



Voices:

What next for the National Collaborative Outreach Programme?

Suggestions from NCOP Leads

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1. Background to National Collaborative Outreach Programme

The introduction of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) in 2017 was a surprise, albeit a very welcome one, to most of those working in the widening access field in England. Coming on the heels of the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) initiative it has presented an opportunity for deeper collaboration between universities, Higher Education (HE) providers, schools and colleges.

NCOP aims to increase participation in Higher Education for those least likely to progress, based on place. The recently released reports on the programme's impact show that NCOP is also enabling an intensive focus on young people, schools and communities whom outreach work may have not reached to a significant degree before, with clear signs that participation from this cohort is rising. However, as with the nationally-funded collaborative access to HE programmes that preceded it, the funding for the NCOP is fixed term with the funding for the targeted aspect of the programme only assured until July 2020 (although it is budgeted until mid-2021).

This briefing looks at the views of the leaders of 18 of the 29 regional NCOP consortia regarding the future of the programme. It looks at which elements of the programme are working, what the case for future funding is and how we avoid some of the past problems widening access work has encountered when successful collaborative programmes are ended prematurely.

2. What is the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP)?

NCOP was designed to meet government targets to support an increase in progression to higher education, among young people in target wards. Target wards, for the purposes of this context, are areas in which higher education participation is low and lower than would be expected on the basis of GCSE attainment.

There are 29 NCOP consortia across the country which have been set up to work with schools and colleges in their respective areas to deliver outreach activities to young people in years 9-13.

The first phase of the programme was between January 2017 and July 2019, and it saw the delivery of outreach work in local areas. The second, current, phase of the programme commenced in August 2019 and is due to come to an end in July 2021. This phase will see the continuation of outreach work in local areas. It will also see the formation of outreach hubs comprising of a wider range of outreach providers for schools and colleges to draw upon. The Office for Students (OfS) have signalled that they would like to finance the outreach hubs until 2025.

The NCOP programme aims to:

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

2.1 NCOP so far

In its second year, from August 2018 to July 2019, the NCOP partnerships engaged with over 180,000 targeted young people from NCOP wards. This is an increase in nearly 60,000 since the first year of the programme. NCOP also worked with over 160,000 schools and colleges in its second year. In terms of its impact there are key trends emerging in particular:

- The importance of sustained and progressive outreach with multiple activities which had a more positive impact on learners' higher education knowledge and attitudes than single or ad-hoc outreach activity.
- Partnerships are moving away from offering fixed menus of activity and increasingly providing programmes that are tailored to the age and circumstances of learners, school/college type and the local context. These activities are of high quality and innovative, and NCOPs are also making notable progress working with parents and key supporters at home.

The programme is also highly collaborative with virtually all consortia working with local authorities, local economic partnerships (LEPs), and the Careers Enterprise Company (CEC). Evaluation of the NCOP to date has shown that it has also:

- Raised teachers' awareness of the routes to and opportunities in higher education
- Minimised outreach engagement burden for schools and colleges
- Facilitated access to high-quality and impartial information, advice and guidance for young people
- Facilitated innovative new outreach approaches
- Improved knowledge sharing and professional development
- Largely met local and national engagement targets
- Built relationships with schools and colleges to gain commitment
- Addressed outreach cold spots.

3. The Partnership View

All NCOP consortia were invited to respond to the following question:

"The Office for Students has signalled its intention to financially support the Outreach Hubs to 2025. What recommendations would you, as NCOP Leads, make to OfS decision makers for a national programme to run alongside the Outreach Hubs to ensure that some element of nationally-funded collaborative widening access work continues once NCOP ends in 2021, drawing on your expertise and your own local context?"

Of the 29 consortia, 18 responded and their answers follow. A summary of the consortia who responded can be found in Appendix 1.

3.1 The North West

Shaping Futures

As an NCOP, Shaping Futures are just starting to see the true impact of collaborative outreach. In many ways, we are still honing our approach by building on what works – a process that takes time. Understanding 'what works' leads to tailoring support with schools and learners – a bespoke methodology which reduces duplication, adds value and allows for sustained and progressive delivery. To achieve this, we need a continued period to establish a rapport, to be valued by service users and to be seen as credible and reliable by all key stakeholders.

A lot of incredible work has taken place to achieve the above, but the targeted work we are currently doing may not be fully evaluated beyond 2021. Current Y9's and Y10's are now benefitting from the hard work, trial and error of Phase 1 – knowing what works, knowing what sustained looks like, knowing how to evaluate, knowing how to make use of the progression framework, knowing how to ensure collaboration is embedded, knowing the regional landscape and knowing how to signpost effectively.

Learners are reaping the benefits of our learning from Phase 1 and will continue to do so for the next two academic years. If provided with more time, the current Y9/Y10 cohort are the ones who should really see the benefits of NCOP as the approach required is now established, but more time is needed to ensure learners benefit and NCOP can be evaluated appropriately.

The onset of the Outreach Hub is a welcome addition for NCOP as it allows for non-targeted learners to benefit from impartial, collaborative outreach. However, there is a tangible danger that the work carried out by partnerships with NCOP priority schools and targeted learners may begin to unravel. The feedback we receive from school and college staff is extremely positive – we are happy to position ourselves as the 'go-to' experts on all things Higher Education and teachers/advisers now utilise us in this way. The support we provide is much broader than just outreach delivery – we now provide schools and colleges with access to a wider regional support network, with reliable materials and resources, with much needed CPD, with signposting to other local and national initiatives and with a means to ensure Gatsby benchmark 7 is met. The foundations laid here will be positively carried forward into the Outreach Hub, but we need to ensure schools and colleges that have benefitted most are not lost as the Outreach Hub is phased in and targeted outreach phased out.

Cumbria Collaborative Outreach Programme

The National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) has provided us with the opportunity to understand our county and the young people we serve. Working closely with our partners, schools, colleges and young people, within each area, has allowed us to understand the unique barriers and build a programme that will have the most impact. Gaining feedback and listening to a range of stakeholders, within each area, has also allowed us to build strong relationships and trust for the benefit of supporting young people locally.

The outreach hubs will provide a platform for signposting to existing outreach activity and bring this together in one place for teachers and advisors. It is unlikely, however, that the partners will be able to continue to fund / deliver all interventions that have been carried out by NCOP. For example, engaging with learners outside of their educational setting or mentoring. This type of in-depth work is difficult to carry out at an institutional level due to time, resources and conflicting institutional priorities.

NCOP has allowed us time to meet young people, in a variety of settings, through a sustained, progressive and impartial programme of activity. The interventions are also tailored specifically to young people in each county or target ward, meaning that we are more likely to make an impact or long term change. This is supported by continually seeking feedback and learning 'what works'. A concern following NCOP is that the important work that has been carried out during the project may be lost.

3.2 Yorkshire and the Humber

NCOP York and North Yorkshire

NCOP has provided a wealth of opportunities to support young people to make informed decisions about their future. The fact that it has operated alongside the arrival of the Careers Strategy (DfE, December 2017) and the renewed impetus for schools to provide a 'stable careers programme' for their students, through the use of Gatsby Benchmarks, has been very helpful in encouraging engagement. The creation of the Outreach Hubs and the Careers Hubs are allowing local partnerships to further develop, so a national programme that combined the two agendas in some way could be very productive.

NCOP has seen the creation of a programme which is informed by local context and knowledge. This has been appreciated by schools, colleges, community groups, local authorities and other stakeholders.

Providing some level of targeted funding for NCOP learners until 2025 would mean that the Y9s who begin in the final 2020/21 year would reach the end of Y13 by 2025 and a greater body of evidence in respect of 'what works?' and in what context would have been produced.

Any national programme should seek to provide funding that directly targets primary school students and those in Y7 and Y8. Earlier intervention is regularly requested by those who work with students on a daily basis. Improved HE knowledge and opportunity at a younger age would then create a greater pipeline of students with more confidence to take the next educational step.

Go Higher West Yorkshire

When GHWY asked schools what they needed to engage with HE outreach activities the answer was "time". Our solution was to create the role of "Higher Education Progression Officer" (HEPOs), a person with strong links to the consortium of HE providers but based in a school or college, whose focus is on supporting learners to progress into Higher Education. Having a person with protected time, dedicated to supporting young people to make decisions about their journey into HE is proving instrumental in supporting learners to make that positive step.

Our HEPOs are embedded within the school/college community; they understand the local context and build strong relationships with staff and learners. They develop a tailored programme of activity tapping into school/college level data and knowledge to match learners to the activity that will best suit their needs and interests, as well as ensuring we do not duplicate what already exists.

Our model works because HEPOs are part of an HE provider community; they have formal line management from an NCOP-funded staff member, regular HE team meetings and a strong programme of HE-related CPD, enhanced by a network of Outreach Officer colleagues based in HE Providers who provide expertise, facilitate activities (on and off campus) and ensure contributions from academics/students to give learners a hands-on taste of HE.

These posts being externally funded through an HE consortium means the time and focus of these officers is protected from the demands of teacher shortages or recruitment cycles, and that the range of HE is represented. Pooling knowledge, creativity and skills across institutions provides the opportunity and catalyst for collaboration – be that local schools joining forces to organise a residential trip to Cambridge, or HEPOs and Outreach Officers working together to create innovative practice such as Access All Areas.¹

We have made terrific progress in the last few years, working in partnership with our schools and colleges to improve the way that young people are supported to experience a taste of HE, explore their options and take the next step. For this momentum to be maintained, and for us to see long-term improvements in the gap between the most and least represented groups in Higher Education, any national level programme should include sufficient resource to support HE-focused staff roles in schools/colleges with protected time, who are able to facilitate hands-on experience, build relationships and support young people in the way most appropriate to them.

¹ <https://www.gohigherwestyorks.ac.uk/access-all-areas-2019/>

Humber Outreach Programme

That a core offer of targeted activities, clearly evaluated over phase two, be in place and delivered by a central outreach team, this would support the universal resources and signposting service operated by the Hub.

This core offer would be in addition to universal hub activities delivered by our HEI partners and wider stakeholders and would offer a bespoke set of interventions that would be tailored to meet the individual needs of our schools, areas and in particular with a focus on those students from our most hard to reach and disadvantaged communities and sectors e.g., Travellers, Educated other, LAC, BAME, Refugees.

This additional targeted tier of support would ensure that young people and their families were able to access interventions focussed on need, free of bias or persuasion and in formats and locations that would make a difference. This model would allow young people and their families to be the key stakeholders and co-design and create the activities. This model would support a cluster approach, tailoring and identifying needs, evaluating impact on a local level and creating that cycle for continuous but rapid response to developing the most appropriate interventions that will make a difference.

It would be linked to the Hub, but allow for schools and communities to work together, being able to not only address an institutional set of needs but look outwardly to create regional responses to what works, where, why and how.

3.3 East and West-Midlands

Aspire to HE

Augar – be it by implication or directly – has meant Higher Education has stayed in the thoughts of policy makers with continued questions being asked over the value of Higher Education and/or the wider civic and policy role of universities in supporting opportunity and social mobility.

Even before the release of Augar, HE institutions will have been aware of the policy climate in the sphere of access, outreach and widening participation in particular; the report: 'Value for Money in Higher education' (October 2018) produced by the House of Commons Education Committee stated: 'Higher education institutions spend a vast amount of public money on access and participation. The results of this expenditure are not always clear to see. There must be transparency on what they are investing in, a greater focus on outcomes for students and a rigorous evaluation process', and before this the Sutton Trust's 2015 report, *Evaluating Access*, concluded that there were 'no UK-based studies evaluating access strategies and approaches using robust designs to establish effectiveness'.

What Phase 1 and 2 of NCOP has done is set a clear goal for NCOP partnerships to try and achieve a significant and positive change with a highly focused demographic of young people. I would recommend maintaining a similar clear and targeted focus beyond phase 2; this maintains a level of focus and challenge for institutions and consortia to prove that their approaches work in increasing levels of progression to HE over a long period of time. Indeed, while I note the challenge of annual budget setting and 5 year political cycles, a long term commitment to a programme that matches the 5 year commitments through the APP process would be welcome. Expanding the age range to permit consortia to work in particular with older potential returners to education in phase 2 has been welcomed, but I would like the OfS to consider including this group as part of consortia's core demographic in its reporting. I note the risk in doing this, as partnerships could utilise resource to support a demographic without a fixed time frame of when HE progression will take place, but I think this could be mitigated with careful thought.

Think Higher

The collaborative funding available through NCOP allows targets to be set which address priorities which might not be picked up through institutional targets.

NCOP has built a huge amount of institutional learning, and allowed a particular focus on groups and schools which may be missed by institutional targets through an APP. For example, an APP target may require a number of learners who meet certain WP criteria to complete a programme, but may not require coverage of specific group (e.g. a geographic area). In the ThinkHigher region, the NCOP wards tend to be in schools which are harder to get to and less likely to respond pro-actively to offers from institutions. NCOP is effectively targeted from a slightly different perspective which drives the inclusion of different groups of learners. This is something which should, in my opinion, be preserved.

Higher Horizons+

We believe that three main drivers have made Higher Horizons+ so successful:

External funding for targeted outreach. Young people and teaching staff appreciate a programme that is clearly impartial and there to support the pathways and progression of their young people. External funding gives us the flexibility to map and respond to school needs and not university priorities. Continuing to fund an outreach programme will guarantee the needs of the learners come first and resources are directed where they are most needed.

Funded staff delivering our impartial programme across our region with no pressures to support changeable institutional priorities. We have seen many institutions shift focus from pre-entry access to post-entry support and outcomes work in the new APPs. This work is valuable, but it may mean institutions with limited resources move away from access, and we see some of the progress made around increased entry rates for learners from low participation neighbourhoods disappear. Continuing to fund a programme with impartial staff will guarantee the future of pre-entry widening access work.

The value of collaboration. External funding has created a platform for collaborative work to take place amongst HEIs. Without this funding, we have serious doubts that this platform would have been created, nor do we believe that it will be maintained. It has not only forced HEIs to work together, but it has also generated genuine collaborative work, understanding of the benefits of impartial support programmes for pre-entry learners, and why widening access work is most efficiently delivered collaboratively. Continuing to fund a collaborative programme will maintain this ethos, ultimately benefitting the young people we work with and also the HEIs themselves.

Having worked on Aimhigher, the NNCO and now NCOP, my recommendation would be to continue to fund a programme that is targeted on place and areas with the lowest participation rates. Outreach Hubs could consolidate APP work, assist with projects for underrepresented groups, and expand collaborative work to primary schools. A targeted programme should focus on Y7 to Y11, as we see Y12 and Y13 saturated with recruitment activity.

NCOP has seen huge investment from the OfS. Having posted underspends at every monitoring return, and in response to the OfS driver to achieve value for money, we believe that investment in staff is key to continuing towards our goals. Annual delivery budgets could be smaller to enable funding to continue over a longer period of time.

We firmly believe that an embedded, long-term, sustained approach to pre-entry widening access will lead to results. Since the start of the NNCO project, our lead institution has more than doubled the number of entrants from POLAR4 Q1 postcode areas – increasing the proportion of students enrolling from this cohort by nearly 7 percentage points. We are eager to add to the 30,000 young people we have engaged with throughout Phase 1, and continue to build on the 40% coverage of NCOP learners we have already achieved since the launch of Higher Horizons+.

Pathways

We would recommend that any future collaborative work focuses on broader criteria / definitions of “deprivation” or under-representation. NCOP’s focus on postcode has been very restrictive and has made it hard for schools with low numbers of eligible learners to engage with the programme. We would also recommend that OfS recognise their role in HEI collaborative work and look at how they can work with the Department for Education to facilitate this work into becoming part of a school’s mandatory work (in the same way Gatsby benchmarks are). Finally any collaborative work needs to blend with existing HEI/FEC outreach to avoid intervention fatigue in target schools. Delivering collaborative targets on top of APP targets as it stands means we are creating competition for ourselves and risk losing engagement with schools.

3.4 London, South East and South West England

NCOP London

As the networks responsible for coordinating collaborative widening access work in London through three successive programmes – Aimhigher, NNCO, and now NCOP – we have seen first-hand the value of system leadership when it comes to delivering improved outcomes in this space. We believe that a combination of funding at national level and delivery of collaborative activity via local networks with the requisite expertise and understanding of their specific area is an effective arrangement, and we sketch out below how such an arrangement might look from 2021 onwards.

A future collaborative outreach programme should have a funding window of longer than two years, with local funding allocations that are guaranteed for a period of ideally four years (to align with the current Access and Participation Plan timeframe, running from 2021 to 2025).

This will allow for the ongoing engagement with existing schools in the service of embedding lasting partnerships and wider networks with schools to be established to support the stability of school-based hub activity.

Its central objective should be to help learners navigate post-secondary pathways in an impartial way. In particular it should help them to appreciate and understand the myriad types of HE setting and HE provider (a choice and variety that is itself a feature of the London HE landscape).

It should directly fund innovative models of collaborative widening access work, encompassing not just face-to-face activity but also blended learning programmes and online resources. At present, funding for this kind of innovative outreach activity is available only as NCOP match funding, leaving consortia to rely on third party (usually private sector) involvement to develop provision rather than shape it themselves.

Without the continued interest of schools generated in phase 1, we will lessen the 'draw' and investment in hubs activity.

A final recommendation relates to the challenges and opportunities associated with the use of targeting metrics in any future funded programme. A narrow focus on single metrics such as POLAR inevitably limits the effect that collaborative outreach can have. Indeed as the example of London shows, some of the most stubborn gaps in rates of progression to HE are along the lines of ethnicity and socio-economic status rather than geography. Attaching more nuanced targeting conditions to future outreach funding would allow it to be directed more effectively towards local need and present further opportunities to review and develop further targeting strategies initiated through NCOP outreach in the service of developing local evaluation and research opportunities for activities that can be taken forward through NCOP hubs.

Southern Universities Network

From our observations of Phase 1 of the NCOP programme we have seen that "traditional" outreach does not engage NCOP students.

The students who are targeted by the majority of our university partners' outreach programmes are engaging students who are already planning to progress post-18 or students who are open to the idea of going and therefore actively engage in the programmes offered. In these instances the student might need further information on what/where to study or some support in applying but essentially are on the path to progression already.

However, from our experience, the students we have engaged within NCOP are not in that position. They need additional support to even consider progressing to Level 4, and in many instances struggling with the transitioning from level 2 to 3 study.

This support may be either pastoral support or academic support but it is bespoke to the student, based on the knowledge of the school/ college/ local authority working with them. This personal relationship also supports them to take up outreach opportunities that are offered to them, with the hope that they eventually feel confident and able to take part in outreach programmes offered by the universities or other organisations.

Though the hub will fill a gap with SEND schools and PRUs (working with our local authorities), its primary function is to direct schools and students to current outreach provision through an impartial portal. This does not address the issue that for this group of students, just offering outreach is not enough. This is especially true for those students in Year 1 and 2 of college where, without the additional support and targeting, they would not have the confidence or see the relevance of these types of opportunities to help them make a decision about their future path.

The other aspect is that by identifying students by postcode, which may be seen as a blunt tool, has helped to identify a group of students who were 'falling through the gap'. They weren't necessarily the pupil premium student nor in the gifted and talented group but often the student who isn't raising alarm bells, is attending school/college, getting "ok" grades. However, these are also the students who have the potential to just not return after Christmas or, because people have assumed they know what choices are available to them, just drift into employment without training.

Kent & Medway Collaborative Outreach Programme

The following submission is based on the experience of the NCOP programme in Kent & Medway and the learning from the Kent & Medway Progression Federation which has been in existence since 2011 and was established to ensure that the work of Aimhigher continued following a similar break in national funding.

Kent & Medway still operates a selective system where approximately 25% of students attend a selective grammar school, around 20% above the national average and this provides a significant challenge for those young people who are unable to prosper within the system.

However, every Outreach Hub area has a unique context of its own that presents individualised challenges such as poor transport infrastructure, isolated coastal or rural communities or industrial change causing long term unemployment. Each Outreach Hub should be given the freedom to formulate strategies that will meet their own regional challenges.

We believe that any post NCOP funding to support Outreach Hubs should be employed to maintain a programme that:

- Allows Outreach Hubs to design and implement outreach and other interventions that meet the particular needs of their communities as established through NCOP and prior work, where the interests of students are the first consideration.
- Requires Outreach Hubs to maintain the valuable cross-sector and inter sector collaboration that has underpinned work to date and, acting as an “honest broker”, to maintain impartiality of delivery in terms of sector and institution.
- Reconsiders the current targeting methodology if other data sets are shown to be more informative with regard to location and need and gives Outreach Hubs the discretion to target support where it is most needed.
- Offers Outreach Hubs the opportunity to work with younger learners, including primary schools.
- Supports best practice sharing between Hubs; in particular with regard to evaluation and research.
- Supports CPD and train the trainer activities to ensure that activities and resources have a legacy beyond the proposed funding cycle.

Higher Education Outreach Network

The introduction of the NCOP in 2017 enabled the partnership to collaboratively address the identified issue of lower than expected participation in HE in parts of the counties. This approach has worked well for our consortium, with many programmes and activities being designed and delivered collaboratively. The value of this has been recognised locally, with HEON's core membership increasing from the 8 original partners to the current total of 11.

We have also seen an increase in partners working collaboratively outside of the scope of NCOP, for example for one partner provider summer school, rather than using internal departments for certain aspects of the delivery, has engaged HEON partner institutions to provide not only their own expertise, but to further demonstrate the range of options available in HE. HEON has been vital in terms of facilitating and promoting this kind of relationship for the benefit of the young people in Surrey & North-East Hampshire.

Similarly, the Outreach Hubs are intended to promote this style of working in the area, and while the hubs will be established and running by July 2021, having some aspect of the NCOP funding continued will be pivotal in terms of enabling and ensuring that the collaborative nature of the hubs is able to thrive and continue as institutions deal with their own internal priorities and pressures.

HEON has worked hard to build strong relationships with key schools in the area, who have increasingly come to rely on HEON's contributions to their annual school programmes. While these schools will of course continue to have access to local outreach via the Outreach Hub, maintaining that dedicated support via the NCOP will be vital in terms of supporting the schools and their students' understanding of and access to local outreach programmes.

Make Happen

The continuation of NCOP, or establishment of a new programme needs to be long-term and sustainable and consider the following elements:

- Continuous changes in programmes (e.g. NNCO, NCOP) makes evidencing projects within the timescale difficult and is harder to maintain relationships and leads to high staff turnover.
- Long-term projects are more effective and efficient. Schools value consistency and are far less likely to “buy into” short term projects.
- Any programme should continue to be data driven and evidence focussed to continue to build a profile of what works within outreach.
- Long term programmes will allow better alignment with Access and Participation Plans so that as much collaboration as possible can happen and institutions don't “compete” for the same students.
- It should continue to be targeted, if possible using a suitable individual level metric as opposed to regional indicators.
- It should, where possible, continue relations and branding from existing partnerships to maintain relationships and consistency.
- New programmes need to allow for an inception phase. This allows planning and consideration without the pressures of delivery against targets. Short planning phases can lead to money being spent on activity which is not fit for purpose, which may then be outsourced to provide spend.
- Links into the hub need to be considered to avoid confusion for schools.
- Levels of funding need to be considered. The funding for NCOP could have delivered a longer programme for the same amount.
- Current NCOP partners should be involved in the scoping and consultation of a new programme (or the extension of NCOP). This should feed into the targeting, levels of funding and desired outcomes expected for the programme.

Next Steps South West

Higher Education (HE) Widening Access resides most convincingly with HE providers. Following the rejuvenation of WP through APP and the formation of the OfS, pressure can now be exerted by the OfS to capture and adopt the pioneering work of the NCOP partnerships. To avoid further short-term interest or the need for additional funding streams, partners' APP plans must support the final phase of NCOP and contribute to the Outreach Hubs.

The OfS can consider:

Closer scrutiny and support to ensure that adequate institutional WP Outreach exists.

For many institutions, NCOP partnerships are neatly taking care of collaborative outreach targets, and implicit impartiality. This does not exonerate HE providers from their obligations to provide high-quality institutional WP Outreach, with the potential student as the focus of their work, not the potential recruitment of that student to their institution. The success of the Outreach Hubs will depend, in part, on their ability to signpost to a coherent, broad-ranging institutional WP Outreach offer. HE providers should be supported to build this now, in preparation for meaningful continued collaborative working post July 2021.

Better recognition of targets other than recruitment figures.

It is vital that student recruitment is not viewed as the sole indicator of success. This precludes genuine WP work, beginning as young as possible, and building individuals' potential to make the final step into HE. By valuing evidence distance travelled through the formative stages of this journey more highly, the OfS can help institutions prioritise pre-recruitment WP work.

Issuing a national evaluation framework.

A standard framework would identify and place value on evidence of addressing WP barriers, providing clarity for institutions and resulting in large, nationally-aligned, coherent data-sets.

Making collaboration compulsory rather than desirable.

Compulsory collaborative targets in APPs would enforce a broader recruitment perspective, supported by more intensive, obligatory use of a national tracking database. An obvious way would be to require institutions to ring-fence funding, but a more on-message approach would be to state clear expectations that partners will be required to provide outcomes-based evidence that they are successfully engaging in this way.

This is a key moment for the OfS to use its regulatory powers to ensure that this enhanced knowledge of WP Outreach and newly acquired expertise in collaborative working is maintained, despite losing the NCOP funding.

Sussex Learning Network

The value and success of NCOP can be seen in a number of different areas:

Impartiality and broad reach

The holistic and impartial nature of NCOP provides schools and colleges with access to a broad range of activities, interventions and providers to offer all their students but particularly those students who need it the most. Crucially, it also offers similar interventions for families and wider communities.

Further Education College Coordinators and Higher Education Champions

Continuing to place NCOP staff in schools and colleges who are experts in progression and widening access gives these institutions the opportunity to fully engage with the broad range of offers and to ensure a bespoke programme of activity for each student and also to fully engage with the students' wider community and lived experiences.

Higher Education and Further Education collaboration

NCOP has the potential to enable colleges and universities to continue to offer innovative and creative approaches to widening access to supplement the standard 'black box' widening participation offer.

Wider collaboration

- NCOP has the potential to enable local authorities, schools, colleges and community organisations to work together on creating opportunities to support outreach around key issues such as wellbeing, attainment and attendance.
- Collaborating and strengthening other outreach programmes – CEC, NCS and the Opportunity Areas. Helping to identify target students, and then helping universities and colleges to support them. Helping schools hit Gatsby Benchmark 7.
- NCOP addresses key issues on a local area - such as in working class communities, issues around attendance, mental health, and for certain cohorts of vulnerable learners. Using national and local data for working groups to share good practice, develop regional work and develop policy out of this work to be shared locally and nationally.
- NCOP can commission impartial activities such as mentoring programmes that work with all partners about educational progression but not about recruitment to specific institutions.
- Building on the important work that NCOP partnerships have already developed, there is a need to continue to work impartially. University outreach is becoming increasingly tied to recruitment and there is a need for independent, impartial work to be funded separately.

3.5 East of England

Aspire Higher

There is a risk that once the targeted outreach phase of NCOP ends, universities could return to working in silos. Furthermore, universities will be driven by Access and Participation Plan targets which could lead to a lesser focus on access in some areas.

The Office for Students' focus on student success is to be welcomed but raises the risk of attention being diverted from access work. The investment that goes into nurturing relationships with schools and colleges means that it is vital that these links are sustained and resources are allocated to build on the successes of NCOP.

We propose that the Government make a longitudinal commitment to regionally based targeted outreach, building upon NCOP, alongside the Outreach Hubs. This would ensure outreach work is no longer project focused, but has long term commitment despite changes in Government.

A welcome aspect of NCOP has been the commitment of all partners to engage with tracking. This enables a more robust evidence base going forward, therefore this aspect should be continued in the new proposals. Any new approach must be evidence led, building on the existing knowledge base and from the NCOP research and evaluation to uncover the most effective initiatives.

The importance of collaboration cannot be overestimated. A regional approach to longitudinal outreach work would ensure collaborations as well as differential funding models to meet local needs. This approach would foster sustained engagement with parents, families and local community groups. Alongside this, extending targeting would enable support for the student lifecycle throughout all stages. Early intervention would engage much younger learners and support them with decision making whilst mature learners who have not benefitted from higher education would also access support. This would align with lifelong learning approaches and promote wider access to HE.

NEACO

Disparities in access to higher education between different parts of the country are often long-standing and entrenched. There is no quick fix to close these gaps; instead we need to focus our efforts on sustained engagement with young people and their families, teachers and communities, over many years. Across East Anglia, the Take Your Place programme has placed 37 experienced and knowledgeable staff in schools and colleges, working to support their students' progression. Being based in the schools and colleges each day has enabled them to build the trust and engagement of teachers and careers advisors.

Through this approach, our staff get to know young people on an individual basis through a progressive series of activities, tailored to support them through key decision points in their educational journey.

While our staff are employed by a local university or FE College, being based in the communities they serve means that they get to understand the context and barriers to progression at a local level.

This individualised approach enables the activity they deliver to be responsive to the needs of the students and their schools.

Collaboration across this network of individuals employed by different institutions ensures that students receive impartial information about the full range of educational pathways available to them. Being seen as impartial has allowed our staff to facilitate sharing of good practice between schools, colleges and universities that might otherwise work in competition.

The time and expertise of our staff is highly valued by the schools and colleges we work with. External funding is necessary to support this collaborative model, and to make a lasting difference in the areas where additional support is most needed.

4

How NCOP consortia see the future

There are a number of key points emerging from these think pieces from the leaders of NCOP across the country:

- **Collaboration is crucial but fragile**

NCOP has re-constructed a genuine national collaborative infrastructure for outreach work in England. Strong relationships between schools, higher education, and further education are being formed but without continued funding there was a definite view that these relationships would not sustain. The experience of the early 2010s is instructive here. After funding for national collaborative outreach ended, few coherent well-funded partnerships were able to survive.

It is also crucial that such collaboration is underpinned by a level of real activity. There is a concern expressed in this report that outreach hubs, if they mean a significant scaling down of activity, will lead to gains made by NCOP unravelling.

- **Commitment to collaboration has to be long term**

A recurring theme of the responses was the need for a stable long-term commitment to a funded collaborative infrastructure. This commitment needs to be until 2025 to at least match the APP cycle. The longer-term planning that the new APP cycle encourages has been welcomed, but those delivering APPs would also benefit from stability in support for collaborative work as well.

- **Starting earlier is key**

A strong theme running through the responses was the need to engage with learners earlier, as soon as primary level if possible. This point is supported by the wealth of evidence that shows young people form perceptions of higher education and employment before they are 10 years old. The Office for Students has the ability to revise how it funds an infrastructure like NCOP, which now means that there should be no structural impediment to such an evidence-led approach.

- **Institutional outreach will not 'replace' NCOP targeted activity**

The experience of working directly day-to-day with partners and in particular schools, led many of the respondents to highlight the difference between the work that the NCOP funding had enabled and that which falls under the banner of institutional outreach. They understood that the Access and Participation Plan (APP) approach overtly encourages providers to focus on their own challenges and really understand them. This brings benefits in terms of strategic engagement in the provider but it also inevitably means a stronger attention on the provider's own agenda.

The seeming shift in focus from access to post-entry success and retention highlights this. NCOP is able to concentrate on the learner first and occupy an impartial role that is becoming harder for providers to maintain. If NCOP targeted funding is removed then large groups of learners will lose their support if they do not fit with the priorities of providers in that area, and the risk is that all learners will have what they can learn about HE restricted. This will include those who need greater, more extensive support to progress to HE.

- **Direct school involvement matters**

NCOP consortia have built a genuine HE oriented presence in schools/colleges, many of which have never had anything akin to this before (or at least not for a long time). The loss of staff based in schools and colleges supported by NCOP will impact hugely on learners in widening access cohorts.

In the context of the other challenges that schools/colleges face the vast majority will not be replaced. Many are only now starting to build that knowledge and trust with staff and young people. Even if funding is to be scaled down there could be a case for transitional support in those areas most badly affected by such a scaling.

A planned transition that enables such a presence to be maintained is essential but consortia would need assistance from the Office for Students and ideally the Department of Education to make this happen.

The ability to really engage with schools and their strategic drivers in the area of careers and advice work, especially the Gatsby Benchmarks, was also pointed to repeatedly as a unique strength of NCOP.

- **Targeting is important, but targeting who?**

There was clear support for the targeting of outreach work. It is seen to focus consortia and their members on goals which, when supported by data and evaluation, can have tangible impact. However, there were voices which questioned the present area based approach and whether an individual-level approach would have greater merit. This is something that some of the Outreach Hubs would be well-positioned to explore.

It would possibly assist the Office for Students in understanding what range of approaches to defining disadvantage and educational disadvantage could be the most appropriate in widening access work.

- **Fund national – deliver local**

A stand out feature of how NCOP leaders see the programme is that it is rooted in the localities of the areas it serves. Each consortia, as can be seen from the responses, has developed its own identity and offer that meets the specific needs of its area. In this regard, NCOP may occupy a fairly unique position as one of the few locally based HE programmes in England at present. The kind of scaling back which has been discussed over the end of Phase 2 would effectively see the ending of systematic engagement of HE with local communities in England. The recent interest in civic universities is welcome but will not represent any kind of replacement for a coherent funded commitment made by the HE sector to engaging with the local areas for whom HE does not seem relevant. There are a range of testimonies in this report to the negative impact this will have for the sector, its partners and most importantly the young people in poorest communities.

5. NCOP Moving Forward

Since 2001 there have been 6 different nationally-funded collaborative outreach programmes. Over a less than twenty year period this represents a significant amount of turbulence and change.

Over the same period, the chances of a young person from the areas of lowest HE participation going to HE has increased significantly¹. While it is accepted that proving the causal links in this field is difficult and could have been done better, it would be very unlikely that collaboration has not had an impact.

It has also done so at what is a very modest investment. The funding for NCOP represents less than 0.01%² of the whole investment in HE and less than 4%³ of that on widening access and participation.

This briefing has highlighted some of the consequences of scaling back the support for a programme that is reaching nearly 200,000 young people per year. It has also shown how, by starting with younger (and possibly older) learners, piloting different targeting approaches, and possibly reviewing targeting, it could have an even bigger impact.

As we enter the third decade of sustained focus on addressing inequalities in access and participation in HE in England, it is imperative that we build on what we have learned from the first two. Regional collaborative networks enable HE providers and schools to focus their lens on this issue, and provide an offer for learners that neither of these agencies can do alone. In the context of an approach to access and participation that concentrates more intensely than ever on individual HE providers, funding to stimulate collaboration that allows the work of these providers to have the maximum impact, and provide an impartial infrastructure, is essential.

This publication was collated and edited by Dr Graeme Atherton (National Education Opportunities Network), Dr Hannah Merry and Ant Sutcliffe (Higher Horizons).

¹ Young people are 61% more likely to enter university in 2018 than 2008 - <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/ucas-2019-end-cycle-report-reveals-unprecedented-opportunity-anyone-considering-university>

² Author's own calculation from UUK Data

³ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/new-what-works-centre-to-help-universities-cut-equality-gaps/>

Appendix 1

Details of the respondents can be seen in Table 1 below.

	NCOP consortia	Leading HEI
1	Shaping Futures	University of Liverpool
2	Cumbria Collaborative Outreach Programme (CCOP)	University of Cumbria
3	NCOP York & North Yorkshire	York St John University
4	Go Higher West Yorkshire	University of Leeds
5	Humber Outreach Programme (HOP)	University of Hull
6	Aspire to HE	University of Wolverhampton
7	Think Higher	University of Warwick
8	Higher Horizons+	Keele University
9	Pathways	University of Leicester
10	London NCOP	Kingston University
11	Southern Universities Network	University of Southampton
12	Kent & Medway Collaborative Outreach Programme (KaMCOP)	The University of Kent
13	Higher Education Outreach Network (HEON)	University of Surrey
14	Make Happen	University of Essex
15	Next Steps South West (NSSW)	University of Plymouth
16	Sussex Learning Network	University of Brighton
17	Aspire Higher	University of Hertfordshire
18	Network for East Anglian Collaborative Outreach (NEACO)	University of Cambridge



Voices.