Partnership building for student access in online spaces: an evaluative exploration of the Higher Education Progression Partnership South Yorkshire

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused significant disruption to the educational experiences of young people and to educational institutions. This article will examine the opportunities and challenges of the 'emergency' move to online spaces for the universities, schools and colleges in Higher Education Progression Partnership South Yorkshire (HeppSY). Within the article, there is a particular focus on stakeholder groups and their relationships, which were vital for accessing and engaging the target students for activities and initiatives, but they are often not explicitly discussed when evaluating the impact of widening participation activities. This article will present the findings of 16 interviews and focus groups and the opportunities and challenges of moving into an online space will be outlined from the perspective of two stakeholder groups, as well as issues around digital poverty, capability and funding. The discussion section will focus on the implications of the online environment for widening participation and partnerships and how it can be moved beyond emergency online delivery to be planned and sustainable. It concludes by outlining the role of the online in widening participation and partnership working that will help drive the diversification of access post-pandemic.

Keywords Higher education, Access, Partnership, Widening participation, Outreach, Online outreach

Introduction

This paper intends to explore opportunities and challenges that were presented by the shift to online spaces because of Covid-19 for a higher education outreach programme in the North of England. Higher education in England over the last half-century has evolved 'from a planned elite system to a mass market' system and been transformed 'from a public good to a private investment' (Harrison, 2018, p. 54). The expansion of higher education has led to increased undergraduate participation across all social groups (Smith, 2018). However, a student's background has a significant

impact not only if they go to university, but what type of institution they will go to, and what course they will study (Pickering, 2019). The inequalities in participation are stark with eighteen-year-olds from the most advantaged groups remaining '2.4 times more likely to enter university than their disadvantaged peers, and 6.3 times more likely to attend one of the most selective institutions in the UK' (Social Mobility Advisory Group, 2016, p. 4). The expansion of higher education has been accompanied by successive government policies and rhetoric aimed at widening the participation of students from all socio-economic backgrounds.

In England, a higher education student's socio-economic status is predominantly identified using an area-based measure called POLAR (Participation of Local Areas) (Jerrim, 2021). POLAR allocates local government electoral wards to one of five quintiles according to historic participation rates of young people in that area; quintile 1 is the lowest participation group and quintile 5 is the highest. While POLAR has come under criticism for being a proxy measure of socio-economic disadvantage, that is often misrepresented, misunderstood and inappropriately used by a number of stakeholders in the sector (Harrison and McCaig, 2015). It is used by the Government and the regulator of the higher education sector in England the Office for Students (OfS) to direct policy and track changes in higher education participation.

In 2017, a new national initiative, the Uni Connect Programme (UCP) was set up to 'support the government's social mobility goals by rapidly increasing the number of young people from underrepresented groups who go into higher education' (Office for Students, 2021). UCP used POLAR data and the results of the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) to identify 997 target areas in England, which have an unaccounted-for gap in higher education participation. Overseen and funded by the OfS, 29 regional partnerships, involving universities, colleges, local authorities, employers and other groups were established to deliver highly targeted outreach activities.

This paper focuses on one UCP partnership, *The Higher Education Progression Partnership South Yorkshire* (HeppSY) and intends to develop findings from a process evaluation of HeppSY undertaken in 2020/21 (Pickering and Donnelly, 2021). While the original evaluation addressed the impact of Covid-19 on the HeppSY programme, it did not specifically refer to the experiences of each stakeholder group (HeppSY colleagues, Universities, Schools and Colleges) at HeppSY and the opportunities and challenges that were presented from the shift to online spaces. As education settings return to standard teaching practices, it is necessary to consider stakeholder expectations of how online approaches in

widening participation could become integrated into future planned delivery. Therefore, this paper seeks to address the gap in the original process evaluation as well as explore the future of outreach and its pedagogical aspects in online spaces.

This research set out to answer the following research questions:

1. What opportunities and challenges were presented for each stakeholder group by widening participation moving into an online space?
2. What recommendations would support the development of strong stakeholder relationships to enable student access and engagement in online widening participation spaces?

This insight will be crucial for widening practitioners as they respond to changing government policy and potentially declining national funding for outreach programmes; online delivery could potentially support increased impact and scale of outreach work in challenging times. The paper begins by providing a brief overview of HeppSY and the aims of the original process evaluation. It then outlines some of the new and emerging research about delivering outreach activities online during and beyond a global pandemic. The methodology section provides details about how data from the previous evaluation were re-analysed for the purposes of this research project, with information about the methods, data collection tools and sampling strategy that were used and the limitations of the approach. The findings section presents the experiences from the perspective of two stakeholder groups: HeppSY and its partner organisations; and schools and colleges (Centres). It provides answers to the first research question, about the opportunities and challenges of moving to online spaces and as a result of the pandemic and illustrates that the partnership was able to provide a unified and adaptable offer of activities and support. Centres embraced gaining greater autonomy in decision-making and were able to strengthen their own capacity, with more staff receiving CPD online, but the online approaches had varied impact on the reach, engagement and evaluation of the outreach activities that were delivered. The discussion addresses the second research question and focuses on the implications of the online environment for widening participation and highlights the importance of partnership building for enabling collective decision making and for determining when online widening participation delivery is appropriate. Finally, the conclusion suggests that practitioners and organisations should ensure that decisions about the design and delivery of programmes are guided by a theory of change approach and the needs of students and stakeholders, rather than technology. However, the online environment is fundamental for developing relationships and building

understanding among partners and as one of the tools available to practitioners to use.

HeppSY Process Evaluation

Formally known as National Collaborative Outreach Programme, UCP has consisted of three phases of delivery from 2017 to 2025. Phase one of the programme started in January 2017 and lasted until July 2019, with phase two commencing in August 2019 until July 2021, with an annual budget of £60 million. Phase three of the UCP started in August 2021 and is scheduled to run until August 2025, although funding for the programme is subject to confirmation and consultation annually, it is currently set to £40 million a year. The aims of phase two were to:

1. reduce the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups
2. support young people to make well-informed decisions about their future education
3. support effective and local collaboration by higher education providers working together with schools, colleges, employers and other partners
4. contribute to a stronger evidence base around 'what works' in higher education outreach and strengthen evaluation practice in the sector.

During 2020/2021, the authors of this paper conducted a process evaluation of HeppSY to capture the views and experiences of various stakeholders about the implementation, performance, and evaluation of the programme during phase two (Pickering and Donnelly, 2021). HeppSY works in partnership with the Higher Education Progression Partnership (Hepp), Sheffield Hallam University, the University of Sheffield and other partners and they are responsible for 45 of 997 UCP target areas. Each regional UCP is expected to engage with at least 20% of the young people living in local areas within their region (Bowes and Patel, 2021). In the South Yorkshire region, there are over 29,000 young people who are eligible for interventions delivered by HeppSY. HeppSY have built their programme around four key strands to support achieving the aims set for all UCPs: confidence and resilience; attainment; higher education knowledge; careers knowledge. Each of HeppSY's activities align with one of these strands and aims to develop the knowledge and skills of students.

The original evaluation focused on five key areas: developing a collaborative approach; relationships with partners; programme implementation; evaluation and monitoring; and legacy. The evaluation also sought views concerning the impact of Covid-19 on the HeppSY programme during phase two. The Covid-19 pandemic

has caused significant disruption to the educational experiences of young people and there have been unprecedented challenges for educational institutions. For periods of the 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years, schools and colleges were closed for most students and only 'vulnerable' children or the children of key workers were able to attend schools and colleges in person. Towards the end of the 2019/20 academic year, OfS removed targets for UCPs to engage with at least 20% of the young people living within their region due to the challenges facing partnerships (Bowes and Patel, 2021). UCPs were 'designed to be delivered primarily face-to-face and largely through schools and colleges' but they had to modify their activities to ensure that delivery could continue and provide support to their students (Bowes and Patel, 2021, p. 2).

Covid-19 and outreach delivery

Across the sector, the discussion of the impact of Covid-19, and moving online, on outreach programmes initially focused on practitioners' immediate reactions but it has since progressed onto exploring how online approaches in to widening participation could become integrated into planned delivery. This emerging guidance is welcome as there is limited research about the effectiveness of online delivery of widening participation and outreach activity. In a framework proposed by Rainford (2021), the three dimensions of pedagogy, technology and humanistic factors are of considerable importance when considering adapting delivery online. The author argues for pedagogy, the first dimension, to take precedence over technology. It is contended that decisions should be primarily guided by the underlying rationale, with a firm grounding of theory and evidence, the creation of appropriate objectives and outcomes, and engagement in partnership working by listening to those who are affected by the activities (Raven, 2020). Using a case study approach covering four university outreach programmes in Australia, Dodd et al. (2021) provided an evidence base to inform the design of online widening participation and outreach programmes. These authors emphasised the 'importance of personalized contact for online cohorts' and 'teacher presence, through positive and constructive communication' (Dodd et al., 2021, p. 10-11) for helping to build a sense of belonging, but this was not dependent on the use of specific technology.

The second dimension technology, focuses on the need for the use of technology to be inclusive and to help students from underrepresented groups, rather than hinder or perpetuate inequalities. There is the potential for students, their parents, and communities to be excluded if they have no or limited access to the internet, devices or mobile data. The case studies by Dodd et al.

(2021) identified the importance of using asynchronous tools, in conjunction with synchronous, to ensure that all students receive support, regardless of when they are able to learn. Similarly, there is a need to challenge assumptions about how teachers and practitioners are expected to engage as they may face similar issues. The third dimension humanistic is concerned with the ethical implications of decisions and safeguarding the wellbeing, privacy and confidentiality of all groups involved. Related to this phase is the need to consider whether there are sufficient resources, such as financial, technical and time, to deliver the online provision (Raven, 2020). Dodd et al. (2021, p. 3) also emphasised the value of embedding iterative and real-time feedback loops into programmes, given the lack of a 'precise evidentiary base of prior experience and knowledge', to allow changes to be made in response to the input of practitioners, teachers, and students.

Methodology

Study design and approach

The original study (Pickering and Donnelly, 2021) applied a process evaluation approach which focuses on 'evaluating the mechanisms through which an intervention takes place', with an emphasis on providing 'evidence of how (well) an intervention has been implemented…against expectations' and 'how it operates' (Parsons, 2017, p. 16). According to Silver (2004, p. 15), understanding the 'experience of conducting the activity, together with the continuing or changing perceptions of the various constituents involved' is fundamental to process evaluations. This type of evaluation not only allows the investigators to assess the 'fidelity and quality of implementation' but also to 'clarify causal mechanisms and identify contextual factors associated with variation in outcomes' (Moore et al., 2015). This type of insight was crucial as the programme under evaluation was significantly affected by Covid-19 and how individuals and stakeholder organisations responded within that context will help establish how the pandemic had an impact on the outcomes.

Data collection

A qualitative methodology of online synchronous, semi-structured, individual and group interviews were used to gather data for this study. This methodology was chosen because it 'has the potential to tie together meaning, context and narratives of the intervention and the organization' (Abildgaard et al., 2016, p. 9).

The lived experience of stakeholders was viewed an essential, especially given the unprecedented upheaval participants had experienced in their professional and personal lives because of Covid-19. As a result of ongoing social restrictions in place during the field work period because of the global pandemic, data collection was conducted using Zoom Video Communications Inc. (Zoom).

Delivering the evaluation online provided a number of opportunities as our population was diverse and geographically dispersed and this environment allowed easier access to participants and saved time and costs in travelling (Gray et al., 2020). As all participants had been working in virtual environments for over nine months when the interviews took place, they had access to the necessary equipment to participate and were experienced in using and interacting in those environments. Recordings and data were also easier to save and manage in a secure manner with less risk of losing documents and files travelling between locations and then uploading onto computers. However, there were also challenges; the speed and reliability of the internet meant some sessions, especially the larger focus groups, were prone to connection issues. There were also security concerns about using Zoom, which were mitigated by creating a unique link for each session that required a password for participants to enter. Also, all audio files were saved directly to a password-protected computer drive rather than the cloud storage offered by Zoom.

Data analysis

Interview transcripts were transcribed by a professional transcription service. They were then organised and analysed in NVivo 12 by two evaluators. The transcripts were analysed using a 'deductive dominant' approach as there was a pre-set coding structure, which aligned with the five areas of the programme output targets and the evaluation questions (Armat et al., 2018). However, an 'unconstrained' coding matrix was applied so any emerging themes that did not fit into the coding matrix could also be reported on. This introduced an inductive element to analysis that was informed by the evaluators' interpretations of the data (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). This synthesis and triangulation of the inductive and deductive analysis allowed the most prominent themes to be identified in relation to the evaluation's objectives. This approach also meant that both evaluators were familiarised with and immersed in the data and enabled them to check for consistency, ensuring the trustfulness of the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1986).

Data sources

A pragmatic, purposeful sampling approach was adopted given the focus and scope of the evaluation. The approach aligns epistemologically with a process evaluation as it aims to 'make sense, report fully on what was done, why it was done, and what the implications are for the findings' (Patton, 2002, p. 72). The sample engaged different stakeholder groups, employees of HeppSY, employees of partners and universities who work with HeppSY to deliver their programme and centre (schools and colleges) staff who are responsible for liaising with HeppSY. These groups were selected as they were 'information rich cases' that would 'best provide insight into the research questions', which aligns with this sampling approach (Emmel, 2013, p. 33). With the support of the HeppSY's data and evaluation team, 54 participants were identified to take part in nineteen semi-structured individual or group hour long interviews between 27 November 2020 and 1February 2021. The interview schedule was structured around the four themes developed from the output targets identified in the programme's logic model and adapted according to the participants' role in the HeppSY programme.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was sought and granted on 4 November 2020 via Sheffield Hallam University's ethical approval process. All project data were held on a password-protected drive, in folders only accessible to the evaluation team. Each participant was emailed an information sheet that outlined what the interview would cover, and how their responses would remain confidential. Participants were also asked to sign and return consent forms.

Limitations

As noted in the original report (Pickering and Donnelly, 2021), the sampling approach may have partially contributed to a positive skew in the findings. While the purposeful sampling approach was useful for accessing participants who were closely aligned to the implementation of the programme, this could have limited the opportunities to capture a wider range of perspectives of intended beneficiaries. Furthermore, there is the possibility that those participants who were closely engaged with HeppSY were more likely to volunteer to take part. Nevertheless, the triangulation of different groups of participants, the use of two different evaluators in collecting and analysing the same evidence and, a continuation

of the methodology used in previous evaluations of HeppSY's implementation provides robustness to the evaluation process (Parsons, 2017).

There were also some limitations to the evaluation due to Covid-19. The pandemic had a significant impact on participants who had experienced unprecedented upheaval in their professional and personal lives which may have shaped how people responded to the evaluation questions. Some participants also experienced changes to their roles and responsibilities due to the move to online working. Covid-19 also restricted the availability of some of the centres' key contacts and resulted in them not been able to participate in the evaluation.

Findings

The findings are presented from the perspective of two stakeholder groups: HeppSY and its partner organisations; and schools and colleges (Centres). The implications of the online environment from each groups perspectives were explored and it was found that both groups felt that relationships between practitioners and staff across the whole partnership were fundamental for accessing and engaging the target students for activities and initiatives. In this study, these relationships were deemed to be a pivotal factor in the success of outreach in schools and colleges, but the ways in which stakeholders work together is often either overlooked or taken for granted as an assumption underlying the success of a widening participation intervention.

The viewpoints of staff and practitioners who work in HeppSY, Hepp and the two universities, are broken down into four sub-themes. Firstly, **vision** outlines how HeppSY embedded a shared philosophy across the partnership prior to and during Covid-19, which was achieved through leadership, a tailored approach and by strengthening infrastructure that enabled them to build trust with centres. Secondly, **responsive to centres' needs,** focuses on how HeppSY were proactive and responsive to meet the individual needs of schools and colleges. Thirdly, **coordination with partners**, concerns the steps taken within the partnership to signpost to each other's resources and promote cross teamworking. The final sub-theme is focused on **interpersonal relationships with centres**, where staff groups experienced varying levels of success in communicating with contacts in centres via remote working.

The viewpoints of staff and practitioners who work in the schools and colleges are broken down into by five sub-themes. Firstly,

accountability and expectations focuses on how schools and colleges evaluate their widening participation practices and demonstrate impact. Secondly, **autonomy** explores the need of independent decision making for schools and colleges within their relationships with HeppSY and its partners. Thirdly, **programme reach and students' engagement**, is focused on the impact of online delivery on schools and colleges' access and engagement with young people in the region. Fourthly, **technological infrastructure**, looks at the future delivery plans of schools and colleges and the strength of their digital infrastructure. The final theme, **networking,** focuses on the interactions and exchanges of knowledge that took place between schools and colleges in an online environment.

HeppSY and partners: Vision

At the inception of the programme, HeppSY accentuated the importance of developing strong collaborative relationships and trust among its stakeholders. The foundation for these relationships was a clear and shared vision, set by HeppSY's senior leadership, about the aims and objectives that HeppSY wanted to achieve within the partnership and the duration of the programme. All groups involved in the partnership were working to the same agenda of "getting young people, parents, and staff to think about higher education" (HeppSY). This meant that decision-making about activities was guided by the same objectives, while the roles of each group had been clearly defined. Reflecting on their relationships with centres, staff at HeppSY stated that they "treat those with incredible respect, and access to young people with respect". It was important for HeppSY to provide a "high quality professional approach" that was relevant for schools and colleges, which involved them using their understanding of each centre to deliver a tailored and individualised offer. HeppSY further developed trust with centres by helping them to strengthen their infrastructure through funding and resource, for example, by 'buying out' staff time in leadership roles and recruiting staff to facilitate the administration, cooperation and delivery of the programme. The allocation of funding also meant that centres became accountable for delivering on the programme and meeting HeppSY's expectations.

HeppSY and partners: Responsive to centres needs

During the initial response to home schooling, HeppSY paused their activity, but they were still thinking proactively by using the time to listen to the needs of centres and to provide guidance. By

redesigning their offer, HeppSY demonstrated that they were flexible and adaptable to support centres across a range of delivery modes, particularly in relation to providing information and advice. At the request of centres, online mock interviews were delivered to students who were no longer able to attend interviews in-person, while other school leavers received careers guidance online and by telephone. There was an intentional "move away from the creation of the resource, and more into explaining how to use the creation of the resource" (HeppSY), which shifted the focus onto developing reusable resources that were easily accessible and embedded into the practices of centres. The availability of staff to update, promote and use these resources was perceived to be a critical factor in them having long-term impact, and some Career Professional Development (CPD) was delivered to teachers in centres to help address this issue. However, there were concerns expressed by HeppSY and its partners about the level of engagement with students during sustained activities delivered in an online environment, primarily due to the limited use of cameras and a lack of 'non-verbal feedback' in sessions, which made it harder to assess the engagement of students during the activities. Camera use during sessions was often limited because of the technological infrastructure in students' homes or Centres, which meant that webcams were unavailable, not usable in a classroom setting, or there were privacy concerns. Careful consideration needs to be given to the type of student engagement required, how this will be monitored for online sessions, and whether or not Centres have the technological infrastructure to support it.

HeppSY and partners: Coordination with partners

There was evidence that HeppSY had been successful in developing a collaborative and coordinated approach with its partners. From the outset of the programme, expectations were set that work across the partnership must "add value", avoid duplication and, where possible, involve "cross teamworking" (HeppSY). This has helped build an ethos that is founded on a "respect for young people" which is "bigger than each of the individual institutions" (HeppSY). In an online environment, HeppSY worked with its partners to ensure that there was a consistent narrative about the support that was available to centres, which involved "signposting to each other's webpage" resources and activities (HeppSY). Individual partners managed to reach larger volumes of students and staff within centres when they held online events, with schools from one partner attending and benefitting from activities delivered by another, which helped to add value and raise awareness of their own offers. The data

collection and sharing agreements in place, which were established in phase one, were indicative of the strategic approach that had been adopted to help link up activities across the partnership. These agreements were mutually beneficial as they enabled data collected by one partner to be shared with another to target activities, which helped to address 'cold spots' and ensure students received support, irrespective of which partner would deliver it. However, while there was recognition that each partner had "their own specialisms" (HeppSY), partners were concerned that centres may struggle to recognise their individual identities. There were doubts whether, once HeppSY ends, "schools and colleges will ever truly understand that we were always a partner, and we were always delivering this with them" (Partner).

HeppSY and partners: Interpersonal relationships with centres

The move to online working has had a varied impact on the staff of HeppSY and its partners in relation to their interpersonal relationships with colleagues based elsewhere in the partnership. Working remotely, without the complication of travel time and location, has made it easier for some HeppSY staff to meet with schools more frequently and enable staff to "make links" that have "resulted in a lot of early delivery" within centres (HeppSY). Nevertheless, for staff who were new to their role or who had been assigned to a different centre, building relationships was extremely challenging as they were "not physically there [in the centre]" (HeppSY) and were reliant on communication by email, which could undermine the delivery of activities. Partners expressed the view that the move online had not significantly changed their way of working as they were used to being based across different locations. There were some issues that arose from different technology and platforms used across the partnership, but these were overcome with relative ease.

Schools and colleges: Accountability and expectations

Centres understood the expectations set by HeppSY that, when there has been a commitment of resourcing, activities are evaluated, and that evidence is shared to show how they have improved the outcomes of its intended beneficiaries. Trust in HeppSY has developed and strengthened due to the impact that the programme has had in successfully raising the profile of higher education and careers in centres. Participants stated that there had been a notable cultural shift in centres, which was reflected in the amount of provision delivered across a variety of year groups compared to the start of the programme. There were also

observations that staff in centres were equipped with more knowledge about higher education and careers, and anecdotal evidence that students were more prepared and see "their future pathways a lot clearer, whether it's [going to] university or not" (Centres). This mutually beneficial relationship and shared vision enabled the work of HeppSY to remain significant and relevant in centres, even during times of uncertainty and transition.

Schools and colleges: Autonomy

From the perspectives of centres, it was essential to be autonomous in decision-making processes and in their relationships with HeppSY and its partners. Centres felt that they were in the best position to determine which, and when, activities were suitable for their own students and staff, and they had high expectations for how they should benefit. In the context of Covid-19, this was particularly important for centres who were "keen not to overload schools with things other than just giving students the curriculum offer and diet that they were missing" (Centres) and to avoid increasing teachers' workloads further. When activity continued through online approaches, some centres relished the opportunity of having greater responsibility and ownership in the curation and delivery of resources and activities. For example, staff in centres "personalised" sets of online resources so that they were targeted towards specific subject and vocational areas, which helped to ensure that "students could relate to it" (Centres) and allow learners to access materials that meet their own needs and interests.

Schools and colleges: Programme reach and student engagement

The new modes of delivery, which included synchronous, asynchronous and blended activities, created further opportunities for centres as they engaged with their students. Participants perceived online activities, such as festivals and workshops, had reached greater volumes of staff and students across a variety of year groups, which helped some centres meet their targets at earlier stages. The online delivery made some activities accessible and affordable to more learners, with barriers such as costs incurred from travel and geographical restrictions now being less of an issue. Furthermore, many centres reported that they had been able to provide "more individualised" one-to-one support, such as information about careers, to help students' make more informed decisions (Centres). However, in some cases, challenges were observed in students' interactions with staff and their peers in an online environment, with concerns being expressed about

how students will learn collectively and develop a shared understanding of higher education. Activities involving physical and collaborative spaces, such as mobile classrooms and campus visits, that were described as being "transformative" in helping to normalise higher education, were deemed to be more difficult to replicate online (Centres). The loss of these spaces was seen by some as a potential barrier to "breaking those boundaries…and changing the mindset" of individuals who had never been to university before, such as students, parents and carers (Centres).

Schools and colleges: Technological infrastructure

There was a commitment across centres, and the wider partnership, to use varied modes of delivery in the future. Students were perceived to be more willing to learn flexibly and the switch online "has dramatically improved everybody's digital competency in schools, colleges and universities" (HeppSY). However, it was evident that for the benefits of online delivery to be attained, the technological infrastructure of centres and capacity and capability of their staff base will need continued support. In some cases, centres did not have consistent access to computers or other hardware, especially when social distancing measures were implemented, which presented challenges for the engagement, delivery, and evaluation of activities. There were also a few concerns expressed about students' access to devices to engage in their learning when they are not able to attend school in-person, for example a lack of access to devices and/or internet within their household. If there are fewer costs incurred from travel due to more events being held online, there is an opportunity for the funding and resources provided to centres to be redistributed to enhance their technological infrastructure.

Schools and colleges: Networking

While collaboration across centres was deemed to be difficult due to time and workload pressures, there was evidence of continuous networking that allowed a "common language" and understanding to be developed (Centres). Network meetings provided opportunities for centres to share ideas and to discuss the planning and impact of activities with other schools and colleges within and beyond their local region. These network meetings were invaluable, regardless of whether they were carried out in face-to-face or online settings. However, under the circumstances of moving online, they were particularly useful for collective problem-solving.

Discussion

The schools and colleges that pupils attend play a crucial role in shaping the choices, decisions, and aspirations of their young people. This 'school effect' accrued through the 'interactions between the school, student and the acquirement of the various forms of capital can influence an individual's outcomes through their gradual alignment to the requirements of the field' (Byrom, 2009, p. 221). Schools and colleges are in turn shaped by 'history, location, pupil and parental social mix, staffing, material and economic conditions' of the centre and 'community infrastructure' (Blackmore et al., 2017, p. 108). This situational context influences how policy or initiatives in relation to widening participation are 'adopted, adapted, ignored, or countered' by staff in centres (Blackmore et al., 2017, p. 108). One HeppSY participant highlighted the individuality of the centres and suggested that there is even "greater fragmentation of schools and colleges in their general practice" because of Covid-19. Austin (2021, p. 100) suggests that the 'challenges presented by Covid-19 require a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by schools, their students, and their families' from widening participation practitioners.

HeppSY's existing relationships and knowledge about the centres they engaged with allowed them to respond in a sensitive and flexible manner at the start of the pandemic. The initial pause in delivery of the HeppSY programme at the start of the pandemic, which aligned with advice given to the sector (Raven, 2020), allowed them to reflect on their own activities and listen to centres about their challenges and needs. As the findings demonstrate, this allowed HeppSY to tailor their response and delivery to the needs of the centres which also helped maintain the role of higher education on centres' agendas. While organisations that deliver access interventions are working to their own targets in relation to diversifying access to higher education, these should not be prioritised over building relationships with centres. As HeppSY has demonstrated, it is only through understanding the unique context of each centre, that policies can be both adopted, adapted and embedded in collaboration with its stakeholders successfully.

Pickering (2021) suggests that staff in centres are key to the success of interventions as they are 'enablers' that provide students with access to interventions and knowledge that becomes socially embedded in the centres themselves. However, Oliver and Kettley (2010, p. 750) found that 'teachers' personal beliefs, experiences and connections shaped their agency in being either facilitators or gatekeepers for students' applications to higher education. Foskett (2011) gave a highly critical account of a careers, information, advice, and guidance service, saying it often applied an adaptive function in steering 'clients' towards decisions

typical for their social and educational group. Although Oliver and Kettley (2010, p. 750) suggest that widening participation practitioners can overcome these challenges through sustained interactions that builds rapport with centre staff to address misconceptions and engage with them to challenge criticism and concerns about higher education. This is reflected in the findings of this study where close working relationships with centres led to changes in the organisations' aspirations about higher education for their students. Fuller and Paton (2006, p. 9) propose 'stakeholder's involvement needs to be differentiated by person… and organisational roles', which means that relationships need to be developed at various levels within the organisations to maximise the success of outreach interventions.

HeppSY's already existing multifaceted approach to relationships has meant that relationships have been built at a variety of levels within the centres. HeppSY provided several ways for centres to engage with them and seek help and support. This flexible and bespoke relationship was essential pre-pandemic for the successful implementation and delivery of access activities, and even more so post-pandemic as centres address the full consequences of school closures on pupils from less privileged backgrounds (Montacute, 2020). The strength of these relationships according to HeppSY participants in this evaluation was built on a high-quality professional approach, trust, and a clear and shared vision. A benefit of this was that centres were willing to actively engage with HeppSY which meant they could influence staff and develop their knowledge about higher education and careers. The switch to online delivery also meant that more centre staff could engage with the HeppSY staff CPD offer. Working with centre staff in this way means that misconceptions about higher education can be challenged in a productive way. It also allows information about higher education to be retained in the centres which will benefit current and future pupils even after the HeppSY programme ends. Working with centre staff as part of outreach activity will no doubt contribute to the long-term impact and legacy of the HeppSY programme.

Harrison and Waller (2018) highlight the importance of teacher expectations in supporting pupils in accessing higher education, and the need to challenge normative expectations of teachers. They propose that expectations need more 'policy attention rather than aspirations' in young people (Harrison and Waller, 2018, p. 931). HeppSY appeared to have been successful in influencing the aspirations and expectations centres had for their students. One centre said they were now encouraging students to look "at what is possible from university" and were pushing students to get onto the "courses that they really want and being more aspirational in

their choices". A number of centres also credited HeppSY for helping them to recognise that they need to tailor their approaches to the cohort of students rather than relying on a single approach. However, while many centres understood 'aspirational' to mean the most appropriate university for the student, a small number of other centres also stated that this might involve "students applying and getting into Russell Groups" (Centre).

Raven (2020, p. 259) states that 'online is unlikely to replicate the more immersive, multi-sensory experience of face-to-face interventions'. The findings from the centres suggests that the absence of these types of interventions were a significant loss as they provide a transformative experience that breaks down barriers and helped normalise higher educations for those that have not experienced university before. For groups underrepresented in higher education, access to unfamiliar habitus enables them to 'anticipate, experience, and reflect' upon being a higher education student (Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2016, p. 47). While digital learning has its benefits as noted in the findings section, it should supplement rather than replace existing approaches (Lewin et al., 2019). Emerging evidence also suggests that new barriers of access to technology have meant that students in underrepresented groups have not always been able to successfully engage in online outreach activities, and the schools they attend might not have the equipment or resources to facilitate this approach effectively (Bowes and Patel, 2021). However, as the findings showed, online delivery can also help mitigate some traditional engagement barriers such as accessibility of location and cost of travel. Pickering's (2021) evaluation of a group mentoring access programme showed how these traditional barriers had a negative impact on the success of the intervention, and this demonstrates that widening practitioners need to understand the challenges and needs of the student groups they are working with and adapt their delivery mode accordingly.

Finally, it is important to highlight the role funding has played in HeppSY's ability to work with partners and build capacity and resources in the centres. The funding enabled a reciprocal relationship to be developed that had clear expectations and requirements for all parties. The centres also found the funding to be beneficial as it allowed the profile of higher education to be raised and sustained as a priority even during challenging times. The participants in this evaluation did propose that the online environment could play a pivotal role in building and maintaining relationships with different partners. It was felt that the digital tools could be used to overcome geographical, time, and cost barriers of travelling to meetings in different locations across the region. As

with students, using the digital tools with partners needs careful consideration but might also help build valuable relationships.

Conclusion

This article aimed to share and expand on the findings from a process evaluation of the Uni Connect partnership, HeppSY (Pickering and Donnelly, 2021). The findings and discussion sections of this article addressed in detail the first research question: what opportunities and challenges were presented for each stakeholder group by widening participation moving into an online space? To conclude this article, the second research question will be addressed: what recommendations would support the development of strong partnerships to enable student access and engagement in online widening participation spaces?

As Rainford (2021) and Raven (2020) have already cautioned, the digital environment should be used carefully when developing widening participation activities. The delivery mode and pedagogical design should stem from the programmes or interventions outcomes. During the pandemic, practitioners had no option but to default to online environments; however, going forward this should not be the default, but one of many tools and resources that practitioners use to achieve the outcomes of a programme. This once again highlights the need for all programmes to be underpinned by a clear theory of change. When deciding what approach is most appropriate, a clear understanding of the challenges and barriers experienced by students the intervention is aimed at needs clear articulation so they can be addressed fully. This understanding is aided through effectively engaging partners in schools and colleges who know and understand the students. This exchange also provides an opportunity to challenge and develop teachers' expectations and aspirations for their students and higher education. The delivery of CPD to staff in schools and colleges by trained widening practitioners should also play a pivotal role in any outreach offer as it helps build capacity, understanding, and trust amongst all stakeholders and will embed higher education knowledge within organisations beyond activities with just students.

The encouragement of collaboration that breaks down barriers needs to be a priority for all future work (Dodd et al., 2021). Partnership building should develop understanding of challenges and opportunities and enable collective decision-making which is essential for impact. Partnerships also need to enable individuals to be active members, and this can be done through a clear remit and clearly defined roles and expectations. As this article has

identified, the online environment provides a useful resource for building and developing networks that aid communication and understanding among different partners. While not all widening participation programmes will have the levels of funding that HeppSY did, they can still aim to build capacity in all its stakeholders. This could be through CPD delivered online and the development of reusable subject specific content that can be embedded into the curriculum.

The role of widening participation activity will become even more essential as the educational inequalities caused by the pandemic become manifest in the years to come. It is crucial therefore that schools, colleges and universities work together to address the challenges and barriers students face and raise the expectations for all young people that everyone can reach their potential and live fulfilling lives.

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