

## **Explaining the Gaps: A National Collaborative Outreach Project**

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### **Report**

The National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) was established in January 2017 and currently funded by the Office for Students (OfS) until July 2021. Its remit is to deliver targeted Higher Education outreach programmes to secondary school learners in Years 9 to 13 (and in colleges) with the work focusing on local areas where Higher Education participation is lower than might be expected based upon GCSE attainment levels. The programme is currently implemented by 29 local partnerships across England and in Lincolnshire the programme is delivered by LiNCHigher based at Bishop Grosseteste University.

The effectiveness of the programme is evaluated nationally by CFE Research, a social research company, and locally by each of the 29 partnerships. The evaluation of LiNCHigher's programme is carried out by a team based within the Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute (LHERI) at the University of Lincoln. A key part of the national evaluation is the annual NCOP learner survey. This is a longitudinal study designed to capture target learners' aspirations, knowledge of HE and intentions to progress to HE (CFE Research, 2019).

### **Explaining the Gaps**

'Explaining the Gaps' is an NCOP project managed within LHERI and its main objective is to provide targeted support to NCOP learners to encourage participation in HE. 'Gaps' are identified at a school and year group level based on survey responses which means that tailored interventions are feasible. With sufficient responses it is possible to stratify further and to identify otherwise 'hidden' sub-groups within larger cohorts, such as those with a self-reported disability. This targeted approach enables LiNCHigher to deliver remedial outreach activities within these schools (and colleges), whilst maximising resources (Moore et al., 2013).

A baseline learner survey was completed during Autumn 2017 by students in Years 9 to 13, attending LiNCHigher's target schools, which provided a snapshot shortly after the inception of NCOP. Defining characteristics about learners were also collected,

including gender, ethnicity, first-in-family status, self-reported disability or mental health condition. In Lincolnshire, the initial baseline survey questionnaire was administered in 'pencil and paper' form during the school day. A total of 2,398 responses were collected. A Wave 1 follow-up survey was carried out in autumn 2018 but this time learner attitudes were collected electronically. This approach generated 9,786 survey submissions which represents approximately 50% of all possible responses from within LiNCHigher's target schools. Wave 2 follow-up is ongoing, with over 10,900 learners having completed the survey. Wave 3 is scheduled for autumn 2020. Although the survey is focussed on NCOP learners, responses are collected from all school populations. Initially this was because many schools were reluctant to single out NCOP learners. However, collecting responses from a wider population facilitates the potential for comparison groupings.

Survey data is used to track learners evolving attitudes by matching individual responses year on year. The currently matched dataset comprises more than 900 students that participated in both the baseline and Wave 1 follow-up surveys. It is anticipated that this learner dataset may be linked to the specific outreach activities<sup>1</sup> undertaken in order to carry out counterfactual analysis. Within this combined dataset a Phase 2 initiative is to invite students for whom there are three consecutive years of survey data to participate in focus groups.

### **Data analysis**

Data reduction (principal components analysis) was used to distil the 28 survey questions into six categories: 'application knowledge', 'participation knowledge', 'confidence', 'study skills', 'personal benefits of HE' and 'aspirations for further study'. Scores for each participant were aggregated across each of the six categories. The mean scores for each category, by year group, were then ranked and ordered into quartiles. Scores within each school for each year group are then compared to the overall year quartiles. The data were then summarised by quartiles and presented to schools using a 'traffic light' scale (red/amber/green). Data were further disaggregated into four sub-groups: female students, male students, NCOP learners and students with a self-reported disability or mental health condition. The 2018 survey generated data from 32 individual schools.

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<sup>1</sup> This dataset is managed by East Midlands Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Partnership (EMWPREP).

## **LiNCHigher: Using the data for targeted outreach activities**

LiNCHigher's outreach activities are each categorised by one or more 'learning outcome(s)' which are based on the Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions (NERUPI) Framework (Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2016) and the Gatsby Benchmarks (Holman, 2014). These are: 'knowledge and awareness of the benefits of HE', 'knowledge and awareness of the benefits of graduate careers', 'confidence', 'study skills', 'contextualised subject knowledge' and 'decision making'.

### *The NERUPI Framework*

The OfS strongly encourage embedding NCOP evaluation within an appropriate framework such as Hayton and Bengry-Howell's (2016) theory- and evidence-based NERUPI Framework. LiNCHigher's learning outcomes have been written to incorporate each of the framework's five 'Practical Learning Outcomes' (see Hayton and Bengry-Howell for a detailed discussion).

### *The Gatsby Benchmarks*

The Gatsby Benchmarks are designed to embed good career guidance in schools and colleges and meeting its eight benchmark statements by 2020 is an expectation of the Department for Education (DfE, 2018). Linking benchmarks to LiNCHigher's learning outcomes will aid schools to demonstrate that they are incorporating the Gatsby programme.

## **Matching 'gaps' to outreach activities**

Whilst the theory- and evidenced-based NERUPI Framework and the Gatsby Benchmarks have generated high-level aims for LiNCHigher's programme of outreach activities, the activities themselves have been categorised via a bottom-up mapping to LiNCHigher's defined learning outcomes.

'Explaining the Gaps' uses six categories generated from the NCOP learner survey which broadly align with LiNCHigher's learning objectives. Gaps identified through the survey data analysis can be filled by appropriately mapped activities. This can be done on a school by school (or college) basis within year groups, and where possible gaps can also be addressed for other sub-groups. Both LiNCHigher and schools

have found this to be an effective way to plan and implement targeted outreach activities.

## References

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