%	-0.5%	-1.6%	-0.7%	0.0%	8.2%	0.0%
Higher/degree apprenticeship	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	-0.3%	-5.4%	0.0%	-0.9%
Apprenticeship	2.4%	0.6%	8.4%	2.6%	0.0%	5.2%	1.1%
Other type of training	-1.6%	-0.5%	0.1%	-0.7%	0.0%	2.0%	0.6%
Work and study at the same time	-1.6%	-1.2%	-1.0%	1.4%	0.0%	0.0%	-0.3%
Full-time job	-0.4%	-0.7%	0.4%	5.7%	-12.5%	14.9%	6.2%
Part-time job	4.4%	-0.8%	-0.4%	0.5%	-6.3%	3.6%	1.3%
Get a job	-1.4%	0.1%	0.2%	0.2%	0.0%	0.0%	0.6%
Don't know	-3.0%	0.5%	-0.5%	5.8%	-6.3%	-12.5%	-2.5%
Base:	1987	1639	552	276	16	22	74

Blue indicates a percentage increase and red indicates a percentage decrease between baseline and Wave 1. The data for FEC level 3 year 2 learners has been suppressed as there were only 6 responses.

Likelihood of applying to HE at age 18 or 19

Seventy eight per cent of learners who said they were likely to apply to HE at baseline were still likely to apply at Wave 1. Positive proportion change is found for learners who responded 'don't know' at baseline and who changed their response to 'likely to apply' at Wave 1 (47 %), and one-third of those learners who were 'unlikely to apply' to HE at baseline changed to 'likely to apply' at Wave 1. These positive findings contrast with the 23% of learners who 'didn't know' at baseline and who changed to being 'unlikely to apply' at Wave 1. There is also a sizeable cohort of NCOP learners (51%) who were unlikely to apply to HE at both baseline and Wave 1 (Figure 20). Mean likelihood scores also decreased between baseline (M=4.59) and Wave 1 (M=4.47).

Figure 20: Proportion change between baseline (W0) and Wave 1 (W1) for learners' responses to the question: "How likely are you to apply to HE at age 18 or 19?"



Further analysis was carried out to explore what combination of learner characteristics and NCOP activity variables are associated with Wave 1 survey outcome scores and the score change between baseline and Wave 1, for likelihood of applying to HE. Small associations are found for Wave 1 outcome scores, accounting for between 6% and 9% of the variance (This means that the likelihood of applying to HE at the age of 18 or 19 is accounted for by other characteristics not included in this analysis). The following characteristics are highly associated with a greater likelihood of applying to HE at the age of 18 or 19:

- Older students
- White learners
- Female gender
- Knowing someone at university

The following characteristics are also associated with a greater likelihood of applying to HE at the age of 18 or 19, although to a lesser extent than the characteristics listed above:

- Higher number of NCOP activity sessions attended
- Campus visits
- Non-disabled

Being older, white, female, and knowing someone at university are strongly associated with a higher likelihood of applying to HE. To a lesser extent, attending a higher number of NCOP activity sessions, campus visits and being non-disabled are also associated with a higher likelihood of applying. Students who received IAG are less likely to state they wanted to apply to HE (see the technical annex⁵³). These

⁵³ http://cfe.org.uk/app/uploads/NCOP_Phase_1_Technical_Annex.pdf

findings suggest that a progressive and sustained programme of outreach activities may be more beneficial for NCOP learners compared with one-off activities. Campus visits may be beneficial as they offer learners true-to-life insights into what the different elements of student life will be like. This can help to demystify and reduce some of the perceived barriers that learners have towards HE. IAG sessions may be less beneficial due to their broader focus and they are likely to cater for a more diverse group of learners. It will be important for Phase 2 of the programme to ensure that outreach activities target the harder-to-reach groups that are less likely to state that they will apply to HE at age 18 – younger students, non-white students, males, first generation students to attend HE and disabled students.

Likelihood of applying to HE in future

Students who did not want to apply to HE at the age of 18 or 19 were asked whether they would apply in the future. In total 341 people responded both before and after NCOP activities. Most of this group were unlikely to apply to university in future or to a lesser extent were undecided. Only one-third of those who were likely to apply at baseline still agreed at Wave 1 (n=63). This group had a demographic breakdown of 93% white, 61% female, 17% with a disability, 13% were in Years 12 and 13, 78% knew someone at university and 34% would be the first in their family to go to university.

Mean scores of whether students were likely to apply to HE decreased between baseline (M=3.21) and Wave 1 (M=2.87), showing that these learners tended to give a 'very unlikely' to 'fairly unlikely' response. There are no significant positive shifts, with 72% (n=173) responding as unlikely to apply at both time points. This finding shows that attending the programme in Phase 1 generally did not encourage these students to apply to HE.

For the group of learners who were unlikely to apply at baseline and Wave 1, compared to the group who were likely to apply at both time points, there is a lower proportion of females (48%), fewer disabled learners (12%), fewer in Years 12 and 13 (3%), more white learners (99%), fewer who knew someone at university (68%) and more who would be the first in their family to attend university (47%). A further concerning finding is that 38% of learners who stated 'likely to apply' at baseline changed their response to 'unlikely' at Wave 1, with only 31% still being keen to apply. For those who were undecided at baseline, 45% still 'didn't know' at Wave 1. Those who changed their minds from 'don't know' or 'unlikely to apply' to 'likely to apply' are a small group of 68 learners. Two-thirds of learners in these groups reported they would be the first in their family to go to university, and only around half already knew someone at university. The group who changed their response from 'unlikely to apply' to 'likely to apply' also had a greater proportion of males (59%).

Learners who did not want to attend HE were asked their reasons for this. The key reasons given before attending the programme were being undecided (n=139), wanting to work and earn money (n=134) and having already decided on a career that does not require further study (n=86). A high proportion of those who were undecided at baseline felt the same at Wave 1 (37%, n=52). Those who wanted to work and earn money initially were still likely to want to do so at Wave 1 (42%, n=56). Students who had decided on a career path not requiring further study were still likely to state this as a reason at Wave 1 (36%, n=31).

Value for money of NCOP

Partnership staff perceive that the NCOP funding is adding value in a number of ways including:

- Addressing ‘cold spots’ in outreach provision by engaging new schools and FECs,
- Providing resources and/or capacity to enable schools and FECs to deliver activities and interventions that they otherwise would not be able to offer,
- Testing new and innovative approaches to outreach with key target groups,
- Influencing parental and teacher attitudes towards HE,
- Building capacity within schools and FECs to sustain activities beyond the life of the programme.

However, the extent to which this represents value for money is still to be established. To date, according to the monitoring data, 246,460 target pupils in 1,586 schools and FECs have been engaged in NCOP. At the national level, total spend on NCOP in Phase 1 is £109,922,085 against a budget of £112,246,718 (2.1% underspend). Total spend equates to a cost of around £446 per learner and an average cost per school/FEC engaged of £69,308.

It is important to note when considering value for money that the first phase of NCOP included the programme set-up. Although in some areas partnerships were already in existence and able to hit the ground running, in others, new ones had to be established. In these areas, a substantial amount of time and resource were invested in appointing a central team and delivery staff as well as in engaging partners. Developing an appropriate operating model, strategy and delivery plan, governance arrangements, monitoring and delivery systems and an evaluation strategy also required a considerable investment of time. Newly-assembled partnerships, along with some of the more established partnerships, were not in a position to begin delivering to learners in the first 6 to 9 months of NCOP. As such, just 25,933

learners⁵⁴ were engaged in activity by the end of June 2017 across the programme and there was a considerable underspend against the projected budget as a result.

The amount of investment that was required at the outset to implement the programme is reflected in the cost per learner engaged at local level. This cost is also influenced by the scale of the challenge, in terms of targeting and engaging learners, that each partnership faced. For example, the time and resources invested in engagement in areas where there were small numbers of learners in multiple schools/FECs, where relationships with schools/FECs had to be established, and/or where learners were geographically-dispersed was higher than in the areas where learners were clustered in a smaller number of schools/FECs in a tightly defined geographical area in which partnerships were already working. As a result, the degree of variation in the cost per learner at the level of the individual partnership is considerable – ranging from £261 to £1,606.

While some variation in cost per learner between partnerships is expected in Phase 2, the cost is likely to reduce because partnerships are now well-established and the number of learners engaged in NCOP has increased substantially. The revised funding formula for Phase 2 ensures variations in local circumstances are reflected in the funding allocation for each partnership. This should help to address the variation in spending against the budget allocation, which currently ranges from a 10.2% overspend to 13.7% underspend. It should also be taken into account when assessing value for money at local and national level.

⁵⁴ This represents 5% of the weight population in areas covered by partnerships which totals 545,526 and 10.5% of the total number of unique learners engaged by the end of Phase 1 of NCOP

06. Evidencing the impact of NCOP

This chapter considers the barriers and risks to effective evaluation in the context of NCOP and the mechanisms in place to overcome them to enable effective evaluation. The ways in evaluation practice could be strengthened in Phase 2 are also considered.

Key findings

- Partnerships accessed support to develop local evaluation frameworks through the capacity building programme and case management. All Phase 1 evaluation plans were judged to be at least satisfactory, with 10 assessed as excellent.
- Evaluation activity is reported to be fully aligned with local and national frameworks in the majority of partnerships. Evaluation plans are live documents that evolve in response to programme developments as well as research evidence.
- Securing the strategic buy-in of senior staff across the partnership is integral to effective evaluation.
- Models such as NERUPI⁵⁵ and Kirkpatrick⁵⁶ have provided useful theoretical frameworks and helped to focus local evaluation activity.
- Training and regular meetings between central teams, partners and operational staff ensure information about evaluation activities and emerging findings is communicated effectively.
- All partnerships have an evaluation lead. While most have been specifically appointed to NCOP, others have been seconded from a partner provider. A small minority have commissioned external evaluators to support or undertake their local evaluations.
- Evaluation budgets vary. Relatively low levels of investment by some partnerships could impact on their ability to implement their evaluation plans effectively and generate robust evidence of ‘what works’.
- The short-term funding for NCOP has contributed to high staff turnover, particularly amongst evaluation staff. Seconding permanent staff into key roles helps to minimise the risk of staff leaving prematurely. Outsourcing evaluation also helps to overcome the challenges of staff recruitment and retention.

⁵⁵ <http://www.nerupi.co.uk/>

⁵⁶ <https://www.kirkpatrickpartners.com/Our-Philosophy/The-Kirkpatrick-Model>

- The time and resources required to secure the buy-in of schools/FECs to evaluation and the burden the process subsequently places on schools/FECs can act as barriers to engagement in evaluation.
- A lack of understanding of the evaluation requirements and the rationale for the approach among schools/FECs has had implications for local evaluations and the success of the RCTs.
- Survey fatigue is perceived to negatively affect response rates. Incentives have been successfully used to mitigate this issue by some partnerships.
- Locating NCOP engagement officers in schools/FECs facilitates effective communication on evaluation and helps to ease the burden of data collection.
- Some partnerships have developed toolkits to ensure consistency and quality in the data collected by partners.
- In-putting data into the tracking systems can be time-consuming and lack of time can act as a barrier. Additional evaluation officers and administrative staff have been appointed to support this process.
- There is limited evidence that tracking and other administrative data is being used in local evaluations.
- More could be done to improve the volume and strength of the evidence, moving beyond identifying effective processes to understand what works, for who, in what context and the impact of NCOP on outcomes for target learners.

Introduction

Evidencing the impact of NCOP is important for informing the ongoing development of the programme, as well as partnerships' strategies and operating models. It is also central to an assessment of the value for money of NCOP in the longer term. To complement the national evaluation of the impact of NCOP on learners' knowledge, attitudes and aspirations towards HE at the programme level, partnerships are required to measure the impact of their NCOP-funded activities at the local level. Although providers have been encouraged to evaluate their outreach activities in the past, this requirement represents a substantial shift for many WP staff and providers within the sector.

In this chapter, we draw on insights from the field visits to partnerships and the review of local evaluation evidence, interviews with 27 of the 29 evaluation leads and an analysis of monitoring data. This explores the barriers and enablers to effective evaluation at the local level and the mechanisms that have been put in place to support partnerships to develop and implement local evaluation plans and develop the evidence base.

Barriers to effective evaluation

Capacity

The short-term nature of the NCOP funding, and uncertainty about the continuity of the programme in Phase 2, has had implications for staff recruitment and retention during Phase 1. NCOP staff have typically been appointed on fixed-term contracts, reflecting the funding period for the programme. High staff turnover has been a perennial issue, as many seek alternative employment as the end of their term approaches or leave mid-contract when a more secure opportunity arises. Internal evaluation posts are typically held by post-doctoral/early career researchers from a range of disciplines, with varying degrees of evaluation experience and knowledge of widening access. Turnover among evaluation staff has presented a particular challenge, as staff not only seek more secure employment, but also employment in an area of research that is closer to their academic interests and which serves as a stepping stone to an academic career.

High staff turnover, coupled with low skill levels in some cases, impact on the ability of partnerships to demonstrate the impact of their local activities and engage with the national evaluation. Temporarily seconding permanent staff into NCOP roles on a full-time or part-time basis is one way partnerships are effectively mitigating this risk. Where this is not possible, it is important that contingency plans are put in place to minimise the impact of staff turnover and ensure continuity as well as a smooth transition process. These could include, for example, a longer notice period than the standard month and a structured handover.

Schools/FECs engagement

A key message to emerge during Phase 1 is that partnerships have had to focus on building and strengthening relationships with schools/FECs and fostering high levels of engagement with NCOP activity. The targeted nature of the programme has meant that it has been challenging to win hearts and minds in some schools/FECs. This has resulted in a longer lead-in and set-up phase for the delivery of activity. This is perceived to have inhibited the development of detailed evaluation frameworks and has had a negative impact on the type and volume of evaluation activity undertaken by some partnerships to date.

Securing buy-in from schools and colleges to the evaluation of NCOP is essential but presents distinct challenges in the absence of a sample frame (a systematic methodology for identifying participants). Schools and colleges act as ‘gatekeepers’ facilitating access to learners for the purposes of evaluation (as well as project delivery) and supporting data collection. Communicating the evaluation requirements to schools and colleges, including the importance of following specified evaluation procedures, overseeing data collection and obtaining consents are

essential but time and resource intensive activities. The investment of time and the burden the process subsequently places on schools/FECs can act as a barrier to their engagement in evaluation. Locating engagement officers in schools/FECs helps to facilitate effective communication between the partnership and the schools/FECs, including on evaluation. It also provides additional resources to ease the burden of data collection and ensures data is collected in a consistent and timely manner.

Failure to adequately brief schools/colleges and changes in legislation have had implications for local evaluations, and data collection in particular. Changes in the regulation of data protection part way through NCOP, including the introduction of GDPR⁵⁷ in May 2018, had significant implications for collecting and sharing personal data. Partnership members, along with target schools and FECs, found the changes challenging to navigate and this negatively impacted on the willingness/ability of schools/FECs to share pupil data in some cases. In addition, some partnerships have been unable to use some of their learners' data because appropriate consent had not been obtained. Some reported that seeking consent by 'public task' or 'legitimate interest' had helped them to navigate the complexity of GDPR.

The legislative changes have also impacted on the national evaluation. Partnerships have adopted different legal bases for data collection and some schools and colleges have not permitted the collection of some variables (e.g. email addresses and/or telephone numbers for students) which are required for tracking and data matching purposes. It will be important ahead of Phase 2 to undertake a more detailed review of the restrictions around pupil data and the impact that this will have on partnerships' local evaluation.

School/FEC engagement with the RCTs presented particular challenges. The process of conducting impact evaluation, particularly RCTs, is complex and resource intensive, and it is essential that each step is undertaken precisely to ensure robust results. The partnerships involved in the trials of the more intensive interventions reported that securing the necessary buy-in of schools/FECs (and the learners) to the randomisation procedures and outcomes data collection, in particular, presented key challenges. These issues, along with the timing of the e-mentoring trial which clashed with mock exams and high A-level workload, contributed to higher than expected attrition rates. The lead-in time required to secure the co-operation of the schools/FECs, level of staff resource, timing of the intervention and the size of the sample required to mitigate the risk of attrition are key considerations for future trials.

Survey fatigue resulting in a lack of motivation to participate in evaluation among learners were also presenting challenges. In order to overcome them, some

⁵⁷ General Data Protection Regulations

partnerships successfully used incentives to secure school/FEC buy-in to evaluation activity. Other partnerships could consider the use of such incentive schemes for Phase 2 in order to boost engagement and response rates.

Quality, consistency and co-ordination of data collection

Several partnerships identified issues that were impacting on the quality of data collected. For example, five partnerships noted that there were inconsistencies as well as a lack of co-ordination in the way that data was being collected by partners. This included variations in the way questions were phrased in interviews/focus groups, low response rates to follow-up surveys and high rates of attrition between survey waves. There were also inconsistencies in the timing of ‘post-intervention’ surveys. Some partnerships perceived that some members did not recognise the value and importance of evaluation and this was contributing to data quality issues. Tensions between a partner’s key performance indicators and the ones specified in partnership’s overarching evaluation framework were also perceived to be a barrier to data collection. Some partnerships have sought to overcome this challenge by developing evaluation toolkits comprising standardised measures and research instruments which all partners are expected to use in order to assess the effectiveness and impact of their activities.

Tracking and monitoring

The quality of evaluation activity and tracking data are inter-dependent. Co-ordination of outreach delivery is complicated and linking activity delivery with tracking, data collection and monitoring has been challenging for partnerships. In particular, in-putting data into activity tracking systems is regarded as a labour intensive process by some partnerships – absorbing a significant amount of time and resource. As noted in Chapter 2, some partnerships have appointed additional staff to support this process in view of the scale of the task. As a result, they are increasingly using tracking data to inform their NCOP strategies and delivery plans. However, in our assessment of the local evaluation evidence, we found very few evaluations which had used tracking data. There is considerable value in using tracking and monitoring data in evaluation, particularly when trying to attribute the positive outcomes/impacts that have been achieved to participation in one (or several) activities. Consistent approaches and optimal uploading of learner records need to be maintained to enable the provision of accurate and reliable data. Once NCOP learners become ‘HE ready’ and HESA data becomes available, tracking data should start to play a more important role in informing the outcomes of evaluation activity during Phase 2.

Targeting

The targeted nature of NCOP is also reported to be problematic in the context of evaluation, particularly when there are few eligible NCOP learners in a particular

school/FEC setting. More often than not, partnerships focussed their efforts on schools/providers with larger populations of NCOP learners. As a result, those with fewer NCOP learners were not targeted for delivery and excluded from subsequent data collection (i.e. national baseline survey). A related issue is attrition resulting from movement of learners. Some NCOP learners move to schools and colleges which are not being targeted by partnerships and this makes it difficult to track them for evaluation purposes. One partnership noted issues in achieving sustained engagement with children from the traveller community who move frequently.

Enablers of effective evaluation

Support to develop local evaluation plans

CFE, in partnership with Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), provided support to partnerships to develop their evaluation plans in Year 1 of NCOP through capacity building and case management. This involved individualised written feedback on partnerships' draft evaluation frameworks as well as webinars and associated materials on aspects of evaluation practice. These included developing evaluation frameworks, survey design and quasi-experimental research methods. Each evaluation framework was rated on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 was deemed to be poor and 5 excellent. CFE and SHU worked with partnerships, including providing telephone and/or face-to-face support when required, to ensure that all the frameworks were at least satisfactory (rating of 3) and aligned with the national evaluation framework. A total of 10 evaluation plans were assessed as excellent.

Once developed, a partnership's evaluation framework should be used to guide local evaluation activities. Close alignment between the framework and the evaluation activities ensures the evidence produced contributes to an understanding of the impact of delivery on the aims and objectives of the programme. The majority of evaluators described their evaluation activity as "totally", "completely" or "fully aligned" with their evaluation framework. Most also regard their evaluation framework as a 'live document' that evolves in response to programme developments as well as the evidence gathered. A minority of partnerships reported that their evaluation framework informed some but not all of their evaluation activity, or "loosely guided" activity. This requires further investigation to ensure local evaluations are appropriately focussed and effective use is being made of the resources.

The OfS has issued guidance to partnerships⁵⁸ to inform the development of their evaluation plans for Phase 2 setting out clear expectations, including the requirement

⁵⁸ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/1456/ncop-phase-one-programme-guidance-2018-update.pdf>

to complete the evaluation self-assessment tool⁵⁹ that was recently developed on behalf of the OfS by the University of Exeter. It will also be essential to ensure local evaluation plans are aligned with newly developed progression frameworks because evaluation evidence about what seems to be working, for whom, and in what context, will help to refine progression frameworks as Phase 2 of NCOP evolves. Partnerships submitted their Phase 2 evaluation plans to the OfS in early July. They were reviewed by the team appointed to deliver the capability building programme in Phase 2 and feedback was provided. Partnerships had the opportunity to modify their plans in response to the feedback before they were approved.

The buy-in of senior staff in the lead and partner providers to the strategic importance of evaluation and the benefits of contributing to the development of a strong and robust evidence base helps to facilitate effective evaluation. It ensures it is appropriately resourced and prioritised in the overall delivery plan. Some evaluation leads acknowledged that some partnership members found it difficult to comprehend the evaluation plans but that this had been addressed through training. Regular meetings between the central team, partners and operational staff had also helped to ensure information about the evaluation underway, emerging findings and future plans were all communicated effectively. Some partnerships also noted that existing models (e.g. NERUPI, Kirkpatrick, and realist approaches) have provided a useful theoretical framework for their local evaluations, helping to provide focus for their evaluation activities as well as the design and delivery of their outreach activities.

Allocation of budget to evaluation

Partnerships are expected to evaluate the impact of their local delivery and, as such, are able to assign a budget for evaluation from their NCOP allocation. Evaluation budgets vary, reflecting the differing size of the partnership. However, relatively low levels of investment in evaluation by some partnerships present a risk in terms of the volume and robustness of the evaluation undertaken and the standard of evidence produced. Greater clarity and consistency on the proportion of local NCOP budgets allocated to evaluation would help to inform an assessment of the feasibility of partnerships' evaluation plans, in addition to an assessment of their suitability and robustness. This is an important step in minimising the risk that the impact of NCOP activities cannot be demonstrated or attributed to the programme.

Dedicated evaluation staff

All partnerships have an evaluation lead in post to implement their local evaluation plan. This is playing its part in developing evaluation capability across the sector. While most have been specifically appointed to NCOP, some have been seconded

⁵⁹ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation-and-effective-practice/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluation-self-assessment-tool/evaluation-self-assessment-tool/>

from an academic department within one of the partner providers. This approach helps to mitigate the risk of staff turnover. Increasingly, evaluation leads are supported by evaluation officers and administrative staff who assist with data collection and data entry into the tracking systems.

A minority of partnerships have commissioned external evaluators to design their local evaluation framework, undertake their local evaluation or to evaluate specific projects. This approach was, in part, a recognition of the specialist skills and expertise required for the most robust forms of impact evaluation but also a practical solution to the challenge of recruiting and retaining evaluation staff. A further benefit of outsourcing evaluation is the additional capacity it creates for partnerships to focus on managing and delivering the programme.

Moving from process to impact evaluation

Despite the challenges, partnerships are implementing their evaluation plans and, as was demonstrated in Chapter 4, evidence is starting to emerge. Evaluation activity can take different forms depending on the specific programme aims. Both process and impact evaluation are relevant for NCOP, but it is important to differentiate the two.

Process evaluations assess whether an intervention has been successfully developed, implemented and carried out. Outcome measures for process evaluations tend to focus on satisfaction with the intervention, enablers and barriers, and on how the intervention can be further developed and improved. Impact evaluations are designed to determine whether a particular NCOP intervention has brought about a change in the target population. Impact in this context means a change that would not have occurred if the intervention had not happened.

The review of evaluation plans and of local evaluation evidence suggests that some partnerships are conflating the two and, where this occurs, it is acting as a barrier to the development of robust evidence of impact. More could therefore be done to improve both the volume and strength of the evidence, moving beyond an understanding of effective processes to understand what works for who, in what context and the impact of NCOP on outcomes for target learners. The concluding chapter provides a series of recommendations designed to support partnerships as they refine and implement their evaluation plans for Phase 2.

07. Conclusions and recommendations

In this chapter, we summarise the progress and key achievements of Phase 1 of NCOP. We draw on what has been learned to develop recommendations designed to inform the ongoing development of the programme and strengthen local and national evaluation.

Programme implementation and delivery

There is a long tradition of collaboration between the FE and HE sectors in England, including in the context of access and participation. As such, many members of the 29 NCOP partnerships already had experience of collaborative working prior to NCOP. The unique and highly-targeted nature of NCOP has, however, meant that established partnerships have had to broaden their membership by engaging new partners and stakeholders from inside and outside the education sector. They have also had to adapt their governance and management structures, develop new systems and procedures, and innovate their approach to delivery in order to achieve the programme's objectives. This has undoubtedly presented challenges but, as Phase 1 draws to a close, good progress has been made towards the achievement of the NCOP's targets. Furthermore, there is evidence that through cross-partnership working and synergies with other programmes and initiatives, NCOP is showing its potential to contribute to wider social, cultural and economic goals in the medium-to long-term, by boosting qualification and skill levels. These, in turn, could lead to improved social mobility and enhanced productivity.

NCOP is fostering effective, collaborative approaches that are successfully addressing 'cold spots' by engaging schools and FECs in outreach (for the first time in some cases) and facilitating access to high-quality, impartial IAG for young people who would not otherwise have access to this level of support. Partnerships are delivering a wide range of activities that combine to form a sustained and progressive programme of support for NCOP learners over the course of their journey from Year 9 to Year 13. Programmes comprise a number of well-established methods along with new and innovative approaches that have been developed in response to the opportunities, as well as the unique challenges, presented by the highly targeted nature of NCOP.

Parents and teachers have a significant influence on young people's aspirations and decision-making.⁶⁰ One of the notable achievements of NCOP to date is the progress

⁶⁰ For a review of evidence on influences on student choice, see e.g. Diamond et al. (2012) *Behavioural Approaches to Understanding Student Choice*. NUS and HEA. https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/resources/student_choice.pdf

that has been made in addressing the challenge of parental engagement. Partnerships have drawn on the skills and experience of practitioners from other sectors to reach out to parents in community settings and convey messages about HE in innovative and engaging ways. Locating NCOP practitioners within schools and FECs to co-ordinate and/or deliver a coherent, progressive programme of activities has also helped to support the professional development of teaching staff, by raising their awareness of the routes to, and opportunities in, HE. There is a widely-held perception that teachers as well as parents and young people, are now more knowledgeable about HE as a result of NCOP. Although it will be some time before it is possible to measure the impact of the programme on progression rates, there is also a perception that young people who otherwise would have considered other options are now considering HE and that the number of applications to HE from NCOP target students has gone up.

Most partnerships have laid the foundations necessary to successfully take NCOP forward into Phase 2 and contribute to the achievement of the OfS's objectives to reduce inequality and ensure every student, irrespective of their background, can succeed in HE. It is true that challenges remain. Some schools and FECs continue to prove harder to engage, particularly those in challenging circumstances and rural communities, and there are ongoing issues associated with the limited-term funding, crowded outreach landscape, tensions between the priorities of schools/FECs and NCOP, and targeting NCOP learners. Encouragingly, most partnerships have effective strategies in place to overcome these challenges.

Recommendations

Going into Phase 2, consideration should be given to:

Governance

- It is important to ensure that all core partners are represented at a strategic and operational level. This can be achieved by inviting a representative from each partner to join the respective groups, or sub-groups reporting into an overarching body in the case of larger partnerships. Some partnerships may wish to consider the merits of inviting wider stakeholders to join their strategic group.
- Steering groups should be focussed on setting the strategic vision and direction for the partnership, and establishing links with other policy initiatives such as OAs to ensure NCOP contributes to wider social, cultural and economic objectives. Senior leaders within partner organisations are often best placed to achieve/maintain this synergy.
- Operational groups can benefit from the input of target schools/FECs which can articulate their specific needs and challenges and help tailor provision to address them.

- Partnerships operating a highly devolved model which affords partners a high degree of autonomy over their budgets should ensure robust systems are in place to monitor and account for expenditure at the local level.

Internal communications

- Good communication between the strategic and operational groups is imperative, as is communication between the lead institution and partners and between partners themselves. Communication has improved but is not always effective and partnerships may wish to consider how mechanisms could be improved so that all partnership staff are fully informed.

External marketing and communications

- Measures are required to address any remaining confusion about the aims and objectives of NCOP and the difference between NCOP and wider outreach activities amongst schools and FECs. Partnerships may wish to draw on good practice from Phase 1 and undertake Phase 2 ‘launch events’ for target schools and colleges, in addition to refreshing any marketing materials. The OfS may wish to consider strengthening the national brand for NCOP and/or introducing a degree of consistency across local branding (e.g. a common strap line) to create a national identity which differentiates NCOP from wider provision.
- Partnerships’ roles in relation to Outreach Hubs are designed to streamline access to outreach provision, but there is a risk that they could create further confusion as the hubs provide signposting to provision for non-NCOP as well as NCOP learners. The OfS should ensure insights from planned research into perceptions of outreach inform the messaging about hubs and Phase 2 of NCOP.

Learner voice

- Strategic and operational groups should consider ways to move beyond simply taking account of learner feedback captured through formative process evaluation in order to embed learners’ voices into planning and delivery. Partnerships should draw on the emerging good practice outlined in this report (and discussed in depth during the webinar hosted by CFE with contributions from partnerships) on effective ways to actively engage learners in shaping provision.

Innovating the offer

- NCOP is providing an important test-bed for new and innovative approaches as well as the trialling of existing approaches with different groups and in different contexts. Building on emerging good practice, partnerships may wish to consider further ways to engage parents as key influencers.
- Providing teacher CPD can enhance the impact of NCOP and ensure best practice is sustained beyond the programme. Exploring further opportunities to engage teachers in NCOP would contribute to the sustainability and legacy of NCOP.

The emerging impact of NCOP

Although the impact of the programme will not be fully understood for some time, current evidence provides encouraging signs that the sustained and progressive nature of the NCOP is benefiting the learners who take part. There is a positive correlation between the number of NCOP activities engaged in and changes in learners' perceptions of their knowledge, attitudes and intentions towards HE – indicating engagement in multiple interventions is more likely to deliver positive outcomes than one-off, or ad-hoc interventions. This, in turn, has the potential to help to reduce inequalities and close the participation gap in the future – a key strategic objective of the OfS. Indeed, interventions, such as workshops and IAG, are often constituent parts of multi-activity programmes and these are reported to have a positive effect on intentions to progress to HE.

In addition to overcoming situational and structural barriers to progression, learners need help to develop confidence in their own abilities and the belief that they, and others like them, can succeed in HE. The evidence to date suggests that learner confidence in their ability to succeed at HE can actually dip as a result of their engagement in outreach activities because until that point they did not fully understand the demands of HE. While it is important to ensure learners understand what is expected within HE, it is important to ensure initial confidence in their ability to succeed is maintained throughout the student lifecycle, as increasing concerns about their ability to succeed could deter them from acting on their intentions. It could also impact on the achievement of the programme's aims.

Encouragingly, there is also evidence that NCOP is helping to challenge misconceptions about who HE is for and is developing learners' confidence through sustained support. The more activities learners engage in, the more likely they are to agree that 'HE is for people like me' and that they would 'fit in well with others'. They are also more likely to have confidence in their ability to 'cope with the level of study required' and 'obtain a place on a good course'. In addition, a higher level of engagement is associated with greater knowledge about HE, with learners reporting that they know where to find information about courses, financial support and accommodation as well as graduate career prospects.

Although not definitive, evidence of the outcomes achieved as a result of different types of interventions that make up a sustained and progressive programme is starting to emerge. *Mentoring* is shown to be an effective way to: improve learners' knowledge and awareness of HE, including the academic demands that are placed on those who study at that level; ensure learners know where to access information about the options available to them; and boost learners' confidence in their ability to make the right decision about their post-18 options. Although the evidence on the impact of *summer schools* on intentions to progress to HE is inconclusive, the opportunity to develop social and cultural capital through engagement in these types

of activities is perceived by NCOP staff to be a key benefit. *Campus visits* are an opportunity for prospective students to get a taste of university life. As a result, they are reported to have a positive impact on learners' knowledge of the courses available, how to apply to HE and what student life is like, as well as the likely career prospects for graduates.

The evidence also suggests that the benefits of a number of interventions, including mentoring, summer schools and campus visits, are enhanced if the programme is targeted at specific groups, such as older year groups, learners with an interest in a particular subject/discipline or demographic groups, such as disadvantaged students. The timing of activities, both in terms of time of year (e.g. to avoid exam clashes) and stage in the student lifecycle (e.g. at a key decision/transition point) can affect their impact. Get the timing wrong and, as the e-mentoring and summer schools RCTs suggest, there is the potential to have a negative effect, including on intentions to progress to HE.

High quality IAG is at the heart of NCOP, delivered as both a standalone activity and as an integral part of other interventions, such as summer schools. As a result, the impact of IAG on outcomes for learners is hard to discern and the evidence of its effectiveness to date is equivocal. Interestingly, there was a slight reduction in the perceptions of learners that HE will provide 'valuable life skills' and enable them 'to get a better job'. This suggests that access to IAG on the range of options available post-18 could be challenging perceptions and opening learners' minds to different possibilities and routes, such as apprenticeships, which they subsequently perceive are more likely to equip them with skills they need to secure a good job. While there is no evidence at present to suggest that this perception is leading those who were intending to go to HE to switch path, it could act as a deterrent to those who are undecided or who are considering other routes and, therefore, warrants further investigation. Information on the potential benefits of HE relative to other routes may be required to challenge this perception for future cohorts of NCOP learners and to enable learners to make a fully-informed decision.

Although NCOP is having a greater positive effect on male perceptions of their ability to succeed in HE compared with females, the analysis suggests that overall NCOP is having a more positive impact on females, as well as on older learners, those without a disability, white learners, those who know someone at university, and those living in areas of relatively low deprivation. Further work may therefore be required to ensure NCOP is effectively supporting key under-represented groups and those who are most disadvantaged, including BAME and disabled learners. These learners are less knowledgeable and confident about their ability to progress to HE than other groups. A greater focus on these, along with male learners, may be required to close the access and participation gap, including more tailored activities.

NCOP is targeting learners with the academic ability to study at HE. As attainment is the principal determinant of progression to HE, it is perhaps not surprising that a majority of this group express an intention to go on to study at HE post-18. However, we also know that a proportion do not subsequently act on their intentions, which results in the participation gap. As the programme, and the associated evaluation, moves into its second phase, perhaps a more important measure of the success of NCOP is whether learners act on their intentions and, crucially, whether a higher proportion of target learners progress to HE than would have done otherwise in the absence of the programme. This will be explored in analysis planned in Phase 2 which will compare outcomes for NCOP learners and those with similar characteristics who did not engage in the programme.

Recommendations for future research

- Further research on the impact of IAG on learners' intentions towards HE is required.
- Further research on the impact of approaches designed to support the progression to HE of learners with disabilities and BAME groups is required to address a gap in understanding and to increase the impact of NCOP on these sub-groups.
- Further research into the barriers experienced by male learners and the reasons for the differential impact of activities on males and females is required to ensure interventions are appropriately tailored for this group in Phase 2.
- Learners intentions towards HE should be tracked overtime to identify when and why 'dips' in confidence occur and effective ways to address these so those who aspire to HE are more likely to act on their initial intentions and progress.
- Research is required to understand the impact of NCOP on where learners intend to apply and what subjects they intend to study, in addition to whether they apply to HE.

Strengthening the evidence base

A central objective of NCOP is to strengthen the evidence base by improving the volume and quality of research that is available on the impact of different types and levels of outreach intervention. Although providers have been encouraged to evaluate their WP activities in the past, this represents a step change for many in the sector which has presented some challenges. In addition to developing and maintaining evaluation capacity internally, winning the hearts and minds of schools and colleges as key gatekeepers to NCOP learners has presented particular issues. The time and resources required to secure their buy-in and the burden the evaluation process subsequently places on schools/FECs has presented a barrier to engagement.

In order to overcome the challenges, partnerships have developed the capacity within their organisations to undertake evaluation with the support of the capacity-building

programme delivered by the national evaluation team. Each has an evaluation lead charged with the implementation of their local evaluation plan, supported by evaluation officers and administrative staff who are responsible for data collection and data entry in many cases. Some partnerships have bolstered their internal evaluation capacity by outsourcing elements of their local evaluations and/or drawing on wider academic expertise available within partner institutions.

A range of strategies have been implemented to secure the buy-in and co-operation of schools and colleges, including incentives to take part. NCOP staff have also been located within schools and FECs to support relationship-building and communication and to also provide practical support to ease the burden of data collection. Additional staff have been recruited to ensure tracking data is captured and some partnerships have developed toolkits to ensure the quality, consistency and timeliness of the data is obtained, including that gathered by partners.

Despite the challenges, most partnerships are implementing their evaluation plans. Evidence on the effectiveness of delivery (process evaluation) is starting to emerge along with evidence of the impact of different interventions on outcomes for students (impact evaluation). This is contributing to a fuller understanding of what works, in what context and why. It also complements the national impact evaluation which is examining impact at a programme level on students' knowledge, awareness and progression to HE.

However, limited use is currently being made of quasi-experimental methods, which compare the outcomes achieved by NCOP learners and a suitable comparison group to establish which is likely to have occurred in the absence of the programme. The same is true of experimental methods, including RTCs, which randomly allocate eligible learners to a treatment and control group to assess impact of an intervention. Therefore, more could be done to improve both the volume and strength of the evidence by moving beyond an understanding of *process* to capture more robust measures of the *impact* of NCOP on outcomes for target learners.

Recommendations for partnerships

Moving into Phase 2, partnerships will be supported by a new Capability Building team to design and implement their local evaluations. The team will initially provide feedback on local evaluation plans. To ensure robust plans are in place, partnerships, working with the Capability Building team, should:

- Seek to develop clear and distinct aims for both the process and impact elements of their evaluation activities, with associated indicators and outcome measures.
- Ensure sufficient budget and staff resources are available to implement the evaluation activities as planned.

- Consider focusing evaluation effort on high cost and/or strategically important activities, along with those that are new, innovative or being delivered to a particular group for the first time, to make best use of the available resource.
- Explore the scope for joint evaluation activities to ensure sample sizes are sufficient to detect an impact for interventions targeted at smaller sub-groups.
- Consider the feasibility of using quasi-experimental or experimental approaches where appropriate and proportionate (see CFE blog for ‘tips and traps’ when undertaking RCTs for access and participation interventions⁶¹).
- Explore ways to make more effective use of monitoring, tracking and administrative data (e.g. National Pupil Database (NPD), Individual Learner Record (ILR), Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC), HESA, and UCAS-tracking system STROBE)⁶² for evaluation purposes.

Recommendations for the national impact evaluation

Undertaking a survey of participants in a complex programme at the national level has presented a number of challenges which have had implications for data collection, response rates and analysis. Addressing these challenges in Phase 2 is paramount for the continued success of the evaluation and the generation of robust evidence on the impact of NCOP. As with the RCTs, important lessons have been learned, and these can help inform the development of the national impact evaluation. It is recommended in preparation for Phase 2 that consideration is given to:

- The indicators in the national evaluation framework and the associated learner survey questions to ensure they are aligned with the aims of NCOP and the strategic priorities of the OfS.
- Ways to streamline and enhance the survey administration process, including securing the co-operation of schools and colleges and targeting survey respondents, in order to boost response rates to subsequent waves of the survey and maximise the sample available for data-linking and longitudinal analysis.
- The scope to develop a common typology of activities and classification of intensity to be used by the three trackers to enhance the data available for the purposes of evaluating impact.
- The development of a reporting template to support the sharing of evidence of good practice and the analysis of local evaluation evidence, to complement the

⁶¹ <http://cfe.org.uk/2018/11/28/implementing-randomised-controlled-trials-to-evaluate-the-impact-of-outreach-activity-lessons-learned/>

⁶² <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/data-products-and-services/strobe>

Standards of Evaluation Evidence produced by the OfS and ensure synergy with the work of the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO), the new What Works Centre for access and participation⁶³.

- A mechanism for feeding back national evaluation findings to partnerships to inform their work on an ongoing basis.

⁶³ See <http://www.taso-he.org/>

Appendix 1: National Evaluation Framework & Indicator Bank

Inputs	Resources	Activities	Outputs	Short- to medium-term outcomes (up to Dec 2018)	Longer-term outcomes	Impacts
<p>2-4 years of NCOP funding from HEFCE/OfS: - 2016/17 £30m - 2017/18 £60m - 2018/19 £60m - 2019/20 £60m</p> <p>Partnership investment (e.g. additional funding, overheads, expertise)</p> <p>Contracts for national formative and impact evaluations</p> <p>HEFCE/OfS investment (staff time etc.)</p> <p>Stakeholder input</p>	<p>1) 29 partnerships (HEIs, private HE providers, FECS, SFCS, schools, charities, LEPs and other partners)</p> <p>2) Partnership staff (directly employed/time purchased)</p> <p>3) Other staff and volunteers (e.g. coaches/mentors, ambassadors)</p> <p>4) Physical infrastructure (e.g. staff desk space, computer networks, delivery space)</p> <p>5) Virtual, printed and other physical resources</p> <p>6) External resources (e.g. consultancy, external evaluation)</p> <p>7) Capacity building and other support from national evaluation partners and HEFCE project managers</p> <p>8) Tracking systems (HEAT, EMWPREP, AWM)</p> <p>9) HEFCE monitoring return documentation</p>	<p>1) Partnerships establish strategic leadership, management and governance arrangements to deliver a collaborative approach</p> <p>2) Partnerships develop strategic plans to deliver outreach activities</p> <p>3) Partnerships effectively engage with schools and other stakeholders to target and deliver their activities.</p> <p>4) Partnerships develop and deliver collaborative IAG and outreach activity, including new and innovative approaches, in target wards</p> <p>5) CFE and SHU provide capacity building support webinars and case studies</p> <p>6) Partnerships develop and implement plans for rigorous evaluations.</p> <p>7) Partnerships record quarterly funding profile to document actual spend</p>	<p>1) Partnerships operate as effective partnerships</p> <p>2) Partnerships are sustainable over the lifetime of the NCOP programme</p> <p>3) Partnerships meet their targets and milestones for engaging schools and other stakeholders</p> <p>4) Partnerships meet their targets and milestones for engaging people in IAG and outreach activities</p> <p>5) Partnerships take-up of webinars and other capacity building support</p> <p>6) Partnerships collect reliable and valid data</p> <p>7) C Partnerships deliver credible and useful evaluation findings at appropriate intervals</p> <p>8) Partnerships track actual spend against forecast spend for each quarter and return completed funding profile to HEFCE</p>	<p>1) Teachers in schools serving the target wards have increased knowledge of the benefits of HE and available routes</p> <p>2) More young people from target wards express an interest in HE</p> <p>3) Young people from target wards have increased knowledge of the benefits of HE and how to get there</p> <p>4) Parents from target wards have increased knowledge of the benefits of HE and available routes</p> <p>5) More young people from target wards aspire to go to HE</p> <p>6) Young people study the necessary subjects/ qualifications at Key Stage 5 to facilitate access to HE</p> <p>7) Increased number and proportion of young people from the target wards that apply to HE</p> <p>8) Partnerships, HEFCE and national evaluators produce sufficiently robust evidence of progress to secure continued funding for NCOP</p> <p>9) HEI partnership members have improved understanding of the best and most appropriate methods for evaluating widening access</p> <p>10) Interim findings on the costs per learner for participating in the range of NCOP activities.</p>	<p>1) Increased number and proportion of young people from the target wards apply to HE.</p> <p>2) Increased number and proportion of young people from the target wards are successful in their applications to HE</p> <p>3) Increased number and proportion of young people from target wards start HE</p> <p>4) There is sufficient culture change in target wards so that HE becomes seen as a positive and realistic choice for young people from all backgrounds</p> <p>5) Improved, more robust, evidence base on what works in widening access to HE, for whom and in what circumstances</p> <p>6) Cost-effectiveness of the NCOP on academic attainment, life skills and aspiration, and HE participation</p>	<p>1) Double proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in HE by 2020</p> <p>2) Increase by 20% number of students in HE from ethnic minority groups</p> <p>3) Address the under-representation of young men from disadvantaged backgrounds in HE</p> <p>4) Positive step-change in how widening access is evaluated by HEIs</p> <p>5) Establishing whether the NCOP has been value for money</p>

Indicator bank

Activities & Outputs

Activity	Outputs	Line of enquiry	Indicator	Data source
(1) Partnerships establish strategic leadership, management and governance arrangements to deliver a collaborative approach	(a) Partnerships operate as effective partnerships (b) Partnerships are sustainable over the lifetime of the NCOP programme	Membership of partnerships	<p>Number and type of partnership member organisations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – HEIs – FECs – Local schools – Local businesses – Community and voluntary organisations <p>Role and seniority of staff representing the membership organisations on the partnership</p> <p>Extent of senior staff buy-in to partnership and NCOP among member organisations</p>	Case studies Formative partnership surveys Monitoring reports
		Models of collaborations	Partnership structure and organisation of leadership, management and operational functions. Division of labour between partners and extent to which tasks and responsibilities are appropriately assigned and duplication avoided	Case studies Formative partnership surveys
		Effective partnership working	Mechanisms for and channels of communication between partnership members. Extent to which members have positive and trusting relationships with each other	Case studies Formative partnership surveys
(2) Partnerships develop strategic plans	(a) Partnerships operate as effective partnerships (b) Partnerships are sustainable over the lifetime of the NCOP programme	Partnership vision and long-term aims.	Clarity of partnership vision, aims and objectives. Extent to which these align with the overarching NCOP objectives. Extent to which partners in each partnership support the vision, aims and objectives. Extent to which	Document review Case studies Formative partnership surveys Monitoring reports

		partnership vision, aims and objectives align with member organisations' concerns and priorities		
		Resources are focused and used appropriately to make progress toward their aims	What resources are being funded? Why have these resources been selected? Who made the decision to fund these resources?	Case studies Formative partnership surveys
		Strategic planning	Partnerships' understanding of the particular needs and challenges of their locality. Delivery plans setting out how the objectives will be met. Partnership milestones, targets and timelines for delivery. Extent to which plans have sound theoretical and/or evidential foundation	Document review
(3) Partnerships effectively engage with schools and other stakeholders to target and deliver their activities	Partnerships meet their targets and milestones for engaging schools and stakeholders	Engagement with schools and stakeholders	<p>Number of schools targeted and number of schools engaged</p> <p>Number and type of other stakeholders targeted and engaged, e.g. parents, businesses, community or voluntary organisations. Extent to which number and type of schools engaged is in line with targets. Extent to which schools are supportive of NCOP and prioritise work with partnerships. Methods used to engage with schools and evidence/perceptions from partnerships on which are the most effective</p> <p>Partners think that schools are receptive to the work of partnerships and make it easier for them to identify and access NCOP learners</p>	Case studies Formative partnership surveys HEFCE monitoring forms
Activity	Outputs	Line of enquiry	Indicator	Data source

(4) Partnerships deliver collaborative IAG and outreach activity, including new and innovative approaches, in target wards.	Partnerships meet their targets and milestones for engaging people in IAG and outreach activities	Partners in each partnership have developed a joint delivery plan to achieve its aim. Partnerships' work to date is on target as detailed in their individual delivery plans	Partnerships' operating plans and actual delivery demonstrate a joined up approach for engaging with young people in outreach activities. Types of activities delivered Number of activities delivered by each partner. Number of young people who benefited from activities	HEFCE monitoring forms Case studies Formative partnership surveys
(5) Partnerships develop and implement plans for rigorous evaluation	(a) Partnerships take up webinar and other capacity building support (b) Partnerships collect reliable and valid data (c) Partnerships deliver credible and useful evaluation findings at appropriate intervals	Partnership engagement in capacity-building activities and the evaluation plans	Total attendance numbers from partnerships, including per cent of partnerships in attendance at event. Each partnership has developed their own evaluation plan/framework Partnerships are engaging with the national evaluation, including baseline methodology Senior stakeholders are engaged with and supportive of evaluation plans Partnerships are 'on track' with implementing their evaluation plans. Partnerships have had their plans for evaluations reviewed by a 'critical friend'.	CFE attendance records review/assessment of local evaluations
(6) Partnerships record quarterly funding profile to document actual spend	Partnerships accurately complete HEFCE monitoring forms on a quarterly basis to detail actual spend	Extent of partnership engagement with HEFCE monitoring forms	Actual number of actual learners engaged in NCOP activity against forecast number of learners Type of activity learners have engaged in Total spend per activity per quarter Change in learner attitudes and aspirations towards HE	HEFCE monitoring forms CFE/partnership survey evaluation data Data tracking data on progression rates to HE

Short- to medium-term outcomes

Outcome	Outcome detail	Indicator	Data source
(1) Teachers in schools serving the target wards have increased knowledge of the benefits of HE and available routes	(a) Teachers have an increased knowledge of the benefits of HE	Teachers can identify social, academic and career benefits	Local evaluations Qualitative interviews Formative partnership surveys
	(b) Teachers know where to get information about HE	Teachers know what information they need Teachers know how/where to find the information Teachers find it easy to access information on HE	
	(c) Teachers understand the different HE options/routes	Teachers can identify different routes – HE, Higher Apprenticeships, distance learning Teachers can describe the difference in the routes	
	(d) Teachers are able to signpost relevant outreach activities to help learners to increase their knowledge about the benefits and routes into HE	Teachers are aware of NCOP activities and how they may help learners	
(2) More young people from target ward express an interest in HE	Learner intentions regarding study at HE	Numbers of learners who express an interest in applying to HE Numbers of learners who have explored potential institutions/courses/ career paths requiring a HE qualification Intention to apply to HE e.g. likelihood to apply to HE (also to understand the reasons why learners may not want to go to university and if would consider applying in the future) Intention to attend HE	HEAT records Learner impact survey Formative partnership survey
(3) Learners have increased knowledge and understanding of the benefits of HE and routes	(a) Learners have an increased knowledge of the benefits of HE	Learners can identify social, academic and career benefits e.g. what life would be like at university, how HE leads to careers I'm interested in, improved social life	Learner impact survey Local evaluations Formative partnership surveys RCT/experimental methodology Qualitative interviews
	(b) Learners know where to get information about HE	Learners know what information they need Learners know how/where to find the information Learners find it easy to access information on HE	

	(c) Learners understand the different HE options/routes	Learners can identify different routes – HE, Higher Apprenticeships, distance learning Learners can describe the difference in the routes	
	(d) Learners understand the financial implications of going to university	Learners are aware of the costs associated with HE (fees, cost of living) Learners are aware of the financial support available (student loans, bursaries/grants, parental support)	
	(e) Learners have an awareness of support they can access when at university	Learners are aware of learning and pastoral support available at HE	
	(d) Partnerships understand what activities work best to help learners increase their knowledge of the benefits of HE	What outreach activities have learners engaged with to increase their knowledge of the benefits of HE? Location of activities What activities and intensity of engagement in activities? Increases in learners' knowledge levels	
(4) Parents have increased knowledge and understanding of the benefits of HE and routes	(a) Parents have an increased knowledge of the benefits of HE	Have an increased knowledge of the benefits of HE (social, academic and career benefits)	Qualitative interviews Local evaluations
	(b) Parents know where to get information about HE	Parents know what information they need Parents know how/where to find the information Parents find it easy to access information on HE	
	(c) Parents understand the different HE options/routes	Parents can identify different routes – HE, Higher Apprenticeships, distance learning Parents can describe the difference in the routes	
	(d) Partnerships understand what activities work best to help parents increase their knowledge of the benefits of HE	What activities learners engaged with have increased their knowledge of the benefits of HE? Location of activities What activities and intensity of engagement in activities? Increases in parents' knowledge levels	
(5) More young people from target wards aspire to go to HE	(a) Young people have a positive attitude towards HE	Motivation to go to HE e.g. going to university will broaden my horizons	Learner impact survey Local evaluations RCT/experimental methodology

	(b) Young people have sought information and advice on HE qualifications	Learners have a positive attitude towards HE e.g. university is for people like me Learners have explored one or more career paths requiring a HE qualification	Formative consortia surveys
	(c) Young people know what grades they need for their desired course and university	Learners have discussed their aspirations to go to HE with teacher(s)/parent(s)/friend(s)/careers advisor/mentor Learners have accessed information about potential universities, courses, entry requirements Learners have knowledge about what grades they need to achieve to get on to their desired course and their choice of university	
Outcome	Outcome detail	Indicator	Data source
(6) Young people study the necessary subjects/qualifications at Key Stage 5 to facilitate access to HE	Young people study the necessary subjects/qualifications at Key Stage 5 to facilitate access to HE	Learners make informed and considered choices about the subjects they wish to study at Key Stage 5, which are aligned with potential career paths	Learner impact survey Local evaluations Qualitative interviews Secondary data sources
(7) Increased number and proportion of young people from Years 12 and 13 in the target wards apply to HE	Increased number and proportion of young people from Years 12 and 13 in the target wards that apply to HE	Number of learners who have applied to HE	Secondary data sources
(8) Partnerships, HEFCE and national evaluators produce sufficiently robust evidence of progress to secure continued funding for NCOP	Partnerships, HEFCE and national evaluators produce sufficiently robust evidence of progress to secure continued funding for NCOP	Local evaluation reports stand up to scrutiny. Funding is secured for the next two years	review of local evaluations HEFCE board decision on funding
(9) Partnerships members have improved understanding of the best and most appropriate methods for evaluating widening access	Partnership members have improved understanding of the best and most appropriate methods for evaluating widening access	Partnerships can begin to identify what works, for whom, in what circumstances	Formative partnership survey review of local evaluations
(10) Partnerships, HEFCE and national evaluators have evidence of the cost-effectiveness of the NCOP to secure continued funding	Partnerships, HEFCE and national evaluators produce evidence of the cost-effectiveness of the NCOP to secure continued funding	Partnerships, HEFCE and national evaluators develop an understanding of the overall cost-effectiveness of the NCOP and what activities are the most cost-effective, costs per student participating in the NCOP and cost-effectiveness in terms of attitudes and knowledge towards HE	HEFCE monitoring form CFE/partnership survey evaluation data Data tracking data on progression rates to HE

Long-term outcomes

Outcome	Indicator	Data source
(1) Increased number and proportion of young people from the target wards apply to HE	Number of young people from target ward who apply to HE Number of young people from target ward who are eligible to apply for HE (to give proportion) Motivation to apply to university	Secondary data collected from partnerships and other national databases Learner impact survey
(2) Increased number and proportion of young people from the target wards are successful in their applications to HE	Number of young people from target ward who are successful in securing a place at university Number of young people from target ward who applied to HE (to give proportion)	Secondary data collected from partnerships and other national databases
(3) Increased number and proportion of young people from target wards start HE: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Double proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in HE by 2020 - Increase by 20% number of students in HE from ethnic minority groups - Address the under-representation of young men from disadvantaged backgrounds in HE 	Numbers of learners from the target ward who enrol on a HE course	Secondary data collected from partnerships and other national databases (HESA)
(4) Progress towards a cultural change in target wards is one where HE is seen as a positive and realistic choice for young people from all backgrounds	Perception from NCOP staff that HE is seen by learners from the target ward as a realistic choice for young people like them. Perception from NCOP staff that HE is seen by parents and teachers from the target ward as a realistic choice for young people 'like theirs'	Formative partnership survey
(5) Improved, more robust, evidence base on what works in widening access to HE, for whom and in what circumstances	Partnerships have developed and implemented rigorous evaluations Partnerships have developed thorough understanding of who influences young people's decision-making	review of local evaluations Evidence from RCTs
(6) Detailed understanding of the cost-effectiveness of the NCOP	Partnerships have provided detailed monitoring returns to enable detailed cost-effectiveness analysis of the overall NCOP, cost-effectiveness of specific activities and returns on progression to HE	HEFCE monitoring form CFE/partnership survey evaluation data Data tracking data on progression rates to HE

Appendix 2: Original research questions

Formative evaluation

- How successful have partnerships been in meeting their own targets and milestones? What are/have been the key challenges for universities, colleges and other partners? This will consider the full range of activity in terms of:
 - targeting
 - engagement with schools and other stakeholders
 - geographical and demographic challenges;
 - collaboration and models of operation
 - innovative practice; information, advice and guidance (IAG)
 - range of outreach activities
 - strategic leadership, management and governance arrangements.
- How successful has the programme been in targeting (design and implementation) and delivering activities to the target groups in the identified wards? How successfully have learner/school needs been determined and addressed?
- How successfully have partnerships identified and managed risks?
- How successfully have partnerships aligned their work with the broader coverage of outreach activity (e.g. that undertaken in pursuit of access agreement targets)?
- How successfully have partnerships sustained relationships and capacity built during previous programmes (e.g. National Networks for Collaborative Outreach)?
- How important has it been for partnerships to adopt a strategic approach? What are the benefits and challenges?
- How have partnerships measured their success? How credible, valid and reliable is the data used and the evidence produced? What are the key factors that have influenced whether partnerships are successful?
- How can evidence from local evaluations at partnership level be used at a national level? What models of evaluation are particularly rigorous?
- Have partnerships developed and tested new or innovative approaches to collaboration or outreach (design or delivery) during this period for any or all of the target population? Is there wider learning and best practice that can be transferred or shared?
- How agile have partnerships been in adjusting to the developing local and national context? What opportunities and challenges has this presented (e.g. working with

local economic partnerships, changing educational landscape)? To what extent might the local context explain what works and why?

- What do consortia and their stakeholders (schools, colleges, learners, parents, other organisations) believe the benefits of and the lessons learnt from the programme to be? What evidence do they have to support this?
- What features of the partnerships are likely to be sustained in the longer term and what may be needed to secure this activity?
- What are the immediate and potential longer term social and cultural benefits? How might we evaluate this type of impact beyond the life of the programme?

Impact evaluation

Design and Implementation

- What are the key issues, opportunities and risks associated with designing and implementing these research approaches in the context of the NCOP programme, and how can these be addressed?
- What are the challenges in establishing anticipated outcomes and impact at local level?
- How adequate is the data and information available at partnership/national level? What further data may be required?
- Can control or comparator groups be established?
- What are the costs involved? Are there any efficiencies that can be made?

Establishing the counterfactual and ‘net’ impact

- Can causal impact of particular interventions or approaches be determined? Can we determine which activities (or groups of activities) have the most impact?
- What evidence is there for establishing the counterfactual? Can we determine ‘net’ impact?
- What evidence is there for what works and in what context? Can any conclusions be drawn from the evidence about how transferable the results might be to other contexts?
- What are the potential longer term impacts and how might we measure these beyond the life of the programme?
- What level of confidence can be placed in the methods trialled and tested? How valid and reliable are they?

Appendix 3: Characteristics of partnership survey respondents – Year 2

Figure 21: Number of responses to the Year 1 and Year 2 partnerships survey by partnership

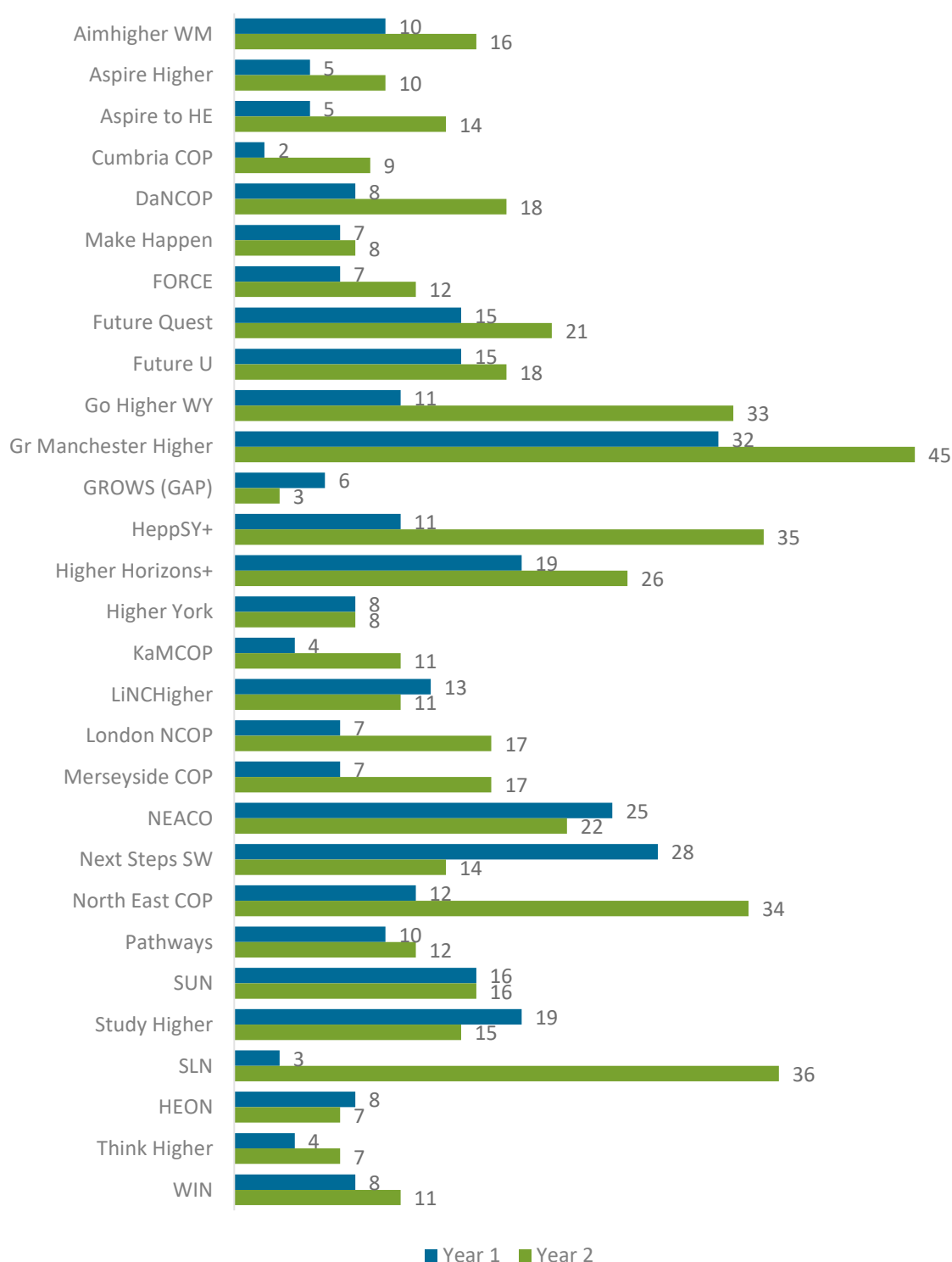
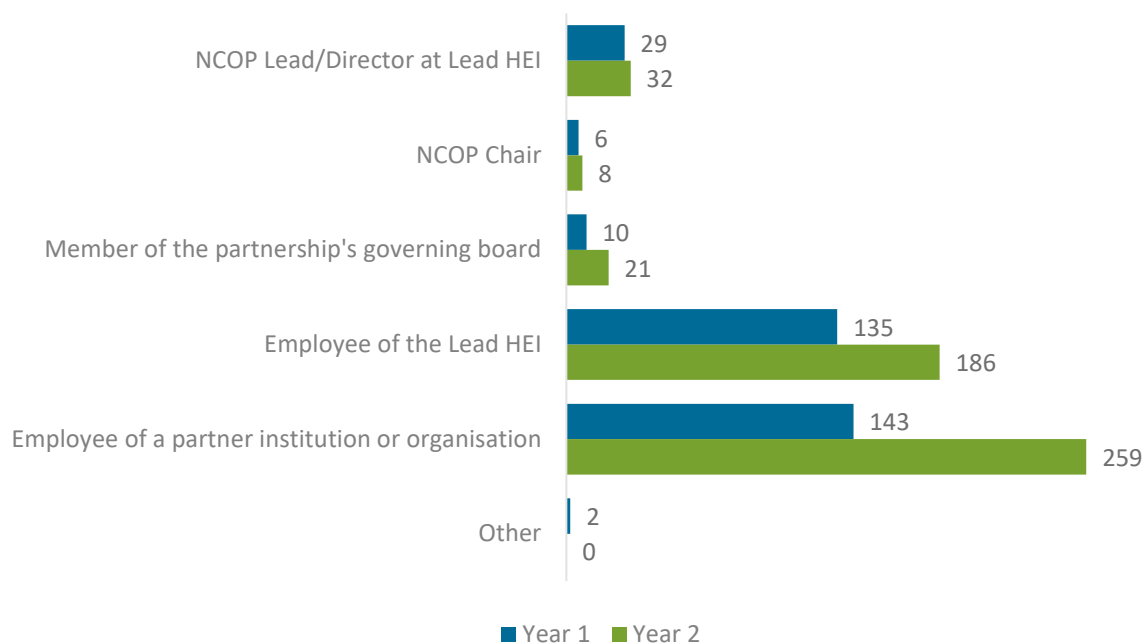


Figure 22: Number of responses to the Year 1 and Year 2 partnership survey by job role



Appendix 4: Analysis of the call for evidence survey responses

Figure 23: Type of intervention activity. Base = 67.

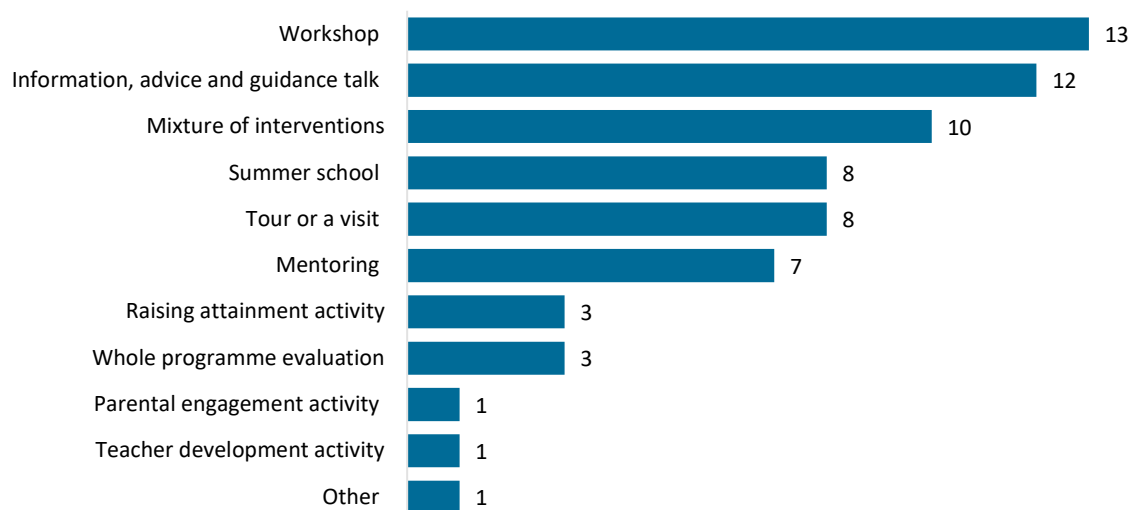


Figure 24: Main outcome intervention sought to achieve. Base = 67

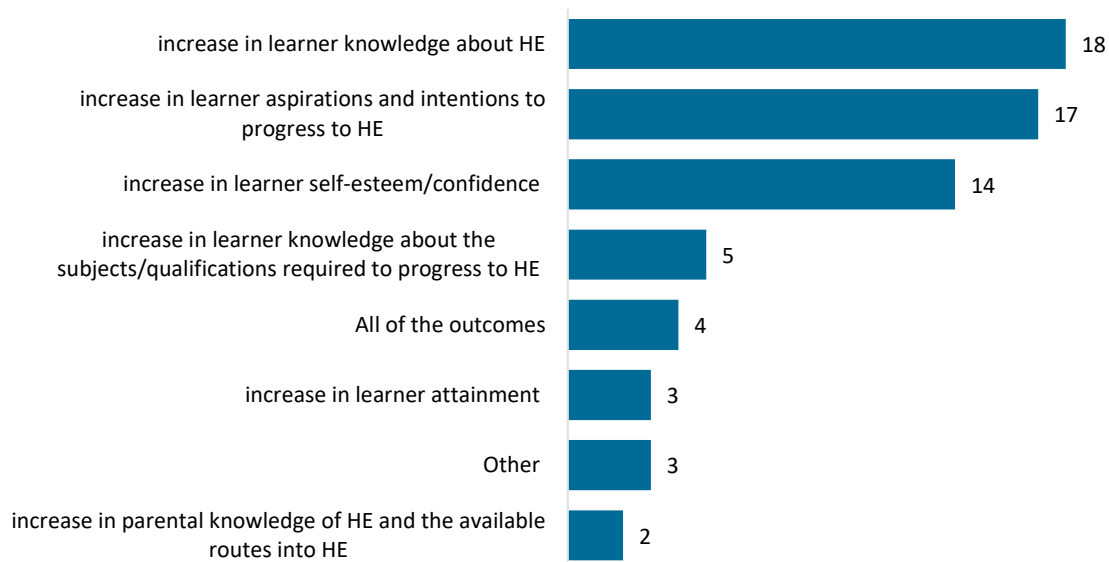


Figure 25: Impact on main outcome. Base = 67

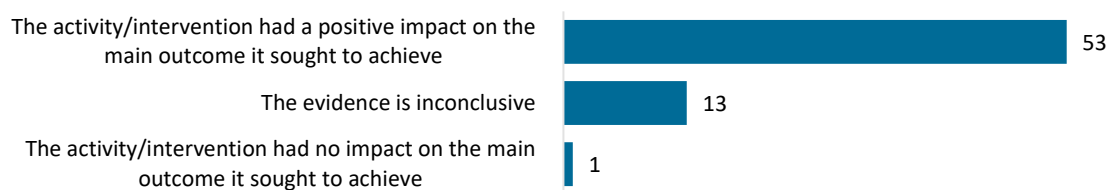


Figure 26: Intervention target group. Base=67



Figure 27: Sample size. Base: 67

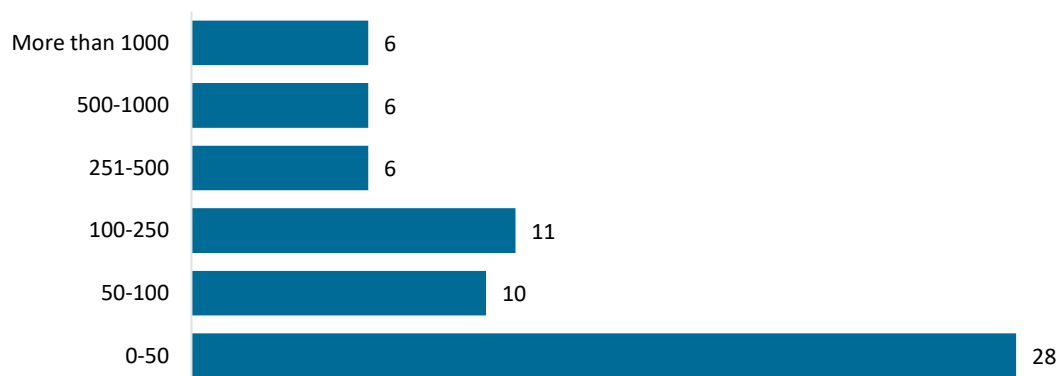
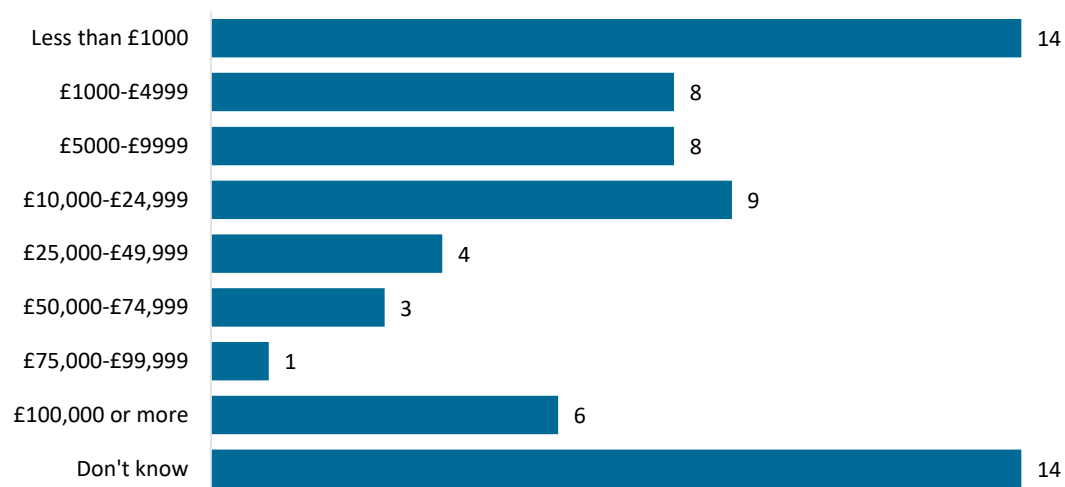


Figure 28: Cost of intervention. Base=67.



Appendix 5: Strength of evidence coding framework

The review of evaluation evidence used the following framework to evaluate the strength of evidence. Each piece of evidence submitted was assessed on each category, from which a total score was derived.

- File ID
- Consortia Partnership
- Type of evidence
- Description of activity being evaluated
- Activity coding (HEAT framework)
- Who is the activity evaluating?
- Methodology (1)
- Methodology (2)
- Research questions/key outcomes measured
- Key findings
- Indicators of impact Challenges
- Inclusion of Comparison group (Y/N)
- Strength of Evidence (number - tab 2) - code in regards to:
 - a - met most criteria
 - b - met half of the criteria
 - c - met a few criteria
- Strength of Evidence
 - What has been done well
 - What has been done less well
- Researcher reflections

Appendix 6: Assessment types of impact evaluation

Type 1: Narrative		Type 2: Empirical Enquiry <i>(encompasses Type 1 and the following)</i>		Type 3: Causal claims <i>(encompasses Type 2 and the following)</i>	
✓ Yes Please	✗ No thanks	✓ Yes Please	✗ No thanks	✓ Yes Please	✗ No thanks
Coherent strategy	Disjointed activities	Clear aim of what activities seek to achieve	Aims developed after activity	Have a target as well as a control or comparison group	
Approach and activities underpinned by evidence from literature or other evaluations	No rationale for developing approach and activities	Select indicators of your impact	No concept of measuring success	Could use an experimental or quasi-experimental design	Using groups that are not comparable
Shared understanding of processes involved	The model of change is not shared	Quantitative or qualitative data – or both, ‘triangulation’ is good!	Information not systematically collected	Think about selection bias and try to avoid it	Selection bias in comparator groups
Reason for activity	Ad hoc activities	Pre/post data (minimum two points in time)	Only collect information once		
Clear conception of why the changes you seek to make are important	No understanding of needs of target groups	Analysis competently undertaken	Data not related to the intervention		
Programme reviews	No review or evaluation	Sharing of results and review of activity	Results not used to inform decisions		

Appendix 7: Summary of RCTs

Partnership	Intervention	Sample	Design	Timeline	Outcome measures
NEACO (a)	Light touch 'nudging' text-based intervention Weekly text messages to support students in applying to HE	Year 13 learners (n=531)	Individual-level randomised trial No wait-list element to the trial	Intervention delivered 31 st October 2017 until mid-January 2018 Analysis planned for July 2018 onwards	Number of students applying to and entering HE (Spring 2019) Knowledge about HE (July 2018) Likelihood of applying to HE one-question survey (Spring 2018) End-point survey about student aspirations and intentions (July 2018)
NEACO (b)	Light touch 'nudging' text-based intervention Weekly text messages to support students information and guidance about post-16 choices and different educational routes	Year 11 learners (n=810)	Individual-level randomised trial No wait-list element to the trial	Intervention commenced in January 2018	CFE learner survey about student knowledge and intentions (July 2018) Student attainment (actual qualifications) and subject choices from student survey and NPD administrative data (Sept 2018-2019)
SUN	Six-week E-mentoring (Brightside)	182 Year 12 FEC learners (98 NCOP learners)	Individual-level randomised trial No wait-list element to the trial	Intervention delivered February 2018 until mid-March 2018 Survey administered Spring and Summer 2018 Progression data spring 2020	Number of students entering university Number of students entering HE-in-FE (FEC-based level 4 courses) Level 4 apprenticeships HE knowledge and student aspirations
GHWY HOP LiNCHigher	Summer school (multi-day)	328 Year 10 learners (180 NCOP learners)	Two-armed, individually-randomised RCT No wait-list element to the trial	Summer school delivered by three partnerships in July 2018 Survey outcome data collected immediately after the trial and in September 2018	Likelihood to apply to HE Knowledge of applying to HE Whether HE is for them Future aspirations



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