

National Collaborative Outreach Programme: Two years on

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Summary

1. This is the second report on the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), funded by the Office for Students (OfS). It highlights what the programme has delivered during the first phase (January 2017 – July 2019) and provides a summary of the national evaluation findings by CFE Research which have been published alongside this report. The report also looks forward to phase two of the programme (August 2019 – July 2021), highlighting the changes to the programme and how we plan to respond to the findings of the national evaluation.
2. NCOP contributes to the wider aims and regulatory objectives of the OfS to ensure that ‘all students, from all backgrounds, are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from, higher education’.¹ The programme is intended to complement and add value to the work that higher education providers undertake through their access and participation plans, in particular work that is more effectively delivered in collaboration.
3. There are many varied and complex reasons why young people from underrepresented backgrounds may not be progressing onto higher education. NCOP partnerships aim to understand those reasons and, with that intelligence, implement a programme of sustained and progressive higher education outreach that is appropriate to the needs of the young people living in their allocated target areas. A sustained and progressive programme of activity means that young people will take part in a range of different higher education outreach activities throughout their educational journey from school years nine to thirteen. Consequently, in the first two years of the programme NCOP partnerships have engaged with over 666,280 young people between the ages of 13 and 18 from NCOP and non-NCOP target wards.
4. The NCOP programme aims to raise the expectations of students and provide clear information on the different pathways they can choose to reach their career destination of choice. Collaboration and impartiality are important aspects of the programme and it enables higher education providers to work together to provide impartial higher education information, advice, guidance and experiences for students in their local area, all of which have the student interest at heart. The partnerships do this by working with schools and colleges to develop approaches which are tailored to the needs of local areas and their students.
5. NCOP represents a significant investment by the OfS as one of many ways to enhance opportunities for young people currently underrepresented in higher education to understand and experience higher education for themselves. This report showcases who is involved in NCOP partnerships, outlines the volume of learners and education providers engaged in the programme and highlights the activity they deliver.

¹ OfS strategy 2018 to 2021: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/our-strategy

NCOP phase one: year two

Background

6. Higher education can improve and even transform lives for those who experience it, but not everyone has the same opportunities to access and successfully participate in higher education.
7. Young people who live in the geographic areas of England with the highest rates of participation in higher education are around three times more likely to enter higher education than those who live in the areas with the lowest participation.²
8. NCOP was introduced in January 2017 to help tackle this disparity, aiming to ensure that all young people have the chance to benefit from higher education if they want to, regardless of where they live or their background.
9. NCOP aims to rapidly reduce the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups by focusing on areas of the country where evidence suggests there is the greatest potential for impact. These are places where higher education participation by young people is low overall and lower than expected given their GCSE results.
10. Through the programme, 29 partnerships of universities, colleges, schools and other local agencies are delivering sustained and progressive programmes of higher education outreach with young people aged 13 to 18 (Years 9 to 13) in 996 target areas across England.³ Individual outreach programmes vary by partnership and are developed and shaped locally to meet the needs of the young people living within the target areas. A range of different activities form part of the sustained and progressive approach to delivering higher education outreach to young people.
11. Two of the most important aims for NCOP are to contribute to a stronger evidence base around 'what works' in higher education outreach and strengthen evaluation practice in the sector. A robust programme evaluation is in place to achieve this which involves both local partnership evaluation and independent programme-wide national evaluation.
12. Summarised evaluation findings are included in this report from independent evaluators CFE Research who have conducted the NCOP national level evaluation for phase one. CFE Research also conduct regular reviews of the evidence generated by partnerships' own local evaluation to integrate learning from the programme.
13. Figure 1 (map of partnerships) shows the coverage across the country, with the dots representing the location of the lead provider.

² POLAR – Participation of Local Areas: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/map-of-young-participation/

³ NCOP learner population estimates: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/182df796-a1cb-4cf8-9af2-7b1a72fac8ef/casward_populations.xlsx

Figure 1: Map of NCOP partnerships in phase one



14. Within the 29 NCOP partnerships a wide range of organisations are involved as core members, including:

- 164 further education colleges
- 122 universities
- 104 local organising bodies (including local authorities and local enterprise partnerships)
- 47 charities
- four other higher education providers

- 75 other organisations (including schools and sixth form colleges).
15. This demonstrates the diversity of organisations involved, highlighting the breadth and strength of collaboration across providers of higher and further education and key local organisations. Figure 2 depicts the partners involved in NCOP.

Figure 2: core members of the 29 NCOP partnerships, as reported in NCOP summer monitoring (18 October 2019)

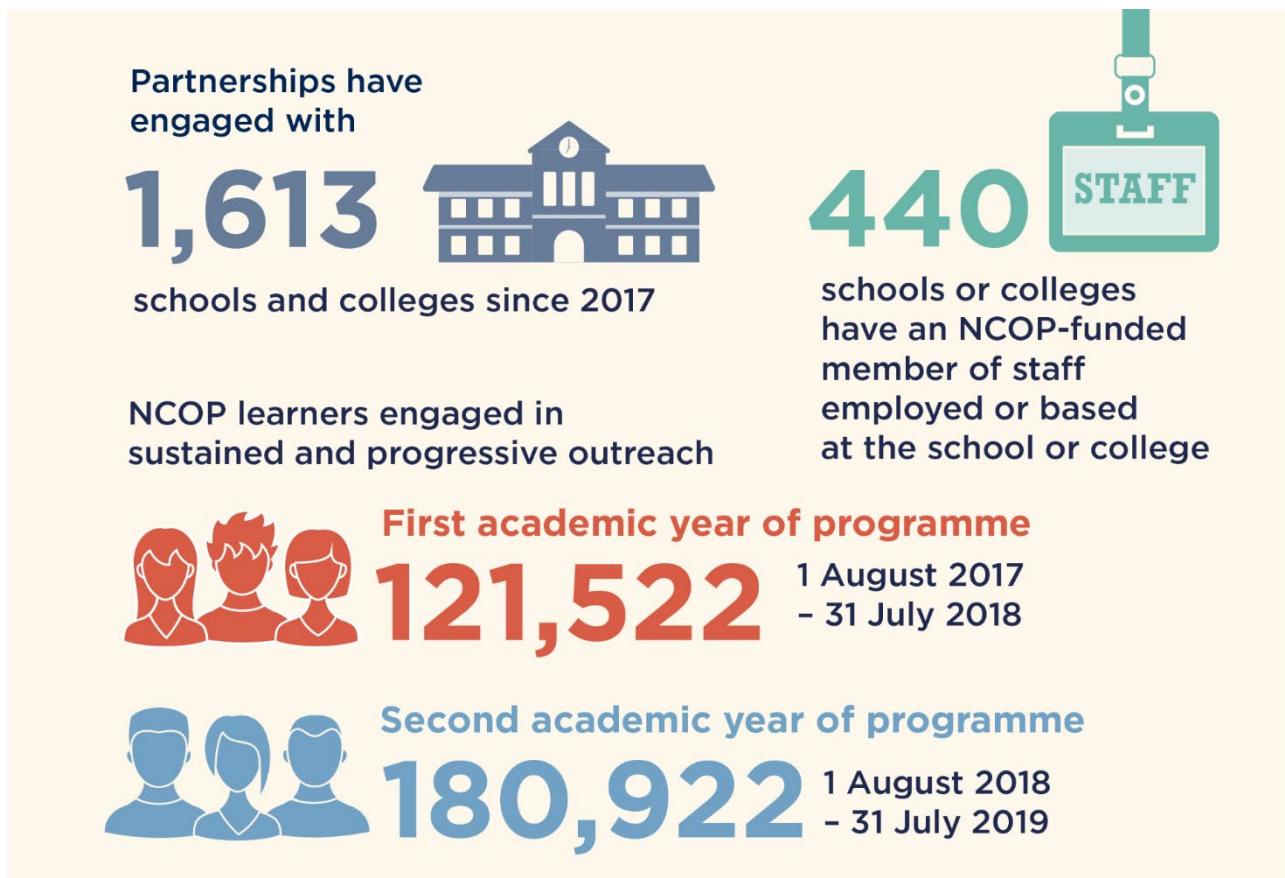


What has the programme achieved in year two?

16. In the second academic year of the NCOP programme (August 2018 to July 2019), there has been an increase in the number of young people engaged in sustained and progressive outreach compared to year one. In August 2018 to July 2019, the NCOP partnerships engaged with 180,992 targeted young people from NCOP wards, which compares to 121,520 in the previous academic year and points to the progress that partnerships have made in working with target learners.
17. Since January 2017, 246,204 NCOP learners have been tracked through the NCOP programme, which will allow us to measure their progression pathways after engagement in the programme. In phase one (January 2017 to July 2019), the NCOP partnerships have worked with 666,284 individual young people, including both targeted NCOP learners and non-NCOP learners in target schools.
18. Figure 3 sets out the number of targeted NCOP learners engaged in the programme and the number of participating schools and colleges. It shows that NCOP engaged with 1,613 schools and colleges between August 2018 and 2019. Of these, the majority were academy converter schools (580), academy sponsor led schools (436), further education colleges (184), community schools (141) and voluntary aided schools (101).

19. Partnerships work with schools and colleges in different ways, with 1,119 schools and colleges receiving funding directly from a partnership and 440 schools and colleges having NCOP staff based there to coordinate and deliver some of the activities offered to young people.

Figure 3: NCOP engagement headlines as reported in NCOP summer monitoring (18 October 2019)



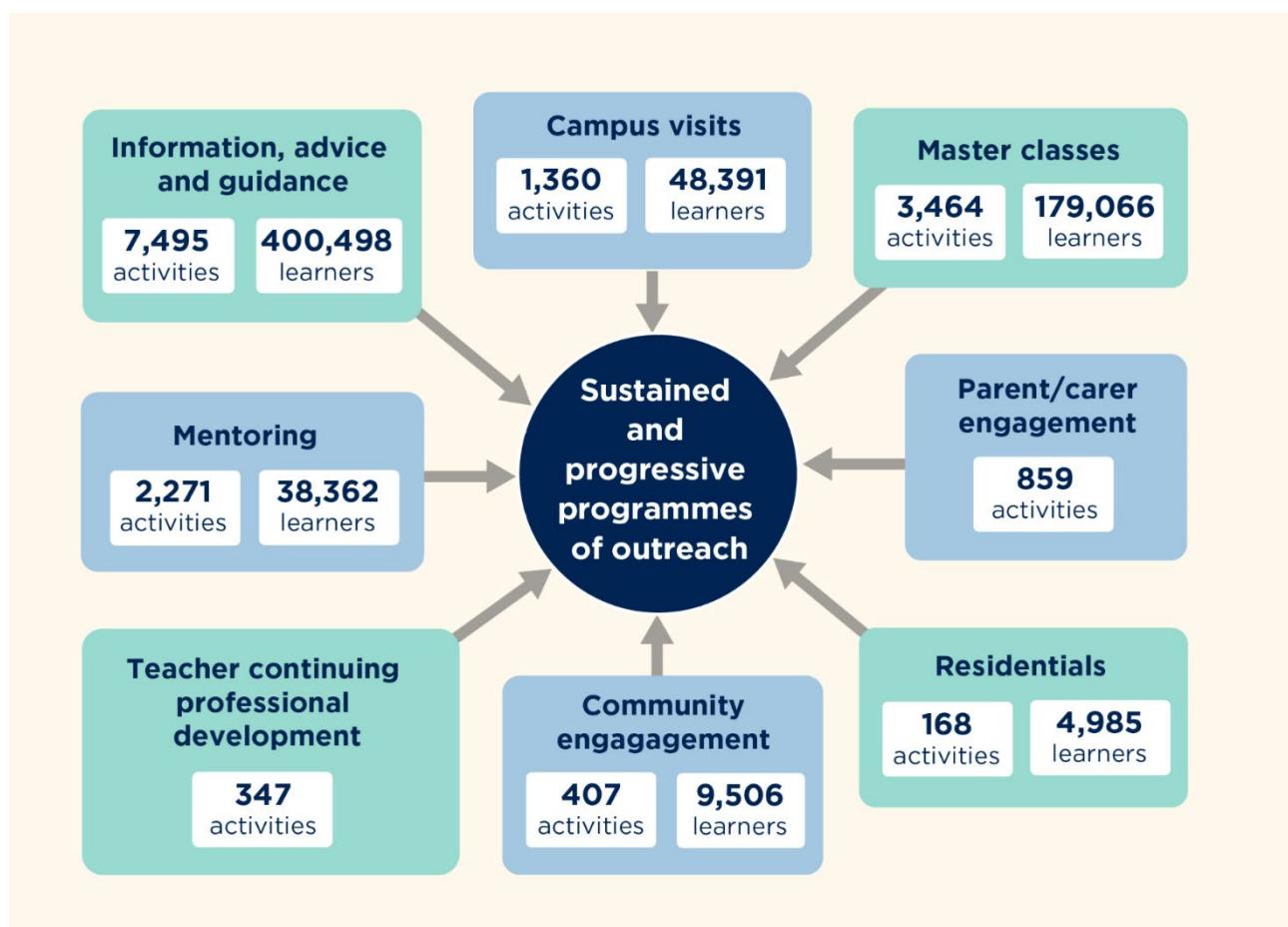
Activities and working with young people

20. Partnerships offer a range of different outreach activities and support to young people in target ward areas, tailoring these to specific needs of individual learners and using advice from local schools and colleges about what might be most effective in supporting young people to make an informed choice about their future options. Some of these activities will focus on demystifying some of the known barriers to higher education, for example explaining student finance (course fees, student loans and budgeting), understanding what university life is like by attending open days and speaking to current students, as well as building learner confidence and improving attainment.
21. Partnerships focus on delivering activities that are part of a sustained and progressive package which means that learners will receive support for a number of months or years (depending on their age at the start) that will grow and develop as they do. By experiencing a range of activities through different points of their educational journey, learners are equipped with the knowledge they need to better understand their capabilities and potential, and the opportunities that are available to them for the future.
22. NCOP partnerships also work with teachers, parents and carers as direct influencers on the future decisions of young people. As part of a suite of activities, partnerships may offer

continuing professional development (CPD) to teachers and careers advisers in schools to ensure that they have the most up to date, impartial and accurate information on the higher education opportunities for their pupils and the outreach activities that are available.

23. Similarly, NCOP partnerships may work directly with parents and carers, tailoring this to their specific needs and addressing the perceived barriers of higher education that can be prevalent. Partnerships may provide impartial, accurate information, advice and guidance on the diverse options available for their children and on the broader aspects of the higher education experience including student finance and accommodation.
24. Figure 4 sets out the broad categories of outreach activity and provides further data on the types of discrete activities (by category) and the number of individual learners engaged in these activities (by category) between 1 August 2018 and 31 July 2019. Some of the learners reported in these figures are not NCOP learners as some less intensive activities may involve partnerships working with larger school and college cohorts, for example speaking in school assemblies.
25. The number of individual parents, carers and teachers engaged in activities has not been collected.

Figure 4 – Categories of outreach activities by discrete number of times the activities took place and the individual learners were involved by activity category. Report in summer 2019 monitoring (18 October 2019)



26. Indications of positive benefits for young people can already be seen from the programme as demonstrated in the case studies that have been published alongside this report.⁴

Evaluation findings: How are NCOP learners responding to NCOP activities?

27. Early findings from the national participant survey and emerging evidence from partnerships' local evaluations suggest a positive impact of NCOP. The full evaluation report from CFE Research is available on the OfS website⁵ and is summarised below.

- Sustained and progressive outreach with multiple activities had a more positive impact on learners' higher education knowledge and attitudes than single or ad-hoc outreach activity.
- Higher education knowledge and attitudes were high at the baseline and remained high or improved at follow-up, though some groups were slightly less likely to show a positive change (learners with disabilities, black, Asian and minority ethnic students and male students).
- Different types of outreach achieve different learner outcomes, for example:
 - mentoring: improved knowledge and awareness of higher education, built confidence in finding information and post-18 decision making
 - campus visits: improved knowledge of available courses, the application process, expectations of student life, and graduate career prospects.
- No significant effects were found from the three randomised controlled trials run by selected partnerships (supported by Behavioural Insights Team), but key lessons and recommendations for running future randomised controlled trials are provided in the CFE Research evaluation report.

Involving learners

28. Partnerships have been involving learners (both NCOP learners and current higher education students) in much of their work to develop the programme. Examples of what this means in practice include:

- student forums involving NCOP learners from different year groups to co-produce and shape the activities being developed
- supportive peer group mentoring sessions where individuals are actively encouraged to support one another and offer advice where they feel comfortable
- involvement of learners in delivering assemblies as part of wider outreach activity

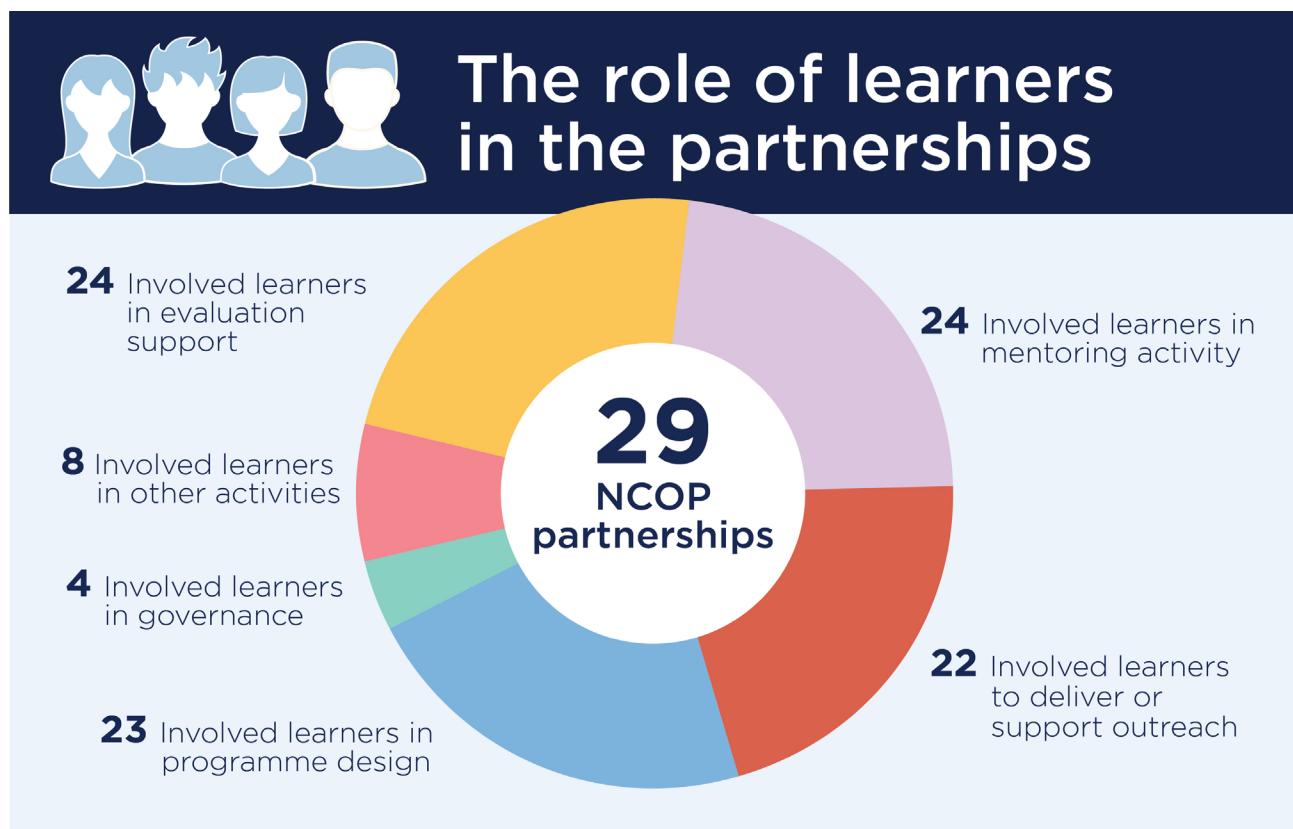
⁴ See: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/national-collaborative-outreach-programme-ncop/case-studies-in-words/

⁵ See: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/ncop-end-of-phase-one-evaluation-report/

- employment of student ambassadors (current higher education students) to deliver outreach activities on campus and in schools, support NCOP learners and support the evaluation of the programme
- learners feeding into the development of the partnership's progression framework.

29. Figure 5 sets out how partnerships have been able to involve learners in phase one of NCOP, with the majority involving them in project evaluation support and mentoring activity.

Figure 5: the role of learners as reported in summer 2019 monitoring (18 October 2019)



Collaborating with partners

30. Strong local collaboration is at the heart of the NCOP – it opens up a greater number of options and pathways for young learners, for example; opportunities to experience different types of higher education provider, and better strategic alignment of local and regional priorities through work with local enterprise partnerships (LEPs) and opportunity areas.
31. By the end of phase one in July 2019, the partnerships had engaged with a wider variety of partners. All of them were working with their local authorities and a high proportion with LEPs, local employers and the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC).

Figure 6: engagement with external stakeholders, as reported in NCOP summer monitoring (18 October 2019)



32. The opportunity to collaborate with a range of wider stakeholders has benefitted the partnerships and the programme. Some of the types of collaborative work that have taken place recently include:

- Development of an award-winning Fast Trackers programme with Network Rail and Mott Macdonald. This programme involved Higher Horizons+, Greater Manchester Higher and Future U NCOP partnerships, and was based around engineering and future careers linked to the development of HS2 across the North for learners on level 3 qualifications. This project expanded in 2019 to other NCOP partnerships around the country.
- Collaboration with the Greater Lincolnshire LEP and CEC in developing the Confident Choices Framework; a joint offer for all schools that supports all eight Gatsby Benchmarks. This provides an NCOP officer and enterprise co-ordinator for each school cluster, combining resources to develop one partnership agreement for each school, reducing duplication, focusing resources where most required and developing capacity within each school to be self-sustaining.
- A collaborative working relationship has been established between the WIN NCOP and the widening participation team at the Royal United Hospital in Bath. A number of WIN students from health and social care courses attended a three-day sixth form conference at the hospital where they found out about the many roles within the NHS and the required qualifications. The students observed an operation taking place and met the theatre staff afterwards in a question and answer session.

33. Further examples of effective collaborative working between NCOP partnerships and wider stakeholders will be shared on a programme level throughout phase two to encourage

partnerships to consider taking up similar opportunities. In phase two of the programme we are actively encouraging further collaboration between NCOP partnerships with wider stakeholders, for example through the issuing of joint guidance on collaborative working with CEC and the organisation of joint workshops with the National Citizens Service (NCS).

Evaluation findings: How are partnerships working to deliver NCOP?

34. To understand the progress of partnerships' programme implementation and delivery throughout phase one and to inform NCOP practice for the future, partnership surveys and field visits were conducted by CFE Research as part of the national evaluation.
35. Independent national formative evaluation found that NCOP partnerships have:
 - supported collaborative outreach delivery and evaluation
 - made progress in engaging parents and carers
 - raised teachers' awareness of the routes to and opportunities in higher education
 - minimised outreach engagement burden for schools and colleges
 - facilitated access to high-quality and impartial information, advice and guidance for young people
 - expanded the size and diversity of partnership members
 - facilitated innovative new outreach approaches
 - improved knowledge sharing and professional development
 - largely met local and national engagement targets
 - built relationships with schools and colleges to gain commitment
 - addressed outreach cold spots.

NCOP strengthening outreach evidence and evaluation practice

36. Two of the most important aims for NCOP are to contribute to a stronger evidence base around 'what works' in higher education outreach and to strengthen evaluation practice in the sector.
37. CFE Research run an evaluation survey annually of NCOP learners' knowledge, attitudes and expectations towards higher education and we can now see changes over the first year of NCOP (between autumn 2017 and autumn 2018). Survey data is combined with learner activity participation data to explore variations in how different groups responded to different types and intensities of activities. However, it isn't yet possible to say that this is due to NCOP until CFE Research incorporate a comparison group analysis in 2020.
38. One way of achieving the aim of strengthening the evidence base is by improving the volume and quality of research on the impact of different types and levels of outreach. Although providers have been encouraged to evaluate their access and participation activities in the past, NCOP represents a step change for many in the sector. In addition to developing and

maintaining evaluation capacity internally, partnerships have needed to gain the necessary support from schools and colleges for evaluation activity. The time and resources required to secure their buy-in, and the burden evaluation places on them, have presented barriers to engagement.

Partnership evaluation achievements

39. The key achievements for partnership evaluation activity identified through the evaluation are:

- Evidence on the effectiveness of delivery and the impact of different interventions on outcomes for learners is starting to emerge.
- Partnerships have developed the capacity to undertake evaluation with the support of the national evaluation team and have an evaluation lead charged with the implementation of their local evaluation plan.
- Effective strategies for securing the cooperation of schools and colleges with evaluation include providing financial incentives and staff resources to support data collection.

Local partnership evaluation recommendations

40. The main recommendations for partnership evaluation activity from the report are:

- More could be done to improve both the volume and strength of the evidence by moving from a focus on developing an understanding of **process** to capturing more robust evidence of the **impact** of NCOP and the relative effectiveness of outreach activities on learner outcomes.
- Limited use is currently being made of randomised control trials (RCTs) and quasi-experimental methods that compare the outcomes achieved by NCOP learners to a suitable comparison or control group to strengthen the attribution of impact.
- Reporting of local evaluation could be improved to ensure consistency in the information provided and greater transparency in terms of the methodological approach, sampling and response rates, and strength of the findings and conclusions.

Translating learning about effective evaluation into action for phase two

41. The CFE Research report highlights the importance of strengthening the evidence base for phase two of the programme along with the evaluation methodologies adopted by the local partnership evaluations.

Building evaluation capability in partnerships

42. The OfS will support NCOP partnerships to do this in phase two by funding an external capability building strand to the evaluation. The aim will be to increase programme evaluation capability support substantially by:

- providing phase two local evaluation plan review and feedback
- providing expert evaluation advice to partnerships through case manager support
- facilitating a community of practice

- capturing and sharing practical evaluation resources
- developing and supporting the use of shared evaluation measurement tools
- working with the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO)⁶ to gain direction on evidence gaps to focus local evaluations.

Future impact evaluation actions for phase two

43. A number of lessons were learned during phase one of the impact evaluation which will be drawn upon to strengthen the approach for phase two. This includes:

- Further research on:
 - the impact of information, advice and guidance on learners' intentions towards higher education
 - effective approaches to supporting the progression of disabled and black, Asian and minority ethnic learners
 - the barriers to progression experienced by male learners and the reasons for the differential impact of activities on males and females.
- Tracking of learners' intentions towards higher education over time to identify when and why dips in confidence occur and effective ways to address these.
- Research to understand the impact of NCOP on the particular providers learners intend to apply to and what subject they intend to study, in addition to whether they apply to higher education at all.
- Reviewing the participant survey approach to improve participant matching and school engagement
- Reviewing the approach to randomised controlled trials in phase two to learn from phase one.
- Significantly increasing evaluation capability support to help boost the local partnerships' ability to generate high quality evidence about what works in higher education outreach.

Programme recommendations for phase two

44. The OfS welcomes the recommendations from the CFE Research report on how partnerships can improve programme governance, communications and implementation for phase two of the programme.

45. As part of their recommendations on communications, the evaluators have identified that measures are required to address any uncertainty among schools and colleges about the aims and objectives of NCOP and the difference between NCOP and wider outreach activities available to them. Specifically the evaluators have recommended that:

⁶ Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes: <https://www.taso-he.org/>

'the OfS may wish to consider strengthening the national brand for NCOP and/or introducing a degree of consistency across local branding (e.g. a common strap line) to create a national identity which differentiates NCOP from wider provision'⁷.

46. The OfS aims to support partnerships in addressing this recommendation and has commissioned work on three distinct areas:

- Research with (a) schools and colleges and (b) parents and carers, to help understand how these key influencers perceive higher education outreach and access activity, including NCOP outreach activity and the marketing and branding of this activity⁸.
- Communications support focused on re-branding the programme with a focus on appropriate language and imagery for young people, parents and carers and teachers.
- A dedicated national website for an external audience and a social media campaign.

⁷ CFE Research, 'National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP): end of phase one report for the national formative and impact evaluations', see: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/ncop-end-of-phase-one-evaluation-report/

⁸ ICM Unlimited, 'Perceptions of higher education outreach and access activity', see: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/perceptions-of-higher-education-outreach-and-access-activity/

Phase two

47. Phase one of the programme finished in July 2019, with phase two starting from August 2019 and running through to July 2021. In addition to targeting sustained and progressive outreach in the same 997 ward areas, NCOP partnerships will have greater flexibility to work with a wider range of state-funded schools and colleges outside of NCOP target areas in phase two.
48. The aim is to provide an impartial single point of contact to locally available outreach activities and the delivery of specific activities to those learners who are most underrepresented in higher education. This will be delivered as ‘Outreach hubs’, as set out below in Figure 7. More information is available in the NCOP phase two guidance⁹ for partnerships.

Figure 7: Elements of the phase two programme



49. We were aware that partnerships were not always able to respond to requests from schools outside of NCOP target wards or work with students who were not from NCOP target wards but would be considered underrepresented learners in higher education. We have introduced outreach hubs in phase two to address this. The hubs will be able to provide a signposting service to wider outreach opportunities to all state-funded schools and colleges, including outreach activity that is funded through individual providers’ access and participation plans.
50. As an OfS-funded programme, the introduction of the outreach hub element in phase two means that there is greater complementarity with and support for provider-level activity within access and participation plans (APPs). This ensures that providers not only deliver their individual objectives through their APPs, but also work together to provide impartial and efficient advice in their local areas.
51. The OfS’s goals for the second phase of NCOP are to:
- reduce the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups¹⁰

⁹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/national-collaborative-outreach-programme-phase-two-guidance

¹⁰ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/about/measures-of-our-success/participation-performance-measures/gap-in-participation-between-most-and-least-represented-groups

- support young people to make well-informed decisions about their future education
 - support effective and impactful local collaboration by higher education providers working together with schools, colleges, employers and other partners
 - contribute to a stronger evidence base around ‘what works’ in higher education outreach and strengthen evaluation practice in the sector.
52. In phase two, partnerships will be able to use the recently launched Discover Uni¹¹ as a new resource to support learners who are interested in going into higher education. Discover Uni is an official and impartial source of information about higher education and is owned and operated by the UK higher education funding and regulatory bodies (the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the Office for Students and the Scottish Funding Council).
53. NCOP partnerships are expected to build upon the models of strategic collaborative activity which have developed within phase one of the programme. The level of strategic engagement partnerships have had with local partners and initiatives, such as LEPs and careers hubs, is varied. A greater focus on this activity will be expected in phase two and the infrastructure of the outreach hubs is intended to support this.
54. The outreach hubs are intended to create a sustainable infrastructure for the future so that the strong collaborative partnerships established through NCOP will continue after phase two of the programme has concluded and to complement and support the access activities identified in five year provider-level access and participation plans. Future OfS funding relating to access beyond 2021 will be considered as part of the wider OfS funding review, on which we will be consulting in 2020.

¹¹ Discover Uni: <https://discoveruni.org.uk/>

Conclusion

55. After two years of operation the NCOP programme has engaged with a large number of young people in schools and colleges through a range of impartial higher education outreach activities. NCOP has demonstrated the benefits of successful collaboration and the innovative approaches that can develop from it. The programme is also contributing to building a stronger evidence base of 'what works' in terms of higher education outreach through the local and national evaluations.
56. Through phase two of the programme, the OfS and the partnerships will reflect on the findings of the CFE Research evaluation report and will work collaboratively to implement the recommendations and increase the impact of the programme.
57. The introduction of the outreach hubs in phase two will provide greater opportunity for the work of NCOP to grow in an efficient and sustainable way and to provide greater links with and support for provider-level access and participation plans. This will be achieved through the signposting that they will be able to offer to all schools, the opportunity to come together to support activities for other learners who are underrepresented in higher education and to collaborate in new ways with a wider range of local partners and beneficiaries.



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