

The National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) Phase 2: An overview of literature, theoretical frameworks and evaluation design

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Report

The main aim of NCOP is to raise student aspiration and ultimately increase the number of students progressing into higher education. This short research notice outlines the work being carried out by LHERI to evaluate the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) in Lincolnshire. NCOP is set within the Widening Participation (WP) agenda which, for the past 20 years or so, has encouraged young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter higher education (HE). Whilst WP has been successful on one level, with more first-generation young people from disadvantaged backgrounds now accessing HE than ever before (Wyness 2017), significant gaps between traditional and non-traditional students remain (Social Mobility Commission, 2019).

Funded by the Office for Students (OfS) the evaluation component of NCOP is led nationally by CFE Research, an independent not-for-profit social research company. The initiative is currently in its second phase (August 2019 to July 2021). Nationally, 997 wards in England have been identified where the HE participation of young people is low or lower than might be expected based on GCSE results. This represents young people who could, but do not, currently progress to HE. The national initiative consists of 29 local partnerships made up of a mixture of universities and colleges, depending on the local context. The aim of each partnership is to deliver targeted HE outreach activities to young people in secondary schools (and colleges) between the ages of 13 and 17 in Years 9 to 13. Outreach activities vary from motivational speakers taking assemblies to one-day visits by students to HE institutions.

In Lincolnshire, NCOP is delivered by LiNCHigher based at Bishop Grosseteste University (BGU) with the evaluation being carried out by a small team from the Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute (LHERI) at the University of Lincoln. LiNCHigher has nine strategic partners from across the county which include

representatives from local colleges, both universities and the County Council. In Lincolnshire, NCOP covers six areas: Boston; Gainsborough; Grantham; Lincoln City; South Holland; and the Coastal region. Each area has an Area Engagement Officer (AEO) and between them they are responsible for delivering NCOP at over 40 locations. In addition, there is a communities worker who is responsible for engaging with specific groups that do not traditionally access HE or that might be considered 'hard to reach' (e.g. the traveller community, care leavers and young people from service families). LiNCHigher also work with parents. The amount of funding each school receives is dependent upon their NCOP numbers and students are identified as NCOP through their postcodes. Schools are rated as either red, amber or green. Red schools have few NCOP numbers and therefore limited funding, and as such receive a 'light touch' in terms of outreach activities. Green schools have a high proportion of NCOP students (some as high as 60%) and therefore receive more funding and more interventions.

Three areas are directly relevant to the subject under investigation: transition into university, making informed choices at post-18 and the impact of outreach activities. Whilst a full review of the literature is available, this section provides summary. Much of the literature concerning the student transition to university focuses on the experiences of first year undergraduates. There is very little from the student perspective whilst still at school or college. The recent article by Money et al. (2019) focuses on whether or not a young person's educational experience in school and college adequately prepares them for university. However, this small-scale study takes the teachers' perspective rather than that of the students. Money et al. find a conflict of interest between teachers and their wish to adequately prepare students for university and become independent learners against ensuring that their students successful pass the A-Level exams they need to in order to be accepted at university. A key message from their study to universities is that they should not expect their undergraduates to arrive as independent, confident learners pointing out that:

If university staff recognise that students are unlikely to have become independent learners by the time they leave school, they can address this issue when they set the first-year curriculum and explain to new students 'how' to develop independence in their learning. (Money et al. 2019: 11)

The work of Wyness (2017), on behalf of the Sutton Trust, looks at the university admissions processes and how the current system favours some students over others. This study finds a number of issues mainly a lack of information, advice and

guidance around the admissions process, such as submissions deadlines and personal statements. In the case of the latter, first generation students provide fewer examples of the type of work and life experiences that universities value, have less support in writing their statements and, as a result, their personal statements are often peppered with spelling and grammatical errors. Wyness finds there to be a lack of transparency and clarity inherent in the admission process. Neither first generation students, nor their families, know how to 'play the game' unlike their 'savvy' counterparts. Wyness concludes there needs to be a better, fairer and more transparent admissions process that does not disadvantage first generation applicants.

Another key area of literature is around information, advice and guidance (IAG) to students regarding their post-18 options to enable them to make informed choices. One of the key studies here is by Diamond et al. (2014). A CFE report, the study found that students do not always make rational choices and that choosing a higher education course and institution can be a very personal activity. They identify two types of students, 'maximisers', who seek more information, and 'satisficers' who are happy to make a decision when their criteria is satisfied. They conclude 'there is no single solution for the provision of the "right" information' (6). Other studies include Rose et al. (2019) whose work looks specifically at how students from low-attainment schools choose which university they apply to. They conclude that schools need to fill the information gap for students left by parents that do not have experience of HE. The literature in this area overall concludes that IAG needs to be timely, accurate, appropriate, succinct and of good quality if it is to be effective. The literature also finds that Information alone is not enough and that relationships, especially the student/teacher relationship, is a key factor. Other factors influencing student choice include a schools type, ethos, values and leadership. Finally, the role of the parents cannot be underestimated.

On the impact of outreach activities, much of the literature centres on Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects and has a more international perspective. However, there are two notable British studies: Hoare and Mann (2012) and Harrison and Waller (2018). Hoare and Mann (2012) considers the impact of their summer school programme. A national initiative that has been running since 1997 in four British universities, their evaluation of 2008 and 2009 attendees found strong empirical evidence that summer school attendance has the potential to narrow the gap in the university application process. Attendees were more likely to engage with the university application process and more likely to apply to leading universities. They conclude: 'summer schools make the biggest difference to the poorest students' (2). Harrison and Waller (2018) considered the complexities of

evaluating outreach activities and explores why it has become increasingly necessary to do so. They report on the increasing pressures placed on universities by the government (BIS, 2014) for evidence-based practice to prove the effectiveness, impact and value for money of outreach activities which cost the public purse some £175 million a year (OFFA, 2016). They suggest a 'small steps' approach set within a Theory of Change framework as the most effective way forward. They believe this approach helps educators and policymakers alike to understand the 'particular contribution made by discrete activities within a wider portfolio' (81). They identify the following five key challenges that they believe are inherent in evaluating outreach activities: selection and self-selection biases; priming and social desirability effects; Deadweight and leakage; complexity and bounded rationality; and realistic evaluation. They also suggest those evaluating outreach activities should employ the following five principals or 'small steps' to help address these challenges: an articulation of a clear Theory of Change; be critical about causality; be critical of measurability; use appropriate timescales; and focus on educational disadvantage.

Much of the literature reviewed as part of the NCOP programme naturally aligns itself with Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, social and cultural capital (1977 and 1986). Widely used in work concerning disadvantaged groups such as non-traditional students, it is recommended by NERUPI – the Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions - (Hayton and Howell 2016) as the overarching conceptual framework for this type of evaluation work. However, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is also applicable. A relatively new theory from the US rooted in psychology, SDT centres around competency, relatedness and autonomy (Ryan and Deci 2000). Each has an influence on an individual's self-motivation and self-regulation of behaviour. In practice, SDT is made up of five key elements: basic needs, organismic integration, goal content, cognitive evaluation and causality orientations (Reeve, 2012). Each element helps to predict, to a greater or lesser degree, an individual's intrinsic or extrinsic motivations and therefore, it argues, their success or failure in any given context. As such, SDT can offer a practical, testable framework for the effectiveness of higher education outreach activities set within the overarching concepts of Bourdieu's broader notions of habitus and social capitals.

Finally, a Theory of Change framework can be used to track a schools journey over the lifetime of the evaluation. According to Laing et al. (2015), Theory of Change was defined by Fulbright-Anderson et al., in 1998 as '[a] systematic and cumulative study of the links between activities, outcomes and context of the initiative'. There are four different Theory of Change models - deductive, inductive, mental and collaborative. The one most appropriate for the NCOP evaluation, and adopted by the evaluation

team, is the deductive model. The main components of a deductive model are the literature review that informs the gathering of quantitative data which is then followed up with qualitative measures such as interviews and focus groups. The NCOP evaluation process takes a mixed-methods deductive approach. Centred around six school case studies (one per area) plus one college, the evaluation will include an end of year student survey which will focus on outreach activities and stakeholder interviews and student focus groups with NCOP and non-NCOP students, parents, school career leads, head teachers, and/or members of the school Senior Leadership Team (SLT), Student Ambassadors and the providers of outreach activity. The evaluation will also track a small group of NCOP students per school, where possible, using 'Explaining the Gaps' data drawn from the national student NCOP survey. In addition, during school visits the evaluators will observe at least three outreach activities per case study school per year. Discreet activities with 'community' groups such as parents, service children and travellers will also form part of the evaluation along with any training offered to teachers in the case study schools.

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