

The National Collaborative Outreach Programme

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

Executive summary

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Report to the OfS by:



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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/>