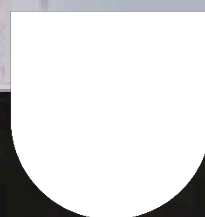


PERCEPTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION OUTREACH AND ACCESS ACTIVITY

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 The purpose of this document

The Office for Students wanted to further develop its marketing and communications strategies to build a more meaningful brand for the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) with schools and colleges. Parents and carers were also identified as key influencers in shaping young peoples' decisions around higher education (HE) pathways and it was important to ensure that NCOP communications are accessible for this audience.

The purpose of this report is to outline the findings from qualitative research with teachers and parents about their perceptions of higher education outreach activity, and specifically the NCOP.

1.2 Summary of our findings

Positively, both teachers and parents want to be involved in HE outreach activity. Teachers start from a place of relatively good knowledge of what HE outreach is and the majority are already involved in a variety of activities in schools and further education (FE) colleges; on the other hand, parents are starting from little to no awareness or knowledge of HE outreach, so need to be informed about what it is and why it is important to them and their children.

However, schools and FE colleges rarely engage parents with the HE outreach activity they involve their students in, so an effective programme that involves both audiences should also provide support and guidance to help teachers and parents engage with each other. From a teacher's perspective, family background can sometimes negatively affect young people's attitudes to HE and they can find it difficult to engage parents in conversations about HE opportunities and options., while recognising how important they are as an influence on students. Additionally, parents believe that schools/colleges have the greatest impact on students' decision-making, greater than the impact that they as parents, have on their own children's decisions.

The parents who participated in the research often had positive perceptions of apprenticeships; they are more at ease with the concept and therefore are more likely to encourage their child down this pathway. Parents are often familiar with traditional, trade apprenticeships, partly because of their own personal experience with them. Furthermore, apprenticeships are thought to provide instant earnings while providing hands-on experience which are both valued by parents. Teachers have observed a shift in government focus onto apprenticeships in both schools and colleges in recent years. In response, many school/colleges have provided pathways to apprenticeships; however, teachers believe that this has redirected focus away from HE.

There are a number of challenges that need to be addressed with parents before they will start to believe that HE is a route that their child should consider. These include an understanding of university tuition fees and the perceived associated debt; the relative attractiveness of other routes to careers such as apprenticeships or going into work straight after school; and whether HE is appropriate for their child. Key for parents, though, is positioning discussions around HE as part of a broader conversation around informed choices.

Positioning an outreach programme as supporting students to make informed choices was also important to teachers. For both teachers and parents, an informed choice means students being able to choose the most appropriate route out of school for them, whether that is via HE, FE or straight into work. This also includes taking a broader view, rather than just focusing on courses and subjects, when informing students about HE choices and grounding the discussions in what university life would be like, how they can prepare for it and what it is like to study away from home or study locally.

Few teachers, and no parents, were aware of the NCOP, so any communication needs to clearly state what the programme does, who it involves and what the benefits of engaging with the programme are. Teachers aware of the NCOP were likely to have known about it via their locally branded NCOP partnership name (e.g. Aim Higher) rather than the NCOP programme itself, although could identify the programme through the description provided during the research.

Teachers specifically are looking for something that feels like it is bespoke and tailored to their school. This should be reflected in the way that the programme is communicated and marketed.

The language employed to describe and market the programme is critical to ensuring it feels engaging and relevant. A good level of knowledge and understanding should not be assumed and therefore acronyms such as NCOP or HE, and jargon such as 'outreach' should be avoided, especially for parents. Similarly, language should also be emotive, reflecting the types of outcomes that teachers perceive should be the result of HE outreach, which include raising aspiration, motivating students, and increasing life chances.

Teachers and parents would like a variety of resources to support them with understanding and engaging with NCOP. A number of these were consistently mentioned across the two audiences, suggesting they should be priority tools to invest in. Face-to-face interactions, whether at meetings for teachers, or workshop sessions for parents, were highly rated. For teachers these meetings should provide a clear understanding of what the programme is, what the benefits are and the logistics. For parents, workshop-style sessions should focus on their concerns before moving on to providing information about HE options.

Case studies, highlighting others' previous experience of the programme including reviews and endorsements from students, teachers and partners, would engender trust amongst both audiences as well as being a helpful information tool. Similarly, videos which bring NCOP to life, showcasing who is involved in the programme, would also catch both audiences' interest.

2. INTRODUCTION

2.1 Background

The Office for Students' (OfS) strategic objective is to ensure that all students, from all backgrounds, with the ability and desire to undertake higher education (HE), are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from HE.

There is considerable investment from HE providers and from government to support HE outreach and access work to increase participation amongst underrepresented groups. While the participation of young people in HE in England has increased in the last decade, this varies significantly across the country with large differences occurring between the most and least represented groups.

National Collaborative Outreach Programme

The National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) brings together 29 partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners to deliver outreach programmes to young people in Years 9 to 13. The work is focused on local areas where HE participation is lower than might be expected given the GCSE results of the young people who live there¹.

2.2 Research aims

The aim of this research was to understand perceptions and engagement with HE outreach and access activity in two audiences: teachers working at schools and colleges, and parents/carers. These are two key audiences in terms of delivering and engaging with HE outreach:

- **Teachers:** They are the gatekeepers to accessing HE outreach activities as most programmes, and the NCOP specifically, are delivered via schools or colleges. Ensuring that the programme is attractive to schools and colleges is integral to the success of NCOP.
- **Parents/carers:** It is well documented that parents and carers have a substantial influence on the decisions that young people make about careers and education². Ensuring that this audience is aware of and knowledgeable about HE options and outreach activities will support them in assisting their child in making an informed decision about HE.

The specific objectives for the research were:

¹ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/national-collaborative-outreach-programme-ncop/>

² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/3933545.stm>

Schools/colleges

- Understanding the perceptions of HE outreach activity, including:
 - The benefits to accessing HE outreach activity
 - The barriers to accessing HE outreach activity
 - The language teachers use to talk about HE outreach activity
 - Who HE outreach is targeted at
 - How HE outreach activity supports careers guidance
- Understanding perceptions of NCOP, including:
 - The benefits of NCOP
 - The potential barriers to NCOP
 - Perceptions around communicating about and marketing NCOP

Parents/carers

- Understanding how parents and carers of young people perceive HE outreach while exploring the views of parents and carers with or without experience of HE themselves.

Parents' current understanding:

- Who parents think HE outreach is aimed at
- What makes parents think it is relevant for their child
- The benefits perceived by parents around their child engaging with this kind of activity
- Whether they see this kind of activity as helping their child make decisions about their future education or career

Increasing engagement:

- The language most effective in conveying the nature of this work and the opportunities presented
- What would make them see this programme as helpful
- How to inspire trust and communicate benefits of the programme so parents/carers will support it
- Whether parents/carers would be more interested if they understood this programme was funded by the Department for Education (DfE) through the OfS
- The activities or support which would help parents/carers to support their child to make decisions about their future education

Barriers:

- The concerns, issues or barriers preventing them from encouraging their child to take part in this kind of activity

2.3 Methodology

ICM undertook two separate strands of research. The first was a set of telephone in-depth interviews with senior staff, classroom teachers and careers advisors at schools and FE colleges in England. The second strand was six focus groups with parents and carers in three

locations in England. Further information about the methodologies and approach to each strand is set out below.

Schools/colleges

ICM conducted 20 telephone depth interviews with senior staff, classroom teachers and careers advisors from schools and FE colleges in England. Each interview lasted 45 minutes. Fieldwork was conducted during the weeks commencing 22 and 29 July 2019.

Participants were recruited using a free-find approach via our specialist recruitment partner. They were recruited to reflect a spread of locations, teacher types, school types and demographics.

Variable	Sample breakdown
Location	11 x North 3 x Greater London 6 x Midlands
Teacher type	8 x Head of subject/key stage 2 x Head of year 3 x Classroom teacher 5 x Careers advisor 2 x Deputy head teacher/head teacher
School type	5 x Maintained school 8 x Academy 1 x Faith school 1 x Free school 5 x FE college
Gender	9 x female 11 x male
Awareness of school participating in HE outreach activity	17 x Yes 2 x No 1 x Don't know

Parents/carers

ICM conducted six focus groups across three locations (London, Birmingham and Leeds). Two groups were conducted at each of the three locations, which were then split by rural and urban participants. Each focus group lasted 90 minutes and consisted of five or six participants. Four of the six groups consisted of participants who had no experience of HE; two groups consisted of participants with HE experience. All had children aged 13 to 18, with varying attitudes to HE. ICM ensured a good demographic spread with a skew to socio-economic grades C2DE. Fieldwork was conducted between 30 July and 8 August 2019.

Recruited to reflect a spread of experiences, locales and demographics

Variable	Sample Breakdown
Location	12 x Leeds (2 x BME) 9 x Greater London (2 x BME) 12 x Birmingham (0 x BME)
Experience of HE	3 x No HE Experience 3 x HE Experience
Urban/Rural	3 x Groups Urban 3 x Groups Rural
Gender	15 x Male 18 x Female
SEG	1 x B 7 x C1 20 x C2 4 x D 1 x E
Children's attitudes to HE	16 x- A (My child is interested in / is likely to pursue higher education) 8 x – B (My child is indifferent to pursuing higher education) 9 x – C (My child is not interested/ is unlikely to pursue higher education)

2.4 Structure of this report

This report explores the findings from both phases of the research, including insight from both teachers and parents. Where we reference 'teachers' we include all types of teachers we spoke to including those from schools and FE colleges and where we reference 'parents' this includes both parents and carers.

Where possible we have combined insights from the separate audiences, however there is an emphasis in different chapters on each audience, reflecting the nature of the research aims.

- **Chapter 3 The context:** Here we explore teachers' and parents' perspectives of HE and some of the potential drivers for these perceptions. The themes developed in this section are reflected in other chapters when exploring perceptions, engagement and barriers to HE outreach and NCOP, so it serves as a fruitful starting point to our understanding.
- **Chapter 4 Exploring HE outreach:** In this section we predominantly focus on the perceptions of teachers and current activity being delivered in schools and colleges. Notably, teachers provided a clear idea of what they think 'good' HE outreach includes.

- **Chapter 5 Barriers to engagement in uptake of HE outreach:** While participants were predominantly positive towards HE outreach, some clear challenges arose during the research around how parents and teachers currently engage with each other, as well as specific barriers that teachers experience.
- **Chapter 6 NCOP marketing and communications:** A clear objective in this research was to explore perceptions and potential engagement with the NCOP amongst parents and teachers, with a nod to informing marketing and communications. This is explored within this chapter.

3. THE CONTEXT

3.1 Introduction

Within this chapter we explore teachers' and parents' perceptions of HE and some of the potential drivers for these perceptions. By doing this, we hope to provide greater context for the findings in later chapters.

ICM spent more time discussing perceptions around HE with the parent audience. This is because we know that parents have a significant influence on the decisions that young people make about careers and education, yet a substantial proportion of young people living in NCOP target areas know of no-one in their family who has experience of HE³. Therefore, gathering a greater understanding of parent attitudes towards HE helps to inform how to communicate about NCOP and engage parents with HE more broadly.

3.2 The parents' context

Parents' awareness of HE options

On the whole, parents had a relatively basic understanding of what HE means, what it consists of and how it applies to their child, but with some confusion around specifics.

Parents were able to list some examples of what they considered to be HE options currently available. These included 'anything beyond school and after the age of 18', for example, apprenticeships, degrees, BTECs and NVQs, and more generally 'qualifications'. Predominantly, parents were more likely to associate HE with university degrees and to a lesser extent apprenticeships.

Across the board, parents demonstrated a good understanding of the institutions which offer HE: colleges, universities, academies and workplaces were all consistently mentioned.

While parents were able to list some examples of what HE may consist of and the institutions where HE could be undertaken, they evidently lacked confidence in their understanding, specifically in relation to their own child's options.

When contemplating having to have these conversations with their child, parents found HE and the subsequent career opportunities a complicated and confusing landscape to navigate, which left many parents feeling uninformed and ill-equipped to adequately support their child during times of HE decision making.

Parents were predominantly focused on what job their child would get, linked to their own experience of leaving school and entering the workplace. Thus, any discussion around HE was intertwined with conversations around careers. However, parents believed that they lacked both

³ CFE research from the NCOP evaluation report:

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180405115436/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2018/ncopyear1/>

information and clarity regarding the career advantages their child may be able to obtain by pursuing HE.

Parents' personal experience of HE

This research included participants who had no experience of HE and, to a lesser extent, those who had some experience. Therefore, personal experience and perceptions of HE were markedly different. Through exploring the reasons why parents did and did not choose to gain post-school qualifications we can better understand the drivers and barriers to endorsing and encouraging their children to attend HE.

For those parents who had no HE qualifications, many explained that this was not a consideration for them when leaving school. Rather, they believed university was for those who were academically gifted or from a higher social class.

"If you weren't that bright you were encouraged to do a trade." (Parent, Male, London)

"It was kind of an elitist thing, wasn't it? A class thing really." (Parent, Female, Leeds)

In conjunction with this, many parents were drawn into employment by the prospect of earning money as well a family expectation to be earning in order to contribute to the running of the family home.

"I wasn't pushed to go to university or higher education, you just left school, went to work and that was that." (Parent, Female, Birmingham)

For those parents who had gained qualifications after leaving school their motivations for attending HE were varied; several parents referenced coming from a family where attending HE was expected of them, as their parents had attended university as had their siblings.

"It was almost inevitable for me, I think. Both my parents had gone to university as did my older brother and sister. I didn't really consider any other option." (Parent, Male, Leeds)

A handful of parents had a clear idea of the career path they wanted to take after school which required an HE qualification. Therefore, these parents attended university with a specific degree in mind to fulfil the requirements for a specific career route.

"The job I first got needed you to have a degree but as soon as you said you had a degree, they said that's that box ticked. It gives you a head start. When recruiters come to interview people, they'll filter people out by whether they have a degree. It seems an expensive price to pay to get on the list, but it's a competitive world." (Parent, Male, Birmingham)

For others, however, and more specifically those who came from families where no parents or siblings had attended university, the motivation for attending university was due to demonstrating a generalised ability for academia or an aptitude for a specific subject in which they were encouraged to attend university by their teachers.

“I showed a clear aptitude for languages and a head for business, so my teachers very much encouraged me to go to university. I don’t think it would have been on my radar otherwise.” (Parent, Male, Leeds)

Scepticism towards educational institutions

There was a clear correlation between the lack of HE understanding and/or experience among the target audience and scepticism towards educational institutions. Many parents suspect that the government had ulterior motives when encouraging young adults to pursue HE. Such scepticism was fuelled by the suspicion that academic institutions are solely motivated by financial gain rather than the wellbeing of young people.

“Of course, they want young people to go to uni, they make a fortune out of them. Schools, colleges and unis are all businesses now, which means their priority is no longer the educational growth of the individual but how much profit can they make. So, I’m cautious about the idea of Jenny going – you have to see through the sales pitch.” (Parent, Male, Leeds)

In addition to this perceived commercialisation of educational organisations, many also referenced how young people are now legally required to stay in education for a longer period than they were (British students today must stay in school until age 16, then must either remain in school or take on vocational training or apprenticeship until age 18⁴). There is strong support for this belief that 16-year-olds are too young to consider HE or employment options. That said, they simultaneously questioned the government’s motivations. Many suspected that the government sought to artificially keep employment rates high, while at the same time reducing the potential for young people to claim social welfare benefits.

“Yeah – I’m glad that they have to stay on longer. They’re far too young to be making life decisions at 16, so I’m all for it. But I know why the government’s done it. They want to stop them claiming for as long as possible and make their employment stats look good.” (Parent, Female, Birmingham)

For those parents with minimal or negative experience of apprenticeships, they too perceived apprenticeships as a money-making scheme that does not guarantee job opportunities. Instead they believed they are designed to provide companies with an abundant supply of unpaid labour.

“These apprenticeships are cons. Employers get money for every apprenticeship that they offer. These kids complete their apprenticeship, the company has got no jobs. What’s that about?” (Parent, Female, Birmingham)

Value for money: Fears and misconceptions

Misconceptions and fears about university tuition fees, maintenance loans and the subsequent debt are currently the greatest barriers to parents endorsing and encouraging university.

Many parents we spoke to were on a limited income, with many relying upon a single salary. With that in mind, university tuition fees and additional maintenance loans presented an

⁴ Cabinet Office: Department for Education. Policy paper: *2010 to 2015 government policy: young people*. Updated 8th May 2015

intimidating prospect for them and their child. The target audience often lack financial security and so the threat of debt consistently held greater weight for this audience than for those who have more financial security and/or a higher household income.

“Look, if we had loads of money, then the charges and debt might be less of an issue.” (Parent, Male, London)

From the parental perspective, debt was a more pressing concern for them compared to their children. All parents perceived that their children lacked any experience, understanding and foresight in taking on a large debt such as a student loan.

“I just don’t think they get it. What do they know about taking out a loan at that age and what the consequences of doing that are? They’re too young for that responsibility. I keep having to drill it in to them.” (Parent, Female, Birmingham)

To a lesser extent, some parents had assumed that, should their child be unable to make the required student loan repayments, they (the parents) would be required to do so. This generated considerable fear among some participants, as they worried that they would struggle with paying off their child’s debt and the subsequent impact this would have on their credit score. Most did not realise that the terms of a student loan are different to a typical loan from a high street bank.

“I just know that he wouldn’t manage with the repayments and I’d have to look after it all. I can’t afford that. That type of debt could ruin you, and for what?” (Parent, Male, London)

For those parents who had experience of and/or understanding of the university loan process, many expressed a frustration that maintenance loans are based on parental income, since it cannot always be assumed that parents are able to financially support their child.

The value of a university degree

Since the sharp increase in young people attending universities⁵, parents we researched have begun to question the value, advantage and applicability for their child. For many, the status and value of a university degree has been ‘diluted’ due to the sheer number awarded. This increase is thought to have amplified the need to ‘stand out amongst the crowd’ and to gain an additional masters degree.

Additionally, the increase in degree courses which parents do not perceive as being useful or leading to specific careers is contributing to the perceived reduced value and status of university degrees. This was particularly problematic as parents tend to be outcomes focused.

Is university for everyone?

On the whole, parents believed that HE was positioned as being ‘for everyone’ and was (now) open to all irrespective of class or, for that matter, ability. For parents, this represented a shift in societal attitudes and perceptions since they were of graduate age.

⁵ UCAS: A record percentage of young people are off to university, 16 August 2018. <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/record-percentage-young-people-are-university>

That said, the introduction of university tuition fees clearly communicated to this audience that education is a privilege and not a right. As evidence, they cite the belief that going on to study is mainly for those who can either pay for their tuition fees upfront or who are able to financially manage decades of debt.

All parents involved in the study expected their child to pick a 'constructive' pathway that will provide them with experience, job prospects and earning potential. They did not always think that an HE route guarantees this. They want their children to be happy, but more so, it is paramount that they must also be productive.

Consequently, they defended the perceived multiple benefits of entering paid employment rather than HE. For those with no personal experience of HE, they saw an advantage to their children entering the workforce immediately after school and gaining several years' work experience and pay compared to attending university.

However, money isn't the only barrier which has left parents perceiving that university is 'not for us'. Some parents also referenced concern that their child might not socially adapt in order to 'fit in' with their academic peers, especially in high tariff universities.

"There's going to be a bully. If somebody's coming from a better family with more money, and someone doesn't have much money, they'll get penalised for that. Especially the clothes they are wearing, and they haven't got much money to go out." (Parent, Male, Birmingham)

The only exception to this 'not for us' perception was when university was an essential criterion of accessing a specific career. Examples consistently provided included lawyers, accountants, and doctors. Many were of the view that academia was not appropriate for their own children, however parents were aware that there are benefits to going into HE such as the social aspect, independence, a potential for increased earning capital, and a desirable social status element, but that these benefits were far from universal.

3.2 The school context

Perceptions of higher education

Overall, teachers were positive about HE because of the impact that it can have on their students.

For some of the teachers we spoke to, the impact of HE was significant as it is perceived as a driver for socio-economic change, enabling young people to move out of a local cycle of deprivation. Other teachers, though, were slightly more cautious and while acknowledging the benefits and impact of HE thought about it from a more specific perspective. In this, the student was the focus and they talked about HE pathways as being part of a broader conversation around future choices and options, which can include a variety of opportunities not just HE routes.

On the whole, teachers believed that HE is open to all types of students. However, teachers were clear that HE outreach should be to support young people make *informed choices* around their future. Equally, teachers saw this as both supporting students to decide on university courses or specific careers that require HE qualifications, as well as helping students realise

that HE is not for them. This focus on informed choices was a clear theme for teachers throughout the research.

“I think it's for anyone who should want it. It's for everybody. There are so many variables that there is something there to suit everyone's academic skill set.”
(Deputy Head Teacher, Academy)

The impact of apprenticeships

A number of teachers mentioned apprenticeships and further education (FE) courses during the interviews. There are two considerations to be made in relation to this. Firstly, when discussing HE and HE outreach activities, many teachers also referred to apprenticeships or FE qualifications, hinting that there aren't clear delineations between HE and FE for all. In addition, teachers did not consider the fact that there are higher and degree level apprenticeships, further highlighting some confusion.

Secondly, there has been a considerable focus on apprenticeships in schools and colleges over the last five years or so, driven by the government's target of 3 million new apprenticeships to start between 2015 and 2020 and the introduction of the apprenticeship levy in 2017⁶. Many schools and colleges have responded to this through offering pathways to apprenticeships, which may have lessened the focus on HE.

“The amount of students applying for apprenticeships has gone up dramatically. For my students in my subject, I do say to them, 'Please consider all the options because of how expensive it is to go to university. There are other options available.’” (Head of Subject, Academy)

The challenge of family background

During broader discussions around student engagement with HE, the main challenge that teachers perceived was a student's family background and consequent influence of parents. They believed this to be particularly true of those parents who had not been to university or taken an HE qualification themselves.

“There are students who, for whatever reason, either financial or because nobody in their family has ever been to university, it's not something that they would consider. So, perhaps trying to encourage them to actually look at it as an option that is going to help them in the future.” (Careers Advisor, Maintained school)

The challenges that teachers mentioned mirrored many of the issues that parents themselves raised, as discussed in the previous section in this chapter, but included parents perceiving that HE is not 'for them', a desire for their child to follow into a similar career as them, and concerns around the debt associated with tuition fees.

Competing school priorities

To a much lesser extent, but still a potential barrier for some schools, the role of HE is part of a large set of competing priorities for a school to focus on.

⁶ researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN03052/SN03052.pdf

One teacher mentioned that as a school they were more focused on pathways to sixth form rather than HE as they didn't have a sixth form and this was what objectives, especially for their Careers Advisor, were set around.

"We don't have sixth form, so really the focus is on getting them in to college rather than further on than that." (Head of Subject, Academy)

3.3 Learnings from this chapter

This chapter has highlighted several factors that drive parents' perception of HE and therefore their level of engagement, endorsement and encouragement of their children.

Essentially, for the parents involved in the research, their perceptions of HE are often driven by fear of the unknown. For these parents, their experience of and familiarity with, paid employment and/or apprenticeships meant that this was the default conversation between parent and child. This avoidance of an HE discussion was often further amplified by what parents perceive to be a complex and unfamiliar HE landscape.

Misconceptions around university tuition fees, maintenance loans and subsequent debt presented the greatest barrier for parents. Educating parents on the facts and figures will go a long way in minimising the impact of this barrier.

All teachers involved in the study observe students' socio-economic background and having parents who have no experience of HE as the leading drivers behind a student not going on to attend HE. That said, teachers believe parents need the greatest support in order to move the dial on engagement. Along with engagement, parents would benefit from supportive and inclusive education on the various HE pathways.

4. EXPLORING HIGHER EDUCATION OUTREACH

4.1 Introduction

Within this chapter, we explore the current prevalence of attitudes and barriers towards HE outreach activity.

For teachers, it was important for us to understand what was currently being delivered in schools to give context to the NCOP programme. From a parents' perspective, we hoped to understand current awareness and understanding of HE outreach more generally.

As we believed that teachers would have a greater awareness and understanding of HE outreach we spent more time in the research exploring their perceptions.

4.2 Understanding and perceptions of HE outreach

Understanding of the term 'HE outreach'

The majority of teachers were aware of the term 'HE outreach'. Explanations of the phrase mainly focused on the notion that it involved partners, predominantly local universities, working with schools/colleges. This could involve universities coming on site to deliver activity or offering trips, or residential on campuses. More broadly, though, it should not be assumed that all teachers are equally aware of HE outreach and what it entails. A few teachers were confused by the term, mentioning FE or apprenticeships when discussing activities or types of outcomes.

"Mostly, the work we do with the local universities and colleges. We would organise them to come in, either on a broad scale for a careers fair, or on an individual basis. If we know that we've got a group of students that are interested in something in particular, we would get a speaker in from a university to talk about that particular thing." (Careers Advisor, Academy)

"Is it looking at further education, so sixth form, or some lower down, obviously apprenticeships and things like that?... I was thinking it was vocational, apprenticeships, things like that rather than the academic route. That's what I saw as outreach." (Head of Subject, Maintained school)

Without exception, parents had no awareness of the term 'HE outreach'. When this was explored in more depth in the focus groups, it became clear that the children of some of the parents were engaging in outreach activities, although the parents themselves did not know that this was called HE outreach. Upon further investigation it became apparent however that some parents were aware of their children engaging in certain outreach activities although they were unaware it fell under this heading. For instance, Eurostar mentoring, campus visits, summer schools, and the Shine Programme (in association with the University of York) were all mentioned. We found that parents whose child had experienced some type of activity were more likely to be academically qualified.

Perceptions of HE outreach

When initially discussing HE outreach a few teachers spontaneously mentioned specific concerns around access to activities and potential inconsistency in delivery. Teachers' concerns around access tended to focus on the fact that it means they have to reach out to partners rather than partners being proactive in engaging with schools/colleges. In the context of the busy school day and their workloads, these types of time-consuming tasks are challenging for teacher to carry out.

"I would say that our school would have to reach out to those representatives to come in, rather than the other way around." (Head of Subject, Academy)

One teacher was concerned about access to good quality HE outreach activity, noting that it can be 'hit and miss'.

"I think that from a teacher's perspective, outreach activities can be quite hit and miss. Some of them are brilliant, others that come to you or you go to them, they're naff, you think, 'What a waste of time, money, effort, organisation, planning, all this was.' There's a bit of scepticism about arranging these activities because a lot of them you don't know what,; if it's a new thing you booked into, you don't really know what you're going into until you've been once and then you can decide whether it was appropriate to do again." (Head of Year, Maintained school)

A few other teachers noted that HE outreach activity was relatively commercial and involved 'selling' style activities.

"I would guess that would be work done by higher education providers to try and engage, to market and sell to potential clients, the students, their schools. It'd be work done trying to secure their numbers from local schools and colleges. That's what I'd see as outreach and trying to raise the profile of what they do." (Deputy Head Teacher, Academy)

While parents had no awareness of HE outreach, their initial impressions when told what it entailed were largely positive with the majority able to see the benefits for both them and their child.

"At school we had a careers advisor. Is it that revamped?" (Parent, Female, Birmingham)

However, as with the teachers, this discussion also raised questions for parents, which included: how do you access it; who can access it; who pays for it; and, how do you hear about it? A handful of parents remained suspicious, largely based on their scepticism towards HE institutions and their profit-making motivations.

4.3 What is being delivered in schools/FE colleges: the teacher perspective

Activities currently delivered in schools/colleges

Teachers noted a variety of activities that support students with HE awareness and decision making. These included activities that happen in school, as well as outside of school.

In school	Outside of school
<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Support with UCAS applications○ Talks from local businesses○ Careers days/events○ Visits from local universities/colleges	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Trips to universities/colleges○ Residentials

Therefore, most schools and colleges included in this research were engaging with a variety of HE outreach-style activities. The HE outreach space is a crowded marketplace in schools. Nearly all teachers we spoke to said their school was involved with these types of activities, however because they predominantly think of HE outreach as being led by external partners this has the potential to lead to some confusion as to what types of activities constitute HE outreach.

Furthermore, we found that HE outreach activities are delivered by numerous agents or agencies. These could be external organisations who specifically deliver HE outreach (e.g. Aim Higher, UCEN) or external careers organisations that provide careers advisors that work either full time or part time in a school. Within the school, various roles and teams were discussed as being involved in or leading on HE activities. These included: form tutors, classroom teachers, heads of years or departments, as well as specific teams such as citizenship teams and inclusion teams. This often means that it is unique to a school who will be involved in HE outreach and a sense of flexibility is required when considering how to engage and market to schools. Overall though, this can make the HE outreach confusing.

“We have a Citizenship department in school, which I'm not involved in, but I know they do a lot of things for the Year 11s in lessons. They have one lesson a week of Citizenship and that's all to do with applying for things and talking about careers. We also have two careers advisors in school and from Year 10 onwards they get appointments fairly regularly with them. There's quite a lot of support in terms of applying for higher education.” (Head of Subject, Academy)

Interestingly, few teachers spontaneously mentioned incorporating HE activities and discussions into their lesson time, although it could be included in a specific Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE) (or equivalent) lesson. This was noted by a couple of teachers as something they would be more interested in doing.

“Link it into lessons. That is probably most valuable because it's something we can continue doing no matter what.” (Careers Advisor, Academy)

There was no consistent picture as to which year this activity started: some teachers mentioned more light-touch activity starting for earlier year groups such as Years 8/9 including assemblies and external speakers, whilst the majority said that activity took place during sixth form.

Teachers on the whole acknowledged that some activity starting at Years 8/9 is helpful for students to support with GCSE choices, but a more intense timetable of activities should be in

place for Years 11/12/13. However, in teacher's eyes, this does appear as a trade-off with curriculum time and there are concerns around specific times of the year such as exam periods when students' focus should be on their school work.

"For the day trips and things like that, particularly Year 12, as soon as they start sixth form, they need to start focusing on what they want to do. Time goes fast and they can get wrapped up in what they're studying. I think they need to have an early focus on where they're going with it." (Head of Subject, Academy)

"I think it would be something sustained, something that is maybe started earlier. Obviously, when students get to Year 11, they have to make their post-16 choices but before that, I think even from lower school, Year 9, Year 10, give them exposure from that early age. That also helps with their choices." (Classroom teacher, Maintained school)

The role of local partnerships

Most teachers interviewed predominantly referenced local partnerships when discussing HE outreach. This emulates the types of partnerships they already work with, for example, the local college or university in their local area. While many teachers saw this as positive because it enables closer, collaborative working among partnerships and makes travelling for trips easier and cheaper for schools/colleges and families, some did mention that they would like partnership working to go beyond the local. This was mainly because it meant that students benefited from engaging with institutions outside of their local area which may impact their aspirations.

"What works is moving away from the local because they've [students] already seen that." (Head of Year, Academy)

The perspective of FE colleges

There were few differences between the perspectives and experiences of teachers at schools versus FE colleges. While schools and FE colleges may have slightly different types of students, for instance, FE colleges tended to have older students beyond 18 years of age and a more diverse demographic profile of students, the way in which teachers talked about engaging with HE outreach and the type of HE outreach that works for various students was relatively similar.

The main difference we found when speaking to FE colleges was that the college may be involved in both delivering HE outreach activities to other schools and having HE outreach delivered by external organisations in the college. During one interview, this led to some confusion with terminology and focus.

4.4 The impact of HE outreach

Teachers' perspective

The impacts of HE outreach were relatively intangible for teachers. It was easiest for teachers to discuss the impact on students, whereas impacts on themselves and their colleagues, school

and community were more challenging and teachers generally had to be prompted on these questions.

A key benefit that teachers mentioned was raising awareness of the different options available for students. The main focus for teachers was that HE outreach helped students to understand the different courses and careers open to them. With this greater awareness, teachers believed that students were able to go on to make more informed choices about what they were and were not interested in.

The majority of teachers also mentioned that HE outreach helps to 'increase opportunities' in two ways. Firstly, that HE outreach activities open up various opportunities for students by explaining the options available to them through taking part in activity. Secondly, HE outreach was perceived to open up long-term opportunities for a student such as the potential for careers, and ultimately increased salaries.

When this was expanded upon, this greater awareness and understanding of options was mentioned by some teachers as supporting raising aspirations amongst their students. Access and engagement with HE outreach activities help students to understand pathways open to them and, in this sense, it can result in them being more engaged and motivated at school.

"I think it is more to give the students a bit of aspiration really. To get them thinking about some of these courses that are available. The example I always use is myself really because I was the first person to go to uni in my family and so it wasn't until when I was at college and did some work, an experience day with the Manchester School of Art, that was literally for me, it reeled me in as I had not even considered that was a possibility really." (Head of Subject, Faith school)

"I think sometimes it changes students' minds [...] to want to do that kind of course or it makes students sometimes think about other options that they never really explored before, so I think it is a good advantage that students get opportunities like that." (Classroom teacher, Maintained school)

Another aspect that teachers believed benefited students were HE outreach activities that do not just focus on the academic side of HE but take into consideration the broader experience for students. The ability to experience what life is like on campus, learn how to manage being a student e.g. managing money, knowing where to get support, all help students with grounding their knowledge in real life which helps them to prepare for life at university.

"I think maybe the lifestyle that they see on residentials, going to be more independent but sometimes the reality of it, will they be able to cope with their studies? I don't think maybe those aspects as well in these outreach things are taken into consideration, like mental health. Obviously in schools you're very close to your teachers but at uni, with my experience, your tutors are not that close to you because they have so many students. So, just giving them opportunity in terms of that, giving them guidance on that as well." (Classroom teacher, Maintained school)

When prompted on the impact that HE outreach can have on schools, teachers rarely thought about this beyond the impact on students, and therefore, the greatest impact that they could see

on the school was that students can become more motivated once they make an informed choice about their future and this potentially impacting on grades.

“I think if it started younger, as in Year 9 and 10, I think it probably has a very profound impact on students because it makes them think it's more realistic and gives them maybe a motivation to do well in their exams. They can physically see that if they do well, this could lead them to do something. Sometimes, it might put students off but that might be good because it maybe makes them realise this is not what they want to do anymore but they could possibly have another course but I think it does have a big impact on students.” (Classroom teacher, Maintained school)

We were also particularly interested in the impact that HE outreach activities could have on careers advice. This was not something that teachers spontaneously mentioned, however when asked, a couple of teachers knew about and referenced the Gatsby Career Benchmarks and how engagement with HE outreach activities can support with delivering the ‘best careers provision in schools’⁷. However, the majority of teachers we spoke to were not aware of the Gatsby Benchmarks and rarely referenced how HE outreach impacted careers advice.

“I'm not aware of those [Gatsby Benchmarks], so I would not be able to offer an opinion on that.” (Head of Subject, Free school)

“It's inspired by the leadership team and the headteacher. There are some benchmarks as well. We look at the Gatsby Benchmarks. The school are supposed to do that. We are working towards those benchmarks as well.” (Careers Advisor, Academy)

Parents' perspective

As parents were relatively unaware and unengaged with HE outreach generally, and the activities their children were taking part in, they knew of few impacts. Nevertheless, they would expect that the impact of their child participating in HE outreach activity to be around helping decide on which qualifications to take, providing more opportunities, which potentially leads to more productive jobs/careers.

4.5 Best practice HE outreach: the teacher perspective

When teachers talked about ‘good’ HE outreach, making the experience relevant and engaging for students drives their perceptions.

While there was an assumption that HE outreach was for everyone, a few teachers spoke of specific student groups that they believed HE outreach should particularly focus on. These included the ‘hard to reach’, those who ‘need a push’ or students ‘unsure’ about HE as these are groups that teachers believed needed the most support. Therefore, HE outreach that appears tailored, or takes various groups of students into account is preferable.

⁷ <https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/schools-colleges/understand-gatsby-benchmarks>

While not mentioned by all, there appears to be some consensus in the approach below to HE outreach for the different age groups:

- Year 7, 8, 9: While these year groups may not be completely engaged with conversations around HE, to start to engage them with option choices was believed to be a good introduction.
- Year 10: Some believed that HE outreach for this year group should be light touch, while others felt it should build on previous activity and increased exposure to help with choices.
- Year 11, 12, 13: Resoundingly, all believed that a core programme of HE outreach should be delivered to these year groups.

The most important point for teachers here was that HE outreach activity should include multiple touchpoints at various times, be a mix of intensive and light-touch activities and be adaptable to different students. However, it must be supported with good planning and organisation at the beginning of the year for it to be effective.

'Good' HE outreach should include a broad range of activities, but types that teachers particularly mentioned were trips, residentials, and masterclasses as those that were most impactful for students. This is because these forums allow for:

- **A broad range of conversations:** Teachers want students to be informed not only of courses and subjects but think that good HE outreach activity also includes broader conversations around what life is like as a student, and that activities such as residentials help students to think what life would be like away from home. They also enable more informal conversations which allow students to ask questions; teachers raised this a number of times.
- **Interaction with a variety of people:** Numerous teachers mentioned how important it was that students got to interact with other types of people including other students, lecturers, and those who had recently finished a degree. These people enable the range of conversations that teachers and parents think students need but integral to this is that these people are experienced, engaging and relatable.
- **Experiential learning:** Engagement that is outside of the school environment and which includes a mix of different types of activities and learning styles is thought, by teachers, to be the most impactful and enjoyable for students

4.6 Learnings from this chapter – Best practice HE outreach

On the whole teachers were generally aware of and involved in HE outreach, although there remains confusion among some as to what it entails. HE outreach is often a crowded space further adding to the confusion of who it involves. Clear language is essential to avoid alienating both teachers and parents ensuring knowledge is never assumed.

Teachers did not speak with one voice in terms of when HE outreach should be implemented, though there was a wider consensus that engaging students before GCSE choices, for example in Year 9, would be beneficial.

While parents tended to focus on outcomes, the impact of HE outreach is often intangible, therefore there should be a focus on HE outreach as enabling students and parents to make an informed choice, guided by aspiration and ability.

Teachers argued that making the experience of HE outreach applicable and engaging for students drives their positive perceptions. Of the various students that should be a priority of focus, teachers consistently referenced 'hard-to-reach' students, along with those who require additional support as they are often confused and unsure.

The most important point for teachers was that HE outreach activity should include several touchpoints at various times, with a range of activities that are adaptable to different students. However, it must be supported with good planning and organisation at the beginning of the year for it to be effective.

5. BARRIERS TO ENGAGEMENT IN UPTAKE OF HE OUTREACH

5.1 Introduction

As we discussed in the previous chapter, teachers and parents had positive perceptions of HE outreach activity and teachers could clearly cite positive impacts on their students. However, during the research a number of challenges arose from both audiences that should be taken into account when designing and delivering HE outreach programmes.

5.2 Parents and teachers: how they work together

Teachers perceive parents to be the biggest challenge

The biggest challenge teachers perceived around delivery and engagement with HE outreach was the role of parents and family background.

More broadly, teachers find it challenging to engage with parents because they are unlikely to want to engage with the school generally. The parents they find the most challenging to engage with are likely to not have had a good experience with school themselves or to think that HE 'isn't for them' and therefore do not want to or know how to connect with the school about HE options for their child.

"We can work on engaging students in the class and through our visits and things but sometimes it's trying to engage parents and up-skill them a little bit really. When we meet them when we're trying to encourage students maybe for their options at GCSE or for college, I find the difficult bit is trying to engage the parent because quite often their view, or their impression of education it can be, not in all cases, but it can be very one dimensional based on their own experience of education, which is not necessarily always good thing really. So engaging parents is the difficult one at times definitely." (Head of Subject, Maintained school)

Teachers believe that a number of long-held myths exist amongst parents that also act as a barrier to engagement with HE and thus HE outreach activity such as university being for the 'rich'.

"It really dispels a lot of myths about university just being people from privileged backgrounds. Especially in the school we're at, it's important for them to have access to that information." (Careers Advisor, Academy)

Numerous teachers also mentioned that parents, and students to a lesser extent, were concerned about the debt accrued via university fees. Furthermore, teachers noted some parents are more focused on apprenticeships, as this route leads to a path with no debt and a steady wage relatively quickly out of school. One teacher also believed that those from low socio-economic backgrounds may be more focused on earning money quickly.

“There's very much a working culture with a lot of the students that we work with. A lot of the students that I work with, they are very keen, when they leave school, to get straight on a money-earning apprenticeship. It's a really popular thing now. It's sometimes hard to show those kids the benefit of the long term. When they're 15, and you say, 'When you're 21, you'll have this qualification.' To them, that feels like a huge amount of time away. I think it's just living in inner-city. They want to get out earning and they want to have money. That's probably the biggest barrier, the lack of financial support or they struggle to see the long-term benefits.”
(Careers Advisor, Maintained school)

This focus on the financial implications to parents when their child goes to university is reinforced when they are asked to pay for certain elements of HE outreach activity, such as paying for travel and days out which they can't afford.

Parents believe schools have the greatest influence

Once parents were informed about the types of activities included in HE outreach, they were very positive towards the idea. They raised very few barriers or concerns around engagement, perhaps reflecting their lack of awareness. There was an assumption that the majority of HE organisation would be done by schools, so the parents themselves would be minimally involved.

From a parental perspective, there was no consensus as to who should be responsible for ensuring their child makes an informed HE decision, however, no one believed it was the sole responsibility of the parent. Parents were often happy to leave their children to make their own decisions unless their decision seems completely futile. This in part appears to be because parents do not believe that they have the knowledge to support their child, nor do they perceive they have the necessary influence over their child.

“Ideally it would be me but I don't know well enough whether it would pay to go to university. So, yeah, ideally it should be me but I haven't got all the information about it. I don't think I can honestly say to my son whether he should go to uni or he shouldn't, because I do think it's hard to get a job without qualifications, it really is, but then at the same time it's a lot of debt.... it's scary, it's a hard decision to make.” (Parent, Female, London)

Parents believed that schools have the greatest influence on their child's engagement with HE and post-school options, alongside peers and siblings. They do question the advice that schools give, suspecting that schools focus on HE pathways and in some instances 'push' children to HE rather than provide a holistic perspective of options. Parents would like a number of different routes for their children so that they can make an informed choice.

“I think it starts at school and they come home, and they talk about what you've been told at school and then you have your two pennies' worth. Well, that's how it was with me.” (Parent, Female, Birmingham)

“Now at school they don't tend to have [craft, design, technology] as much. They just want to instil in you that you've got to go to university because these are the only type of jobs that are out there anymore. They don't mention in schools about plastering and painting or that.” (Parent, Male, Leeds)

There appears to be little engagement between the two audiences

Both audiences acknowledged that there is little engagement between schools, FE colleges and parents currently, but teachers and parents equally stated during the research that they would like this to change.

Teachers talked about engaging parents at parents' evenings and other similar forums but beyond that there appeared to be little engagement with parents especially around HE and HE options. Teachers acknowledged that parents need more support with understanding the process, implications and benefits of HE for their children but do not think that this support is currently provided, and that greater engagement by schools/FE colleges is required.

"It's a challenge because there just isn't enough of it, really. In theory it sounds easy, engaging parents, but I think it really is the missing piece at the moment."
(Head of Subject, Faith school)

Most parents did not feel that they were involved in conversations around HE activity happening in their child's school because their child did not always pass on information, and they tended to have to be reliant on the school for communication. As such, they felt uninformed as while they do receive text messages and email newsletters from the school, parents did not mention that these included references to HE or HE outreach activity.

Parents recall being communicated to from the school via email newsletter and text messages. While parents were positive about the school communicating with them through these channels there is no mention that these communications include any references to HE or HE outreach. There is a strong appetite for increased communication from the school regarding HE, so that they can then follow up with conversations at home.

"My engagement with the school is limited to, basically, when they want money out of me for something." (Parent, Male, Leeds)

"That's it. Or parents' evening." (Parent, Male, Leeds)

Parents also expressed a desire for schools to signpost them to resources, to explain the range of HE options available, to understand university tuition fees, and how to support with HE decision making, for example, helping their child with UCAS and personal statements.

5.2 Other barriers to HE outreach: the teacher perspective

Time and logistics

The second barrier was one that teachers themselves specifically experienced with HE outreach – logistics and timings. This mainly focused around time: the time it takes for teachers to organise activities and conduct risk assessments, for instance, is perceived to be an extra burden on an already heavy workload. Teachers also noted that any HE activity in school time resulted in collapsed timetables, which means students spend less time in lessons. This is a tricky decision to make for teachers given the impetus on exams and results and teachers were

clear that activity should not be conducted during exam season. There was no consistent feedback on whether certain activity, such as trips or residentials, should be delivered in school or holiday time. Some teachers believed that activity held during the holidays had the least disruption to the school timetable, while others believed that this put a lot of emphasis on parents which is burdensome.

Teachers also noted that not having enough lead in time to organise an activity was a barrier, so it is helpful to know about and plan everything at the beginning of the school year.

“Time. Doing the research, making sure the correct things are in place, having somebody who could coordinate that within school. So many people coordinate so many things, it's just an extra thing to add to the already very long list and hard workload we've got at the moment. That's definitely one of the things that would put people off, because we'd need somebody to take charge with it. If somebody's not willing to give up that time to take charge, it can't happen. There are time constraints, that's a massive one.” (Head of Subject, Maintained school)

“Sometimes curriculum time. If these things happen during the school year, we just simply can't afford, or students don't want, to be away from lessons for that long. Teaching time is so tight that for students to leave, sometimes even for a day in Year 11, it knocks them back, maybe not academically, but confidently, in terms of their lessons. They miss something, so that is a barrier, the focus on cramming so much into a curriculum in a school day. That is an issue.” (Deputy Head Teacher, Academy)

Quality

A further barrier identified was around the delivery of the HE outreach activity itself. Teachers spoke of not always being aware of HE outreach on offer, as well as disparity in the HE outreach available across different subjects and courses. A couple of teachers also mentioned that delivery of activity can vary in quality, and the challenge of identifying good activity since there is no rating system and a general lack of access to reviews.

“[The big barrier] I think is the vetting process. I think it's the quality of the programmes that are being delivered, knowing that as a teacher.” (Head of Year, Maintained school)

5.4 Learnings from this chapter

Teachers referenced several barriers to engaging with and delivering HE outreach, the biggest of which was the role of parents and family background. Teachers noted how parents' concerns centre around cost of attending university and associated debt. Additionally, teachers referenced some parents' greater focus on apprenticeships and the role of money/wages.

A key barrier for teachers is the time it takes to organise activities and to conduct risk assessments as well as the delivery of the HE outreach activity itself. Teachers believed that they were not always aware of HE outreach on offer and expressed concerns about the inconsistency in the HE outreach available.

On the whole, a primary obstacle is the lack of engagement between parents and teachers, suggesting that improving this relationship is the key to improving HE perceptions among parents. As such, support around engaging these two audiences, should be both encouraged and supported. To maximise outcome, schools should take the lead on facilitating these conversations.

6. NCOP: MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS

6.1 Introduction

In this section of the report we aim to learn from what teachers have told us about ‘good’ HE outreach and the impacts they are looking for, alongside what they fed back on the NCOP itself. In doing so we aim to provide insight and recommendations that will capture what is of interest to teachers and prove to be an engaging offer.

We also explore parents’ perceptions of NCOP and how to market it, combining insights from both audiences to develop a coherent, overarching messaging and communications plan.

Our recommendations are based on:

- What parents told us about HE
- What teachers told us about HE outreach activities
- What participants told us they liked about NCOP
- What participants told us they wanted from communications

6.2 NCOP and the OfS: awareness and understanding

None of the **teachers** we spoke to were aware of the OfS, and only a few were aware of the NCOP, however it appears that this awareness is because their school was already engaged with some NCOP partnership activity.

What is encouraging though is that lack of awareness did not preclude enthusiasm for or potential engagement with the programme, when they were provided with details⁸. Teachers were very positive about the programme, and they especially noted parental engagement, masterclasses, teacher CPD and residentials as activities that especially resonated with them.

*“Off the cuff, it sounds like this Office for Students is working on behalf of students and this programme is going to be tailored to students and is going to be done so in a way that’s based on what students want. It sounds like it would be good.”
(Head of Year, Maintained school)*

Similarly, no parents had any awareness or understanding of NCOP and there was a consistent dislike for acronyms because these do not help to inform the audience of what the programme is.

“Is it just a load of institutions working together then?” (Parent, Female, Leeds)

6.3 NCOP: Key communications principles

⁸ Please see appendix for full description.

There are five key principles which we would recommend taking note of in any messaging or communications. These themes arose across the interviews and focus groups we conducted and highlight how important it is to communicate the basics of the programme, as well as stressing the support that NCOP would provide and how applicable and accessible it is for all.

1. Programme's aims

- a. Be clear: What NCOP does and what it will deliver. Parents are particularly focused on the outcomes associated with the programme especially around careers.
- b. Your USP: What does NCOP do that other programmes don't?
- c. For **parents** specifically: how long NCOP has been in existence and NCOP's role in the educational sphere.

2. The support NCOP offers

- a. How the programme will support **teachers** with engaging their students with HE – thinking of those who are most challenging for teachers to engage with (boys, hard-to-reach audiences).
- b. How **teachers** will find the programme easy to get involved with and implement, addressing their time and logistical concerns.
- c. How the programme will support **parents** and students with making decisions and transitioning to HE. This should particularly focus on sharing knowledge around university fees and student finance.

3. The activities that NCOP delivers

- a. For **teachers**, this is about highlighting the outreach activities that they do not currently engage with but think would be helpful – parental engagement and teacher CPD.

4. Accessible and appealing to all audiences involved

- a. All communications should cater for all audiences, both parents and teachers, meaning assumptions should not be made about a base level of awareness and understanding. Equally, communications need to consider the student audience.
- b. Students are at the heart of what **teachers** care about, so a programme that is not appropriate to be shared with students will not feel relevant and is likely to turn them off.
- c. From a **parent** perspective, this means answering some of their fundamental questions: Who is HE outreach for? Is it accessible to everyone?

5. A national, but tailored programme

- a. Specifically important for **teachers**, messages that focus on NCOP as a national programme, but that is bespoke for 'my school', will make the programme stand out.

6.4 NCOP: Specific barriers to address

While we hope that our suggestions for communications and marketing will help with overcoming these barriers, it is helpful to lay out the specific challenges that teachers and parents noted so that these are addressed.

1. **Knowledge the programme exists:** While this barrier was only noted by one teacher, it was referenced by a number of parents. Marketing the programme to give a general level of awareness would help to support knowledge and understanding.

“The more people know about it [...] you’d research it more.” (Parent, Male, London)

2. **Funding/money:** While the current description on the website of how NCOP works⁹ includes a section on funding, being clear with teachers upfront about the funding and (potential) costs associated with the programme is important. This is a key concern for teachers, and one that they are also conscious is a barrier for parents.

“I think the cost could be quite an important one. When you talked about campus visits and residential, if they’re free they should be really promoted as being free. If they’re low cost, or subsidised, that could be made clear as well.” (Careers Advisor – Achievement Tutor, FE College)

Similarly, parents raised issues with money, linked to their concerns around the expense of HE and associated debt. Being clear with parents about whether HE outreach activities are free, as well as more broadly supporting them with understanding the costs of university and funding options available to them, will help to address some of their fears, and in turn increase engagement.

3. **Who can participate:** After hearing the description of the programme, some teachers raised questions about whether the programme was available to their school because they believed they did not fit the target areas. Some teachers also queried whether the programme shouldn’t be available to all schools as they thought the NCOP would benefit all pupils and schools, and was something they wanted to be available more widely.

As we have seen throughout this research, a key challenge from a parents’ and students’ perspective is thinking that the programme is ‘for them’. Many parents expressed confusion about whether the programme would be for their child, as it was unclear to them who could get involved.

“I’d think it might be for kids with disabilities, or something like that. Putting them in the workplace. I don’t know. It’s vague.” (Parent, Male, Leeds)

There were some specific barriers that **teachers** mentioned:

4. **Time:** Time is one of the biggest barriers for teachers generally. The majority of teachers will always be concerned with how much time it will take for them to implement, as well as what it means for curriculum time, and these issues were raised by a number of teachers. Highlighting that the programme is easy for them to engage with helps to combat this.
5. **Crowded marketplace:** Engagement with HE outreach activities is commonplace, so explaining to teachers how NCOP complements (or supersedes) what they already do will

⁹ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/national-collaborative-outreach-programme-ncop/how-ncop-works/>

help them to understand how it can be implemented and address potential concerns around logistics.

“I think if there was some education for teachers about what we're trying to do, what we're trying to achieve and what the benefits are then that might bridge that gap a little bit between what we're trying to do in our school and what the teachers have to do, which is results.” (Careers Advisor, Academy)

- 6. Benefits of the programme:** One teacher particularly mentioned wanting to understand the benefits of NCOP over and above other outreach programmes available. They queried whether NCOP meant greater coordination and greater efficiencies for them. This feeds in to the broader point of clearly stating the aims of the programme and what it delivers.

“I'd have to say that everything they do sounds brilliant, because it's a lot of the things that the universities do anyway. It's not a negative thing. There's no negative perception. It's just the fact that there's great co-ordination across HEIs. That's making the whole thing more efficient in some ways. Is that making it easier for schools? Is it making it a bit broader and making the offer possibilities a bit broader in terms of number of students? I think these are the questions that I would want to ask.” (Head of Subject, Free school)

There were also some specific barriers that **parents** mentioned:

- 7. Whether HE is the right choice for their child:** Many parents again raised the question around whether HE is the right choice for their child on being told about NCOP. This partly links back to building knowledge among parents so that they are better equipped to advise their child on HE routes, but also hints at broader concerns around the experience of HE for their child and whether it is an option 'for them'.

“Everyone wants to go to university but not everyone is really bright.” (Parent, Male, Leeds)

6.5 NCOP: Marketing the programme – messaging, language and tone

1. Be clear and accessible

Any communications should clearly state what the programme is, what it involves, who it is for and the impact it will have. This should be clear and accessible to all audiences, as teachers will be thinking about how to communicate this to other audiences including students and parents.

“I think when I saw that it was, like, 29 universities I was slightly concerned. That sounds like quite a small number spread out across the whole country. It's a bit unclear whether that would give people a genuine taste for the kinds of institution they're looking for. Is that expected to grow, that number?” (Careers Advisor – Achievement Tutor, FE College)

Teachers all believed that communications should be detailed; as a knowledgeable audience, they want to see detail around who and what is involved e.g. partners involved, logistics for residential. This will help increase trust.

Language should also be clear and accessible. Some **teachers** queried language such as the 'HE' acronym and the word 'outreach'. They suggested being much simpler, using words such as opportunities and universities. The response from **parents** supported this, with many believing the word 'outreach' meant engagement with the community. Parents believed that the language should be tailored to the audience. For them, this means being snappy and straightforward as well as informative, and not full of jargon or patronising.

"I guess just making it accessible for everybody...parents who don't have English as a second language, so as well as not really understanding the higher education system, it's made harder by the fact that some of them perhaps don't have good English language, either." (Careers Advisor, Maintained school)

The name of the programme - either National Collaborative Outreach Programme or NCOP - was perceived by the majority of **teachers** to be uninspiring and that even the full title didn't clearly explain the programme. **Parents** also responded to the name in a similar manner; many questioned what it meant or involved, particularly questioning why the word 'education' would not be included in a programme of this kind.

2. Tone should be fun and snappy

Teachers believed that the tone of communications should reflect the programme: fun, engaging, and aspirational were all words used to explain what the tone of messaging should reflect. However, it is important the OfS get the right tone between 'selling' the programme and giving teachers the detail they expect.

3. Be emotive

For most **teachers**, emotive language that evokes the potential outcomes of the programme would resonate the most. Language that resonated most with them included: raising aspirations, supporting long-term aims, motivating students, improving long-term health, long-term career prospects and increasing life chances.

"It's aspiration. It's about making sure every student knows what is out there and what is available to them, that it's not just about what generations of their families have done or what other students in the school do just because they come from a certain area. Those expectations are that you will just go and get a job and earn money or not even get a job, just leave school and that's it. It's about giving students that aspiration, that idea that other things are possible, is how I see it... From a marketing point of view, it's about showing the students every aspect of what's possible for them." (Careers Advisor, Academy)

The potential strapline 'fairer futures' was tested amongst **parents**. While teachers were relatively ambivalent towards the phrase, parents found it polarising. Some felt it was socially inclusive and offered 'fair' opportunities to all, whereas others found it ambiguous.

"I always thought university was for rich people so that 'fairer' thing might make people think 'Oh, I might want to go to that'." (Parent, Male, London)

4. It's more than just HE

A number of **teachers, and the majority of parents**, believed that grounding outreach activities in knowledge beyond courses and subjects was important. Information around what university life is like and broader life experience resonated strongly with audiences.

Parents were particularly interested in their children being taught about life experiences, broader career benefits and options available. In line with previous findings in this report, parents were also interested in activities to include broader pathways than just HE.

*“I work with doctors as well and their children are doing the apprenticeship routes. It isn’t easier, it just seems like the old-fashioned route. You work your way up.”
(Parent, Female, Birmingham)*

6.6 NCOP: How to engender trust

The OfS specifically wanted to understand how to promote NCOP as a trusted brand. When considering this, **teachers and parents** had some quite specific feedback on what would make the brand feel trusted for them, which were in line with each other:

- **Endorsements:** A programme that is ‘endorsed’ would make teachers feel more confident that others have participated in it and trust that it has the impact it says it has. This endorsement could be from a school, university or wider partner; it is akin to a stamp of approval from others. Some teachers talked about this as the programme being ‘accredited’ by other sources. Parents also wanted to see endorsements, but from the school their child attends, to know that it is something they support.
- **Reviews:** Showcasing reviews and feedback from schools, students and partners will help teachers to understand what the experience of the programme is like and this type of feedback is among the most trusted for teachers. It was a similar picture for parents, however: what is most important to them is believing that these reviews are honest and relatable accounts of what NCOP is like. Presenting these as case studies would be especially attractive.
- **Statistics:** Reporting statistics and outcomes around improved pathways, routes to university, the impact of taking part in the programme on students (including any impact on grades) will provide clear evidence of the programme which will build trust for both teachers and parents.

“I was going to say, if there were people that endorse it, that would help. If there's certain schools that would endorse the programme, it helps to make it feel like, 'These schools are using the programme, they endorse it,' they have feedback from parents, students, and teachers, and it's funded through the DfE. All those things would be a plus.” (Head of Subject, Maintained school)

We also prompted **teachers and parents** on whether stating that the DfE funded the programme would impact trust. On the whole, linking to the DfE would positively reflect on the programme for both audiences, however there is a core section of teachers who will not view this positively because they do not trust the Department. Parents though believed this would engender trust, promote legitimacy and demonstrate inclusivity.

“[Would the DfE inspire trust?] Yes, probably. Probably to parents, teachers would be a bit more cynical.” (Head of Subject, Academy)

6.7 NCOP: Channels and resources

Initial contact with schools/FE colleges

Teachers’ suggestions around how to make initial contact with them about the programme, and the types of channels to use to promote the programme, and the accompanying resources they wanted, varied, although there seemed to be no real driver for this beyond personal preference.

There was some consensus that to make an impactful first contact a face-to-face meeting would be best, preferably with senior staff. However, who teachers considered as being the most appropriate staff member to engage with at first contact, varied. Some teachers mentioned a member of the senior leadership team, most commonly the deputy head, while others thought a mixture of careers advisor, heads of subject, sixth form leadership team and careers team.

“I think: get into schools at the beginning of the academic year. Have a physical presence, not just by email. I don’t know if it’s possible but if it’s in an area like London, have a London representative. Have a Manchester representative. That could be the first point of contact for a teacher.” (Classroom teacher, Maintained school)

Other ideas for how to make contact included a telephone meeting with a senior leader or initial email contact to the school, and then a follow-up with a head of subject.

Resources and support for teachers

Teachers identified a vast array of different types of resources that they thought would be useful when marketing the programme. These broke down in to two distinct types: firstly, physical or online resources and secondly, face-to-face activity.

The first of these – physical or online resources – was a long list of different formats, with no clear picture of what was most helpful. We would recommend focusing on a video as this was mentioned by a number of teachers and draws parallels with the second type of resource teachers mentioned: having someone come in and speak to them.

The types of videos that teachers would like to receive included: understanding what happens during an activity, showing how exciting and engaging it is, and what the experience of participating has been like for other students. In this format, NCOP could showcase the types of facilitators and people involved in delivering the programme, which teachers want to see as enthusiastic, passionate and relevant to students.

Other types of resources included: brochures, posters, PowerPoint presentations, case studies (on posters), and a booklet. A few teachers mentioned a website, whereas others talked about receiving printed materials in the post. Again, much of this was down to personal preference, but really highlights that teachers receive a lot of different types of resources in their working lives and there is no single go-to resource that will stand out above the others.

“They’d have to send some kind of brochure or a taster, perhaps even a PowerPoint presentation explaining it. I’d include everything that’s on offer, how to

go forward with that and making the link with them. Also, a list of all the institutions involved.” (Head of Subject, Academy)

The second set of resources and support teachers requested were face-to-face. These could be on a range of scales:

- A set of local representatives
- Face-to-face assemblies, hosted by someone from NCOP
- Face-to-face staff meetings, hosted by someone from NCOP
- NCOP sessions with students
- NCOP hosting a big event e.g. at a careers fair

Regardless of the type of face-to-face activity, teachers were clear that the person from NCOP should be engaging and a dynamic presenter.

“Get in touch with as many schools as you can, at the start of next year, and try and have a 20 to 30-minute conversation with at least one person in those institutions. I know that's a logistical nightmare, but if you can do that and just touch base and go through the offer and send out a brochure and stuff in the first couple of days of the school year, then I think you'd be sorted. Try to speak to the right person. Schools get quite busy and these emails can be quite easy to miss.” (Head of Subject, Free school)

Resources and support for parents

Parents expressed a desire to be included and engaged in conversations around HE outreach activities and open to receiving marketing. They suggested emails and text messages as the most appropriate channels to communicate via. However, they would also like content to be shared over social media, most notably Facebook.

There were two main resources that they would like NCOP to provide:

Firstly, in line with what the NCOP already delivers, parent engagement evenings. During these sessions, which could also include students, parents would like the following aspects to be addressed:

- If my child wants to go to university what do I have to do as a parent?
- How does student debt (e.g. tuition fees and maintenance loans) relate to parents' earnings and potential future graduate earnings?
- How do maintenance costs work?
- When should this conversation actually begin?
- How do we navigate which university is best for which degree?

The second resource parents recommended was a website. This should host information about the NCOP programme, HE outreach activities going on, as well as addressing some of parents' other needs and wants. However, parents also thought that this website could include information beyond just the NCOP programme and act as a point of information about HE outreach more generally. Parents in Leeds pointed to The Leeds Apprenticeship Hub as a good example of how to promote HE options available, as well as directing parents to official websites for further information.

This website could also include videos explaining different HE routes and pathways and case studies of different experiences to grab parents' attention.

6.9 Learnings from this chapter

In order to maximise the success of NCOP, teachers and parents must be fully engaged and supported. Teachers want information that will enable them to deliver HE outreach in the most compelling and least disruptive way. Ultimately, what teachers want from NCOP is what they want from all outreach activities. It must clearly demonstrate how it will assist teachers and the benefits for their students, and how easy it will be to implement.

Parental engagement with HE outreach is pivotal to their child's perceptions and engagement with HE. In order to both encourage and maximise engagement, clarity and transparency is key. Educating parents must be the primary priority whereby key questions and concerns are addressed head on. In order to engender trust, this should be done before HE is 'sold'. It should be positioned as providing an informed choice and not solely pushing HE irrespective of the student's aspiration and/or ability.

7. LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
CPD	Continuing professional development
DfE	Department for Education
FE	Further education
HE	Higher education
NCOP	National Collaborative Outreach Programme
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
OfS	Office for Students
PSHE	Personal, social and health education
USP	Unique selling point