

Coronavirus Briefing note

Office for
Students

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Supporting disadvantaged students through higher education outreach

Introduction

Universities and colleges work with schools, local authorities and third sector organisations to support people who might not have traditionally entered higher education to do so. Through 'outreach' – programmes that provide advice and information about and experience of higher education – they raise awareness and expectations, removing barriers and creating pathways.

Outreach is delivered in schools and in the community as well as on campus, with many activities typically delivered face-to-face. Coronavirus restrictions including school and university closures mean that many of these activities are not currently possible, requiring other ways to engage potential students.

This briefing note looks at how universities, colleges and their partners are responding to the challenges of delivering outreach activities during the coronavirus pandemic. It does not stipulate particular approaches or endorse the actions of specific providers, and it does not constitute regulatory guidance. Its purpose is to highlight the practical steps universities, colleges and others are taking to ensure that they can continue to engage

Working with universities, colleges and other stakeholders, the Office for Students (OfS) is producing a series of briefing notes on the steps universities and colleges are taking to support their students during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The notes do not represent regulatory advice or guidance – their focus is on sharing ideas and responses, and signposting to further information. They reflect current information as at date of publication in a rapidly evolving situation.

with those most likely to benefit from higher education outreach.

Our briefing note on information, advice and guidance for prospective students also looks at aspects of this.¹

The role of outreach in supporting access to higher education

Considerable progress has been made in improving access to higher education during the past decade. Yet wide gaps in participation remain for some groups, and there are large differences in the participation rates of young people living in different parts of the country.²

Universities and colleges registered with the OfS must set out in access and participation plans how they will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education, and what outreach they will do to support that. Alongside this, the OfS-funded Uni Connect programme brings together 29 partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners to offer impartial outreach activities, advice and information on the benefits and realities of going to university or

The Office for Students is the independent regulator of higher education in England. We aim to ensure that every student, whatever their background, has a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers. We regulate to promote quality, choice, competition and value for money in higher education, with a particular remit to ensure access, success and progression for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups of students.

college. Through collaboration, the hubs deliver a coordinated outreach offer which allows schools to engage with higher education efficiently and effectively.³

Approaches to delivering outreach during the pandemic

Providing remote outreach online

Because of school closures, many universities and colleges have adapted their outreach model to engage learners online. Typical activities include virtual open days and summer schools, online mentoring, academic support and information, advice and guidance. There are a number of existing and emerging platforms that aim to support these efforts.⁴

Online approaches

The Sutton Trust: Online summer school programme

Sutton Trust Online aims to support 6,000 disadvantaged Year 12 students with their university and college applications. The new platform will incorporate all the features of the Sutton Trust's summer school programme, including academic content, advice and guidance on applications and student finance, and an insight into what university life is like.

NEON: Online platform delivered in partnership

Uni4Me is an online platform providing access to a wide range of online outreach activities suitable for learners of all ages. It has been created by the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON) in partnership with over 50 higher education organisations.

AccessHE: Online outreach through student advocates

AccessHE, the widening access and participation network for London, has launched its Student Advocate programme with the aim of putting current higher education students at the forefront of outreach work in the capital during the pandemic. The programme created a regional cohort of ambassadors for higher education who are delivering online outreach sessions to schools across London.

Providing remote outreach offline

To use online resources, learners need access to a suitable study space, appropriate technology and a sufficiently fast internet connection. Sutton Trust research found that just over a third of parents with children aged five to 16 reported that their child did not have their own computer, laptop or tablet to access the internet at home.⁵ Some innovative approaches do not require participants to have access to the internet.

Blended approaches

Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and Goldsmiths College: Blended summer art schools

Royal Central School of Speech and Drama and Goldsmiths College are adapting their collaborative summer school. Their 'blended model' offers both physical and online activity, enabling learners without access to technology or internet to take part.

Participants are sent a physical 'art box' of creative supplies. They are then invited to look at short 'how-to' videos, created by student ambassadors, lecturers and creative industry experts, which provide instructions and inspiration for using the supplies, alongside information on soft skills. The project will end with an online celebration event at which participants can present their work for virtual display.

GROWS: Blended learning careers booklet

The GROWS Uni Connect partnership in Gloucestershire has designed an interactive blended learning booklet, adapted from sessions run in school, for Year 9 and 10 learners researching potential future pathways and careers. Through quizzes and other interactive activities, they can explore post-16 pathways and qualifications, develop their interest in particular careers and courses, identify their own skills gaps, and set goals and actions to work towards their dream career.

The booklet includes activities that do not require internet access. Those that do are designed to be undertaken in short chunks and can be accessed on smartphones, tablets and other devices. Printed copies have been posted to the homes of students in those schools with the highest populations of widening participation learners.

Responding to the needs of learners from underrepresented groups

Engaging with learners from disadvantaged backgrounds

School closures resulting from the pandemic are expected to exacerbate inequalities and widen the existing attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers.⁶ Before the pandemic, disadvantaged pupils were over 18 months behind their more affluent peers in attainment by age 16.⁷ Time away from school is likely to widen this gap, which may be further exacerbated by lack of access to the resources needed to study effectively. Other challenges, such as increased poverty and food insecurity, are likely to indirectly affect attainment.⁸

Universities and colleges are therefore adapting to the needs of disadvantaged learners. For those in Year 13, the focus may be on study skills during school closure, preparedness and readiness for higher education, and information, advice and guidance about their final choices. These learners may also have concerns about the use of calculated grades in the light of cancelled summer exams.⁹ For earlier year groups, outreach might focus on curriculum support, making choices around Key Stage 4 or 5 study, building confidence and raising awareness and expectations of future opportunities.

Engaging disabled learners

Many disabled learners already face challenges at school or college as a result of their disability. The coronavirus pandemic may intensify these issues and raise new ones. For some students, school closures can exacerbate mental health issues.¹⁰ Online learning can also prove challenging for some neurodiverse learners. Outreach providers are recognising the need for digital activity and resources to be inclusive and accessible to all students.

University of Birmingham: Supporting underrepresented university applicants

The University of Birmingham outreach programme, Access to Birmingham (A2B), supports disadvantaged learners and those from underrepresented groups. Participants usually attend on-campus events, complete an academic assignment and receive an alternate offer (below the standard course offer) as well as enhanced financial assistance.

A survey of A2B applicants revealed that many had limited access to IT and the internet, as well as facing other pressures at home. As a result, the university decided that learners would not need to complete the usual academic assignment to benefit from its alternative offer and the benefits associated with the scheme this year. The outreach team has also developed additional online resources to complement the support available through the programme. A2B students have been offered one-to-one mentoring by a current undergraduate student to help with their preparation for higher education, and regular online chats with a member of the outreach team. Learners are also encouraged to complete a reflective task designed to support their preparation for university and help them develop the skills they will need to succeed.

LiNCHhigher: Using online video to engage learners with specific learning difficulties

The LiNCHhigher Uni Connect partnership has adapted its in-school activity to an online platform which hosts training modules and material, using individual learner and teacher information accounts. Pupils can be allocated work modules based on their individual learning needs and year group, as well as more targeted activities for underrepresented groups, and their progress can be tracked.

The platform currently contains 20 courses and over 100 videos, which are designed to engage learners – particularly those with specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia. By September 2020 it will host webinars and other real-time activities if restrictions on face-to-face activities are still in place.

Engaging Black, Asian and minority ethnic learners

There is evidence of a disproportionate impact of coronavirus on black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, which could increase the barriers to educational success and progression for these students.¹¹

Rare: Supporting black African and Caribbean applicants

Target Oxbridge is a programme run by Rare, a diversity specialist, that supports black African and Caribbean students who are applying to Oxford or Cambridge universities.

When planned events were cancelled, Rare wanted to ensure that applicants on the programme would still be able to benefit from talking to current black students at the universities about their concerns about fitting in at university. It moved the launch online, with a webinar featuring a discussion panel of black Oxbridge students.

Following the online launch it designed a 10-part webinar series using survey data to cater to participants' interests. Five podcast episodes provide advice to parents, teachers and learners, and feature a Target Oxbridge alumnus who has studied at Oxford or Cambridge. Rare is also providing tailored support to individual Target Oxbridge participants by phone and email.

King's College London: Supporting Gypsy, Roma and Traveller school students

Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children are among the least likely to go to university. They are also most likely to experience multiple types of deprivation, including lack of access to computers at home and parents who may be less able to provide homework support.

To increase progression to higher education among the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community, King's College London launched the RomBelong programme in 2018.

The college has adapted its approach and is collaborating with the Traveller Movement on its project to provide bespoke one-to-one tutoring for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families. Every tutor is matched individually to help with the needs of the family, using whatever technology they have access to. Where possible, tutors support them with work that the school has sent home. If the family cannot access this work or the student has finished what they have been set, they provide workbooks to help students continue learning. The Traveller Movement has supplied tablets for some of the families and King's College London has provided internet connections, as this is a major barrier for students living on sites.

Engaging vulnerable learners

The Children's Society has expressed concern about the impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable children, including those in poverty, refugee and migrant children, looked-after children and young carers.¹² While education in school is still being provided for the children of key workers and those

Go Higher West Yorkshire: Integrated school-based approaches to support vulnerable pupils

Go Higher West Yorkshire's Progression Officers are based in, and often employed by, target schools and colleges. During the pandemic these staff have been able to use school or college communication and home learning systems to offer outreach and support to learners. These staff have been involved in pastoral care and facilitating an individually tailored package of support including enhanced careers guidance and specialist tutoring – including for vulnerable learners physically attending school during the lockdown.

who are considered vulnerable, these groups may be at greater risk of financial insecurity, digital disadvantage, anxiety, isolation and many other challenges. This could have implications for their future progression.

Tailoring outreach to meet the needs of younger age groups

Outreach is most effective as a progressive, sustained programme of activity and engagement over time.¹³ Approaches should be planned, coherent and contribute to an incremental journey taking learners towards their educational goals. Outreach therefore tends to begin young: nearly all universities and colleges work with learners under the age of 16.¹⁴ This engagement remains important during the pandemic.

University of Surrey and HEON: Supporting younger secondary students in reading and writing

Recognising the disruption to English lessons and access to school and public libraries the University of Surrey and the Higher Education Outreach Network (HEON) are supporting learners with their reading.

The Book Quest provides students with books and access to an online portal on the HEON Outreach Hub website. There are two 'quests' (Years 7 to 8 and 9 to 11). Each lasts several months and involves reading four books, with digital certificates and rewards as an incentive. The portal contains a range of activities that enable the students to learn more about English language and literature. Students can complete assignments (quizzes to assess knowledge) or larger 'pursuit' projects involving cross-curricular activities and expeditions.

Students complete a pre-evaluation form that measures their confidence in reading and creative writing, and a final evaluation. The quizzes and activities are also used to assess levels of engagement and knowledge development. Parents and carers are encouraged to become involved and are given information about the books their child is reading.

Engaging with parents and carers

Outreach work with parents and carers can help disadvantaged pupils get into higher education.¹⁵

Make Happen: Support for parents and carers of secondary school children

The Make Happen Uni Connect partnership in Essex has organised two webinars for parents and carers of children in Years 7 to 13 who feel they need support during lockdown. The first focused on parents' and carers' concerns and challenges and on helping to equip them with the tools and knowledge needed to support and motivate their children. The second looked at other ways in which parents and carers could help their children with remote learning and home schooling to promote healthy and effective learning and soft skills development. The events were offered in both the morning and evening to facilitate attendance.

Engaging with mature learners

Universities and colleges also undertake outreach targeted at potential mature students, often in partnership with further education colleges, employers and community groups. The pandemic is likely to have disrupted this activity, at least in the short term, and economic pressures as the country comes out of the crisis may have a longer term impact on partners' ability to engage.

Birkbeck, University of London: Rethinking outreach with mature learners

The pandemic stopped all face-to-face activities with mature learner communities run by Birkbeck's Access and Engagement department. In response, the department reconsidered its method of activities, communications and overarching support, rapidly moving all community facing pre-entry programmes online. It is using a number of platforms to provide 'live' and 'watch later' advice and guidance interventions and has designed tailored guides to help participants navigate these new learning environments. It has also made extensive use of community Facebook groups, local newsletters, partners still working on the frontline, and messaging through the marketing and communications teams. Student ambassadors have provided insight sessions and advice to participants about the challenges and positives of learning from home and details of how they will be supported and prepared come the start of term.

Evaluating remote and online outreach

The amount spent on outreach activities has increased year on year over the last decade but there is too little robust evidence available about what is most effective in improving access and participation.¹⁶ This is in part due to the challenges of undertaking high quality evaluation in this area.¹⁷ However, things have improved in recent years and we are now seeing a genuine commitment to evidence and evaluation.

The OfS has placed great importance on the role of evaluation in our approach to access and participation. We are supporting the sector to improve evaluation practice and generate better evidence by providing practical guidance and toolkits¹⁸ and through funding the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO).¹⁹ We also work closely with higher education tracking services to help demonstrate whether outreach is effective, regardless of where students enrol.

With a rapid expansion in remote online outreach delivery, evidence and evaluation will be crucial to gauge the impact and effectiveness of new approaches, identify any issues, and learn and adapt accordingly. Many of the evaluation methods previously used, like online surveys, phone interviews and postal questionnaires, may still be applicable in current circumstances. However, data monitoring and collection may need to change to reflect changes in delivery. If a provider is using an online platform for an activity it should know what data it wants to capture and whether its chosen platform can provide this.

Southern Universities Network: Planning for monitoring, evaluation and research

The Southern Universities Network's research and evaluation team has created a monitoring, evaluation and research response plan which has enabled coherent communication across the partnership as well as supporting a consistent approach to ethical aspects of evaluation and providing robust evidence towards its local impact evaluation.

The response plan operates via a traffic light system, linked to the stages of the government's plan to lift restrictions. At each traffic light stage it has identified the risks to its monitoring, evaluation and research and identified how it will mitigate against this.

The network and six other Uni Connect partnerships have agreed to work together in mapping across evaluation themes addressed in online activity. By collating datasets the group hopes to gain robust validity in findings that support understanding of what works in online outreach delivery.

Ethics and safeguarding

There are a number of ethical and safeguarding issues to consider when delivering and evaluating digital outreach activities, including:

- data privacy and consent
- Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checking of personnel
- mechanisms for identifying and reporting risks or concerns
- ensuring appropriate support for participants, staff and volunteers
- adherence to university, college and school safeguarding policies and processes.

It is clearly extremely important to promote the welfare of outreach participants, as providers recognise. Further information and advice on safeguarding and ethics can be found in the resources section at the end of this note.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that working with schools during the pandemic has been challenging, and there are real concerns about the impact on students' attainment and expectations around higher education. However, the shift to online and blended modes of delivering outreach has the potential to lead to innovation in the longer term that could increase efficiency and effectiveness. Online and remote engagement with learners could be with us for some time, with blended approaches potentially becoming a more mainstream part of the outreach toolkit.

Outreach has an important role to play in mitigating the immediate and longer-term impacts of the pandemic, especially for the most disadvantaged students. And with these students and their communities likely to be most affected by the pandemic, it is more important than ever to make progress on access and success for all students, regardless of their background.

Further information and resources

Delivering remote outreach provision

Office for Students coronavirus briefing note on information, advice and guidance for prospective students: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/coronavirus-briefing-note-information-advice-and-guidance-for-prospective-students/.

Office for Students information about providers of online outreach provision: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/uni-connect-programme-an-update-from-the-office-for-students/>.

Department for Education guidance on safeguarding and remote education: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/safeguarding-and-remote-education-during-coronavirus-covid-19>.

The Key for School Leaders advice on safeguarding pupils and staff for remote learning: <https://schoolleaders.thekeysupport.com/covid-19/safeguard-and-support-pupils/safeguarding-while-teaching/remote-teaching-safeguarding-pupils-and-staff/>

The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children's advice on undertaking remote teaching safely: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/news/2020/march/undertaking-remote-teaching-safely>.

Online safety charity **South West Grid for Learning's** information on safe remote learning: <https://swgfl.org.uk/resources/safe-remote-learning/>.

The Sutton Trust shares what it has learnt about online delivery: <https://www.suttontrust.com/top-takeaways-for-online-delivery/>.

Paper by **Jon Rainford** on moving widening participation outreach online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13603108.2020.1785968>.

Evaluating remote outreach provision

BetterEvaluation blog series on adapting evaluation to respond to the pandemic: <https://www.betterevaluation.org/en>.

FHI 360 webinar on monitoring, evaluation and learning during the coronavirus pandemic: <https://www.fhi360.org/resource/monitoring-evaluation-and-learning-during-covid-19-webinar>.

London School of Economics and Political Science blog post on the practical and ethical considerations of carrying out qualitative research under lockdown: <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2020/04/20/carrying-out-qualitative-research-under-lockdown-practical-and-ethical-considerations/>.

Market Research Society guidance on undertaking safe face to face data collection: <https://www.mrs.org.uk/standards/undertaking-safe-face-to-face-data-collection>.

American Journal of Evaluation article on methods of rapid evaluation, assessment, and appraisal: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1098214007300895>.

Office for Students information and guidance on standards of evidence and evaluation self-assessment tool: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation-and-effective-practice/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluation-self-assessment-tool/.

Office for Students research into the evaluation of outreach interventions for under-16-year-olds: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/understanding-the-evaluation-of-access-and-participation-outreach-interventions-for-under-16-year-olds/.

TASO step-by-step guide for effective impact evaluation: <https://taso.org.uk/evidence/evaluation/>.

Public Health England guidance on rapid evaluation of digital health products during the pandemic: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/rapid-evaluation-of-digital-health-products-during-the-covid-19-pandemic>.

Study Higher blog post about its new toolkit for creating, monitoring and evaluating online activity: <https://outreachevaluationhub.org/blog/index.php?entryid=19>.

British Psychological Society ethics guidelines for internet-mediated research: <https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/ethics-guidelines-internet-mediated-research-2017>.

We thank those universities, colleges and other organisations that provided the case studies in this briefing note. These case studies and interventions have been developed at pace and have not yet been evaluated for effectiveness. They are offered in the spirit of sharing practice that others may find useful and applicable in their own contexts.

Notes

¹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/coronavirus-briefing-note-information-advice-and-guidance-for-prospective-students/.

² See <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education-2019>.

³ See <https://www.ofsuniconnect.org>

⁴ See <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/uni-connect-programme-an-update-from-the-office-for-students/>

⁵ See <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/internships-pay-as-you-go/>.

⁶ See <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/covid-19-resources/best-evidence-on-impact-of-school-closures-on-the-attainment-gap/> and <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/disadvantage-gap-covid-19/>.

⁷ See <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/disadvantage-gap-covid-19/>.

⁸ See [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667\(20\)30084-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanpub/article/PIIS2468-2667(20)30084-0/fulltext).

⁹ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/exceptional-arrangements-for-exam-grading-and-assessment-in-2020>.

¹⁰ See <https://chartered.college/2020/05/07/chartered-college-publishes-report-into-potential-implications-of-school-closures-and-global-approaches-to-education/>.

¹¹ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-review-of-disparities-in-risks-and-outcomes>.

¹² See <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/resources-and-publications/the-impact-of-covid-19-on-children-and-young-people-0>.

¹³ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-strategy-for-access-and-student-success>.

¹⁴ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/understanding-the-evaluation-of-access-and-participation-outreach-interventions-for-under-16-year-olds/.

¹⁵ See <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/evaluating-access/>.

¹⁶ See <https://taso.org.uk/news-item/report-evidence-widening-access-to-higher-education/>.

¹⁷ See <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180511112322/https://www.offa.org.uk/egp/improving-evaluation-outreach/impact-outreach-young-first-family/>.

¹⁸ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation-and-effective-practice/.

¹⁹ See <https://taso.org.uk/>.