



Young people's educational futures and the 'value' of outreach

SLN:COP Research and Evaluation Report



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Contents

1. Acknowledgements	4
2. Executive Summary	5
2.1 Evaluation Headline Findings.....	5
2.2 Research Headlines.....	6
3. List of Abbreviations	8
5. Context: Young people’s educational futures and the value of outreach.....	10
5.1 Widening Participation	10
5.2 National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP)	12
5.3 The Sussex Learning Network (SLN)	13
5.4 SLN:COP Strategy and Approach	13
6. Research and Evaluation Strategy	15
7. Evaluation	16
7.1 Evaluation Forms	16
6.3 Learner Survey	16
6.4 Practitioner Survey	16
8. Research.....	17
8.1 Learner Focus Groups	17
8.2 Interviews	17
8.3 Case Studies	18
8.4 Data Analysis.....	18
9. Support, Consultancy and Community	19
9.1 Research and Evaluation Toolkit.....	19
9.2 Consultancy and Training	19
9.3 Regional Fora	19
9.4 Community of Practice	19
10. Evaluation Findings	20
10.1 Findings from CfE Survey	20
10.2 Findings from SLN:COP Evaluation Forms and Learner Surveys	22
10.3 Findings from Practitioner Survey	24
11. Research Findings	27
11.1 Space, place and complex lives.....	28
11.2 Circumstance, ‘choice’ and support	31
11.3 Outreach should be delivered <i>with</i> and not <i>to</i> young people.....	34
11.4 Meaningful outreach for the real world	37
11.5 Parents, near peers and siblings as under-utilised key influencers.....	40

11.6 The need for whole community approaches to outreach.....	44
11.7 Regional solutions for localised contexts and challenges.....	47
11.8 The benefits and needs of a distributed model.....	50
11.9. Young peoples’ decision making in a climate of risk	53
11.10 New and globalised approaches to outreach	56
13. Recommendations: Young people’s educational futures and the ‘value’ of outreach	59
14. References	64
15. Appendices	66
.....	66

1. Acknowledgements

We wish to thank all those who gave their time and energy to filling in surveys and evaluation forms and taking part in focus groups and interviews. Your collected knowledge and experiences allowed us to better know how to support young people to achieve the futures they desire. Thank you!



Figure 1: SLN:COP Learners on a careers visit to the City of London

2. Executive Summary

The following report presents a summary of the research and evaluation findings for the first two years of substantial activity of the Sussex Learning Network National Collaborative Outreach Programme (SLN:COP), between January 2017 and January 2019.

SLN:COP allocated funds to schools, colleges, universities, local authorities and community groups to deliver outreach programmes to young people in Years 9-13, who are between 13-19 years of age. This work focused on local areas where higher education participation is lower than might be expected given the GCSE results of the young people who live there. From January to August 2018 (the last data cut off point for writing this report) SLN:COP has reached **7,427** young people, a **49.9%** engagement rate, exceeding the indicated target of 28%. Over 61,000 outreach activities have taken place to date, including mentoring, assemblies, workshops, IAG sessions, taster events, UCAS application support and careers fairs.

The effectiveness and impact of these activities has been assessed using the SLN:COP Research and Evaluation Framework ([Section 6](#)). This provided a strategic direction for the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data collected between November 2017 and December 2018 including:

- 1,610 learner evaluation forms and survey responses from NCOP learners¹
- 38 responses from SLN:COP staff to our practitioner survey
- 22 interviews with teachers, education professionals and heads of community organisations
- 39 Year 9 NCOP pupils taking part in two focus groups across 4 schools
- 37 Year 12 NCOP pupils taking part in two focus groups across 4 schools
- 10 in-depth case studies of 7 further education NCOP learners and 3 parents

2.1 Evaluation Headline Findings

These findings draw on analysis of the learner evaluation forms and learner survey responses. These were both designed to measure the impact (before/after) of activities on 4 areas of our evaluation framework: learners' **knowledge** (feeling better informed about higher education including options, costs, experiences) **self-confidence** (feeling more positive about themselves and their educational futures) **aspiration** to go to higher education (their decision or the likelihood of them making that decision) and **ability** to pursue choices (enhanced practical and personal resources to negotiate their educational futures, including overcoming challenges).

1. **60% of NCOP learners' parents had not been to university and 12% didn't know whether their parents had been to university.** This finding confronts assumptions about the nature of the link between parental education and other proxy measures of disadvantage, as well as highlighting the complex ways 'knowledge' about higher education is passed on (or not) through inter-generational discussions.
2. **All SLN:COP funded activities had a positive impact on learners**, evidenced by a **6%** average increase in responses of Strongly Agree/Agree after learners took part in activities. This was across three out of four areas of the evaluation framework (a 14% mean increase across knowledge, 7% across ability, 3% in self-confidence but a -2% in aspiration to go to university). Taking the online survey data alone, **all areas saw an increase**. However, this

¹ Calculating the proportion of learners captured is problematic as this 1,610 figure may include repeat submission from the same learners. However, if 7,427 young people have received activity from SLN:COP so far, the numbers captured via our survey/evaluation data represent 22% of that figure.

survey had a higher representation from Year 9s, suggesting the likelihood to ‘aspire’ to go to higher education decreases over time.

3. The outreach activities young people rated most highly in the learner survey were **visits to a university** followed by **work experience** and **motivational assemblies**. The reasons given in the qualitative comments focused on gaining real-life, experiential insights into higher education e.g. *‘they were able to give me a bigger view in my future’*; having practical experiences that they wouldn’t have had otherwise e.g. *‘because you’re actually achieving something by doing this’* and gaining useful information *‘I feel I learnt the most’*.
4. The question with the strongest evidence of change relates to **knowledge** – *‘I understood how higher education funding works’* at 23% increase in Strongly Agree/Agree combined. The question with the weakest evidence of change was *‘I was planning to go into higher education in the future’* at 1%. This suggests that increased outreach may not result in increased participation but that, through SLN:COP work, young people are overall better informed about their future education and employment pathways.

2.2 Research Headlines

Drawing on analysis of the interviews, focus groups and case studies, our research indicates the following 10 key findings.

1. **Young people are more than just a postcode.** As a proxy measure, the use of postcode is too blunt and does not enable attention to other relevant aspects of identity and experiences, including ethnicity. This suggests an urgent need for multiple measures of educational disadvantage.
2. **The most marginalised young people experience chaotic lives and engage in complex decision making, with few support structures.** The strategic, well-informed student, making ‘logical’ choices from a plethora of higher education products, supported by an educationally rich family is atypical for many NCOP learners. In addition, NCOP’s focus *only* on young learners making a traditional linear trajectory into higher education is problematic for learners who may need to access higher education later in life and/or via part-time or flexible learning. This suggests a need to understand NCOP students as heterogeneous.
3. **Outreach should be delivered *with* and not *to* young people.** Young people felt as if their needs and interests were rarely consulted and described university as being ‘sold’ to them through a range of disconnected providers. This suggests a need for personalised and independent approaches to progression, including that delivered through school and college, in which young people were also able to input, shape and lead the nature of this outreach provision.
4. **The most successful outreach offered young people meaningful and realistic experiences of higher education.** Teachers, parents and young people saw the value of outreach that showed a picture of everyday life where people ‘like them’ lived, worked and studied, showing many a ‘new world’ that they would be motivated to work towards. Moreover they valued activities that offered meaningful opportunities to develop their skills. This suggests best practice should be informed by a philosophy of meaningful and realistic outreach.
5. **Near peers and siblings are highly significant in shaping young people’s futures.** While the role of parents and carers in educational decision making is known to be highly significant, our research revealed how near-peers, siblings and friends are key social influencers in young people’s lives and are often under-utilised in outreach activities. This suggests a need to consider family more broadly and to explore how siblings and near peers can be drawn upon in outreach activity.

6. **There is a need for a coherent whole community strategy on outreach.** Those studying and working in NCOP regions spoke of their deep connection to their wider communities, indicating a need for outreach to think beyond the education sector for its solutions. This suggests the value of collaborative multi-agency working with community members, local business and public sector organisations, as well as educational providers.
7. **NCOP offered the opportunity for regional solutions to the challenges of coastal and rural population.** This suggests a need for NCOP to integrate with careers and enterprise strategies to ensure that higher education and career progression is locally contextualised and appropriately targeted to meet young people’s needs and those of local employers.
8. **Distributed funding to schools offers significant value but requires enhanced cross-sector understanding.** Schools are ideally placed to provide education and careers guidance for young people that is relatively independent, personalised and embedded into everyday classroom conversations at an early age. However, there was a need for cross-sector training and understanding. This suggest a gap for high quality CPD for teachers and other relevant professionals to ensure outreach good practice can be shared and replicated.
9. **Outreach needs to consider the emotional realities of higher education decision making.** Young people commonly used terms such as ‘pressure’ ‘fear’ and ‘uncertain’ when talking about their educational futures. This suggests that outreach may be need to learn lessons from, or make connections with, mental health provision to better support young people.
10. **Outreach needs to modernise and globalise.** The world of further and higher education is in continual flux, with increased globalisation, marketization, digitisation and commodification. This suggests a need for higher education policy makers and institutions to offer provision that meets the need of a changing global workforce by more flexible opportunities (including part-time, adult education and distance learning), as well as look beyond regional and national borders to ensure students can have equitable access to global education and career opportunities.



Figure 2: One of our SLN:COP project leads in her secondary school.

3. List of Abbreviations

CfE	An independent research organisation conducting the national evaluation of the NCOP programme, including a national learner survey.
CEIAG	Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance – a curricula or programme of work to support the careers decision making of young people.
CPD	Continuous Professional Development – refers to training and guidance provided in a work or professional context.
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England – the previous organisation funding the NCOP programme until April 2018, now Office for Students.
NCOP	The National Collaborative Outreach Programme 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 higher education participation is lower than might be expected given the GCSE results of the young people who live there.
OfS	Office for Students – the regulator and competition authority for the higher education sector in England who currently fund the NCOP programme from April 2018.
SLN	Sussex Learning Network – the consortia commissioned to undertake the programme of outreach in Sussex.
SLN:COP	Sussex Learning Network National Collaborative Outreach Programme – the programme of NCOP funded outreach.
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths.
UCAS	University and Colleges Admission Service – the online application system for British universities.



Figure 3: Year 10 pupils taking part in the SLN:COP funded 'Be the Change' programme

4. Introduction: SLN:COP Research and Evaluation

'This report presents a summary of the research and evaluation findings for the first two years of substantial activity of the Sussex Learning Network National Collaborative Outreach Programme (SLN:COP) between January 2017 to January 2019.

SLN:COP allocated funds to schools, colleges, universities, local authorities and community groups to deliver outreach programmes to young people aged 13-18. This work is focused on local areas where higher education participation is lower than might be expected given the GCSE results of the young people who live there. So far, SLN:COP has reached 7,427 young people, a 49.9% engagement rate, exceeding the indicated target of 28%. Over 61,000 outreach programmes have taken place to date, across a suite of activities including mentoring, assemblies, workshops, IAG sessions, taster events, UCAS application support and careers fairs.

The effectiveness of these activities has been assessed using the SLN:COP Research and Evaluation Framework This comprised of the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data collected between November 2017 and December 2018. This was led by Dr Tamsin Hinton-Smith and Dr Emily Danvers, with assistance from Data Officers Clare Everett and Holy Lewis.

The findings show that...

It is important going forward that we continue...

Sarah Williams

Director, Sussex Learning Network

5. Context: Young people's educational futures and the value of outreach

Our research and evaluation findings about the experiences of young people engaging in outreach as part of the SLN:COP programme are better understood within their broader context. This includes situating NCOP – the current programme of activity focused on supporting young people to access higher education – within a policy framework of widening participation. It also includes a brief explanation of the history and operating structure of the Sussex Learning Network.

5.1 Widening Participation

The UK has traditionally been perceived as leading the agenda to widen participation in higher education (Burke, 2013), and successive governments have been keen to emphasise their success in both increasing higher education participation and closing the gap in participation between the rich and poor. There have been undoubted substantial gains both in actual participation and in wider cultures of understanding and commitment in the half century of successive British governments' widening participation agendas. However, it is important that growing participation does not necessarily negate the persistence of inequalities. Higher education gaps continue, within a sector that remains highly stratified including in terms of differences in participants' university choices, experiences, outcomes and life benefits. It is vital that we measure the success of widening participation initiatives in terms of retention, outcomes and graduate journeys – young people must not simply be 'dropped' in higher education and a success declared.

Higher education inequalities are the outcomes of educational gaps that start early and open up as young people move through their education journeys. This necessitates the development of deep and wide understanding into the relevant factors at play. The mechanisms that inform young peoples' progression pathways are a complex constellation of their own contextualised decision-making, and that of other decision-making gatekeepers in their educational trajectories, including school and university teachers and outreach professionals. These key adults are invariably well-intentioned and committed to supporting their students, often informed by coming from widening participation backgrounds themselves. We need to develop greater understanding of how such 'guides on the side' support and inspire young people they work with. Yet the efficacy of their work can also be hampered by lack of knowledge and resources, as well as the mediating influence of wider problems in young peoples' lives beyond the sphere of education. This includes specific challenges relating to the localised geographical contexts from which young people come, that may include lack of access to secure and quality jobs, as well as available education opportunities, and wider social problems including potential for attraction to the criminal economy. A key area of progress is an increase in developing focus and understanding around core groups of young people who are targets of widening participation, and this is an important area to continue to take forward. Debate persists around the efficacy of the various so-called 'proxy measures' of educational disadvantage for young people including Pupil Premium, Low Participation Neighbourhood, and First in Family or First Generation Scholar. There remains also no agreed measure, not only of how to target widening participation, but also what counts as a successful outcome.

Further, persistent gaps in higher education participation are not only the residue of stubborn past inequalities. Participation inequalities can be seen as mapping to new and emergent insecurities including the introduction of fees in 2010 and ensuing concerns around the perceived 'risk' of investing in higher education (Hinton-Smith, 2016); the end of Aimhigher and through this universities' external accountability for widening participation success; and the replacement of universal Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) with the National Bursary Programme. Sitting within the wider context of welfare reform and austerity, these developments have raised the challenge for the higher education sector as it works to increase participation by young people from

socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The combination of influencing factors in mediating the higher education decision-making of prospective students from the most financially vulnerable backgrounds has been referred to as a 'toxic mix' (Finlay, 2014). Contemporarily significant developments for young people include an increase in diagnosis of mental health problems; and the widespread social implications of the potential of Brexit to disrupt the opportunity trajectories of emergent generations of young adults as they progress through education and into employment. These distinctive yet related social trends among others are not separate but map importantly onto young peoples' higher education possibilities and decision-making.

Also relevant to outcomes for young people are developments in the provision of widening participation itself. The slide of widening participation into the marketing and recruitment agenda within many institutions, has implied new pressures that can include, but are not restricted to, pressure to prioritise outreach over support for existing students; conflation of audit and evaluation; and focus on those young people perceived as potential 'quick wins', at the expense of the hardest to reach who are arguably most in need of support. In recruitment and marketing dominated provision, there can be fear of working with the most vulnerable young people who staff are not used to and do not feel confident whether their efforts will translate into acceptance of a place and success at their institution. Such an approach to widening participation has a specific agenda that is seen as out of sync with supporting young people's own choices as agentic decision makers in their own lives. It also implies an increased responsibility for universities to interrogate the targeting and impact of their institutional policies to both widen access and increase student numbers. As widening participation becomes increasingly about measurability, it is seen as important that identifying value and success needs not to become buried only in measurable targets, with a concurrent risk that social justice agendas get left behind (Harrison and Waller, 2017).

What constitutes 'widening participation' activity comprises a variable set of practices – from outreach work in the community to specialist summer schools or mentoring programmes. Traditionally, this agenda appeared to be directed from higher education institutions themselves in specialist outreach departments, yet with concurrent pressures on schools to demonstrate progression and further education colleges providing higher education programmes, the sector has proliferated. Naturally, policy makers and governments (mindful of both budgets and demonstrating impact) are keen to know 'what works'. Indeed, this was the subject of a key research programme co-ordinated by the Higher Education Academy between 2008-2017. This found that work to improve student access, retention and success was most successful when it was collaborative, ongoing and part of a programme of measures, rather than being standalone 'quick fixes'. It also highlighted the importance of institution wide, research-informed approaches to developing solutions for access, retention and success (Thomas, 2012). This finding chimes with research into widening participation outreach work that showed that sustained (long-term, rather than a one-off) and progressive (building towards something, rather than standalone) activity is most successful. It also highlighted the need to conduct outreach with younger pupils in primary school and the need for higher education providers, schools, colleges, employers and other partners working closely together to ensure young people are well-supported (DBIS, 2014).

That said, the research found no compelling evidence for exactly *what* to do and for *whom*. Developing insight into the complexity of young peoples' journeys and the nuancing of success can be challenging, and require more in depth understanding than that provided by standard tracking requirements. Indeed, there are a complex mix of reasons for why this might be the case, most notably the challenges in attributing a young person's 'decision' to a specific moment or activity provided. Yet exploring 'what works' continues to be a key driver for funding, running and taking

part in outreach work to ensure effectiveness, value for money and impact. While we would not dispute this agenda entirely, it constitutes a partial lens for conceptualising the intricate web of young people's lives as they interact with education and a limited definition of 'value' that rarely moves beyond quantitative measures.

5.2 National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP)

This report focuses on work carried out as part of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), a £60 million per year funding initiative in England. The first phase of the programme started in January 2017 and aimed to support the government's social mobility goals by rapidly increasing the number of young people from underrepresented groups who go into higher education. Phase two will commence on 1 August 2019 with proposals for more intense and targeted work.

NCOP brought together 29 regional partnerships across England, each made up of consortia of universities, colleges and other local partners, working together to deliver outreach programmes to young people in Years 9-13, aged 13-19. NCOP has been designed to be shaped locally to meet the needs of young people living within the target areas, with consortia working collaboratively to decide on the best approach for their area.

The level of participation of young people in higher education in England varies across the country. NCOP intervention has focused on young people living in particular geographic areas where higher education participation is lower than might be expected given the GCSE results of the young people who live there. The emphasis is therefore on working with young people who choose not to go into higher education despite achieving or being on track to achieve the entry requirements. NCOP work is intended to support government targets to double the proportion of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education by 2020. Specific additional areas of focus have included to:

- Increase by 20% the number of students in higher education from ethnic minority groups
- Address the under-representation of young men from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education.

NCOP has utilised data on areas with an unexplained gaps or cold spots in higher education participation to determine where investment can be best targeted to boost the numbers of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds going into higher education. This process led to the identification of the 997 'wards' which are the focus of the NCOP. These postcode-based wards have:

- Low levels of young participation (POLAR3 Q1) and lower than expected levels of young participation, considering Key Stage 4 attainment and ethnicity (Q1 or Q2), or
- Low levels of young participation (POLAR3 Q1) and lower than expected levels of young participation, considering Key Stage 4 attainment only (Q1 or Q2).

NCOP funding offered opportunities for more sustained engagement work with young people as they undertake the complexities of their locally contextualised higher education decision making journeys. In addition, a further emphasis of the NCOP approach is on fostering a 'collaborative' approach through partnership working between the variously skilled stakeholders engaged in consortia networks. NCOP aimed to facilitate relationship building and work to close the loop between often traditionally separated stakeholder groups of outreach design and delivery, teaching and progression guidance, and research and evaluation; fostering greater collaboration to enhance understanding and through doing so, maximise gains.

5.3 The Sussex Learning Network (SLN)

“The SLN has a proud history of uniting tertiary education across Sussex to provide educational opportunities for learners from disadvantaged groups.”

Professor Jane Longmore – Chair of the Sussex Learning Network.

The Sussex Learning Network (SLN) is the consortia undertaking the NCOP project in Sussex. SLN was formed in 2005 as a strategic partnership of further education colleges and higher education institutions working together to ensure local people are fully supported to realise their full potential, across Sussex (and into Surrey). It is supported by three Local Authorities, two Local Enterprise Partnerships and a network of independent training providers.

The specific aims of the SLN NCOP (SLN:COP) were to develop innovative approaches and new understandings informed by and informing what works in widening participation practice. With a central focus on closing the gap between key stakeholder perspectives in widening participation, our closely collaborative approach develops opportunities to bring together diverse voices including widening participation practitioners, young people, parents, teachers, community organisations, and academics.

Key to SLN’s approach is applying insights generated through previously commissioned SLN research, most notably that by Gazeley, Hinton-Smith and Shepherd, 2017 and Stone de Guzman, 2017. These reports foreground insights around the importance of fostering collaborative approaches between key stakeholders to facilitate effective widening participation; and have centrally informed our distinctive approach to the NCOP project. We recognise that approaches that are too top-down and prescriptive without adequate space for consultation are seen as pulling against opportunities for innovation, creativity and effectiveness. Moreover, raising aspirations for disadvantaged young people also means working with the perceptions of teachers, university staff, and careers advisors in terms of *their* aspirations for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This requires interrogating underpinning institutional cultures and their assumptions around diverse students. It also means all stakeholders in widening participation being willing to reflect critically on existing practice to interrogate strengths and weaknesses; and collaborating to knowledge-share and co-produce new and more effective strategies to address persistent sticking points in participation inequalities. We see engaging these multiple stakeholders directly as active partners in informing the direction of initiatives and developing best practice as key to ensuring effective widening participation policy and practice for the future.

Sitting alongside SLN’s philosophy of collaboration, is an equally important focus on engaging and listening to previously silenced voices including those of young people and parents, with a view to critically considering: *what can pupils and parents tell us about what needs doing?* Widening participation work engages these groups but too often does outreach *to* rather than *with* them. Our supported SLN:COP projects and evaluation approach have placed at centre stage the need to listen to the lessons we can learn from these key stakeholder groups about what is needed. This is vital to developing understanding and informed responses to *why* young people do not go to university, rather than simply seeking to encourage them to do so.

5.4 SLN:COP Strategy and Approach

SLN’s consortia distributed NCOP funds to universities, colleges, schools and community organisations in the Sussex region to enable them to run a diverse series of projects. Overseen by a core team of project managers within SLN, these projects ranged from mentoring programmes aimed at BAME young people across Sussex, direct funding to schools to fund higher education

'champions' to an innovation fund to undertake research. A summary of the funded projects can be found at <https://www.sussexlearningnetwork.org.uk/projects/>.

These projects all aimed to:

- Gain a better understanding of vulnerable groups and the barriers that they face in accessing, and remaining in higher level learning
- Provide a flexible and responsive offer, which can be tailored and offer a broad-range of activities dependent on learner need, and their families/carers/communities to enable progression into Level 4+ learning
- Offer a mixed methodology of delivery of outreach and study, with some taking place online, at school, in the community, at FE/HE, in a work environment
- Support attainment raising and skills development in young people to support and enable progression
- Provide access to funds to overcome practical barriers, such as transport and subsistence
- Develop sustained and progressive programmes which can reach out to young people and support their journey through education
- Monitor and evaluate what is meaningful and effective through impact research

Our role, as research and evaluation managers within SLN, was to consider what value these different projects offered and to whom and gather a range of forms of evidence about how best SLN's partners can continue to effectively support young people throughout their educational trajectories to see higher education as a possible future.



Figure 4: A SLN:COP funded 'higher education champion' in a secondary school.

6. Research and Evaluation Strategy

Given some of the concerns outlined above – from the complex range of projects funded by SLN:COP, our desire to rethink the ‘value’ of outreach beyond quantitative measures and the need to empower and utilise the voices of our SLN:COP partners as partners in our research – we set about designing a programme of research and evaluation. This aimed to explore the impacts and value of outreach, as well as consider broader contextual issues that shape how outreach might be received, understood and valued.

Our philosophy was informed by principles of social justice, in playing close attention to how data gets collected, produced and interpreted. For example, we were mindful of the dynamics of academic researchers entering classrooms as ‘transient’ strangers asking young people to give experiences and perspectives with us. Consequently, we ensured these focus groups were led by their voices and ideas for what they would like to see in future outreach activity, rather than us priming them for what we wanted to hear. In addition, we were mindful of the need to listen to and value the perspectives of all our SLN partners, many of whom were experts in the field of delivering outreach. As discussed in [Section 9](#), we facilitated as a series of networking events and fora as spaces to gather best practice and collaboratively produce ideas for how to evaluate outreach. In addition we created a research and evaluation toolkit and offered our consultancy to empower partners to lead evaluation and research – doing it *with*, rather than *to* them.

With this underlying philosophy in mind we designed an evaluation framework to structure our programme of work. Our evaluation framework was primarily designed to focus on the key factors we saw as being significant in terms of reporting to the Office for Students. These are measuring the impact of SLN:COP activities on learners’ across four domains:

1. **Knowledge** (feeling better informed about higher education including options, costs, experiences)
2. **Self-confidence** (feeling more positive about themselves and their educational futures)
3. **Aspiration** to go to higher education (their decision or the likelihood of them making that decision)
4. **Ability** to pursue choices (enhanced practical and personal resources to negotiate their educational futures, including overcoming challenges).

This framework provided strategic direction for a programme of evaluation and research which used quantitative and qualitative methods to gather data from learners, their parents, educational professionals, academics and community groups. Our strategy aimed to:

- **Evaluate** SLN:COP activity through the design of evaluation forms that collated qualitative and quantitative measures of activities on learners’ knowledge, self-confidence, aspiration and ability to pursue choices.
- **Research** the purpose, assumptions, value and success of SLN:COP activity using interviews and focus groups with learners, parents and practitioners and the use of learner and project case studies.
- **Support** partners to develop skills and engage in additional high-quality research and evaluation via CPD events and the creation of a collaboratively produced toolkit on research and evaluation.

Further detail of our approach to each is provided in the sections that follow.

7. Evaluation

Our evaluation measures comprised of evaluation forms and a learner and practitioner survey. These reached a total of **1,610 respondents**.

7.1 Evaluation Forms

Using the framework above, we designed a series of evaluation forms for young people, their parents, teachers and educational professionals to measure across the four domains. Evaluation forms were distributed to SLN:COP partners who were encouraged to use these appropriately to evaluate activity and return them to us for analysis. We also encouraged partners to tailor the forms to the specific requirements of their projects, drawing on our philosophy of engaging partners as experts. A drawback of this approach is that we had less consistent and useable data but we prioritised that the data was meaningful to those delivering the projects in enabling them to measure, learn and develop. A total of **1,150 forms** were received.

6.3 Learner Survey

The national evaluators of the NCOP project, CFE Research, commissioned a survey to be sent via consortia to all NCOP learners. Due to ethical concerns around personal data, we ran the learner survey in October 2017 with Post-16 learners only. We received 907 responses, of which **214** were NCOP learners.

In May 2018, we followed up with a shorter and more targeted learner survey designed by our SLN:COP Data Officer, Holly Lewis. This was identical to the evaluation form except for an additional question that asked participants to rank their preference of outreach activity. This survey was distributed to learners in schools and further education colleges to be completed online or on paper. We received 351 responses, of which **246** were NCOP learners.

6.4 Practitioner Survey

We recognised the importance of gathering the perspectives of practitioners across the SLN:COP who have designed or delivered outreach activity. In particular, we were interested in what they thought were some of the challenges faced by young people and how they can be best supported via effective outreach. This online survey was sent in October 2018 to project leads of SLN:COP funded projects and received **38** responses.

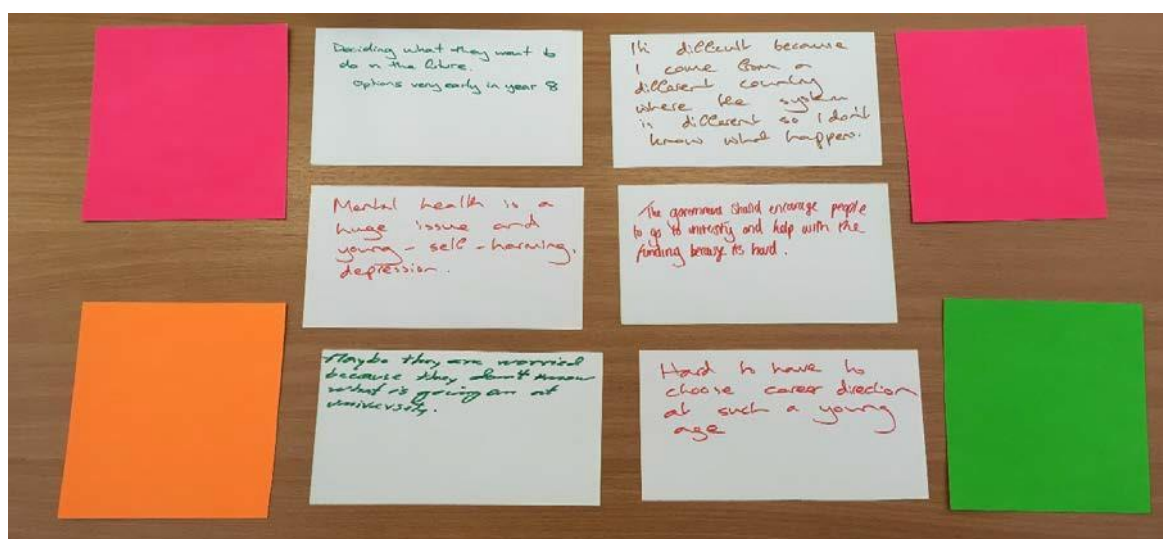


Figure 5: Comments from parents about the barriers for young people thinking about higher education, collated as part of a Parents' Evening at Beach Green School.

8. Research

In addition to measuring the impact of outreach activity, we recognised the complexity of issues surrounding young people's decision making and the need for more focused, in-depth analysis via research. This took the form of focus groups, interviews and case studies which reached **108 participants**. Our research was given ethical approval by the University of Brighton Cross-School Research Ethics Committee (CREC).

8.1 Learner Focus Groups

We conducted focus groups with **76** young people in four 11-18 provision schools across the Sussex region. These schools were sampled to represent a range of geographic locations (e.g. city, coastal) and school types (e.g. local authority, academy, faith). These have the following features and pseudonyms:

- **Academy School** is an OFSTED 'good' co-educational academy for students aged 11-16, with a 6th form for students aged 16-19. It has around 1,100 pupils, with 80% of those in year 9-13 identified as living in NCOP wards.
- **Beach Green** is an OFSTED 'outstanding' co-educational academy school for students aged 11- 16, with a 6th form centre for students aged 16-18. It has around 1,000 pupils, with 37% of those in year 9-13 identified as living in NCOP wards.
- **Church View** is an OFSTED 'good' co-educational comprehensive faith school for students aged 11- 16, with a 6th form for students aged 16-18. It has around 900 pupils, with 19% of those in year 9-13 identified as living in NCOP wards.
- **Townside** is an OFSTED 'requires improvement' co-educational academy for students aged 11- 16, with a 6th form for students aged 16-18. It has around 1,700 pupils, with 39% of those in year 9-13 identified as living in NCOP wards.

Within these schools, we ran two separate focus groups each for Year 9 and Year 12 NCOP pupils. This reached approximately 39 Year 9 learners and 37 Year 12s. The first focus group asked about some of the challenges young people face in thinking about their progression into higher education, as well as some of the opportunities higher education might provide, with responses noted in a poster and through verbal feedback. In the second focus group, we asked young people to design an outreach activity using a worksheet and gather their thoughts on what they find informative and inspiring. A copy of the worksheet can be found in [Appendix A](#). Our role in these focus groups was to listen and to gently guide. These focus groups were digitally recorded and we kept copies of the worksheets and posters.

8.2 Interviews

We conducted a total of 22 semi-structured interviews with education professionals. In each of the schools we interviewed teachers either individually or in groups who were most closely responsible for the management of outreach e.g. heads of 6th forms. We also held interviews with the heads of widening participation across the three universities, as well as a head of a large further education college to gain the senior management perspective in other sectors. In addition, we spoke to heads of projects that had a range of different features (e.g. mentoring, community organisations) to explore the nature and impact of cross-regional projects.

In all of these interviews, we asked participants to explore with us the challenges and opportunities faced by young people in Sussex and how their activity, projects or approach might constitute best practice.

8.3 Case Studies

In order to provide a richer snapshot of the student voice of young people close to the transition into higher education, we developed case studies of 7 further education learners. These were targeted to capture the perspectives of young people in a different further education context to those who had opted to progress into the sixth-form in their 11-18 schools. This was seen as important for reasons including that young people in 11-16 schools may be less prepared for university decision-making because of not having seen older students undertaking this process.

These case studies were developed through walking interviews with learners where they showed us around their college and discussed their plans for the future and how these had been shaped by outreach activity they had been engaged in. In addition, we developed case studies of 3 parents drawing on phone interviews to provide the perspective of those supporting young people along their trajectories.

8.4 Data Analysis

The evaluation and research data combined produced a rich mix of qualitative and quantitative information for us to explore in depth. The research data was coded using NVivo software which generated a series of common or significant themes. Alongside this, we analysed the evaluation data for key statistical changes, which we sought to explore the meaning of through the in-depth research data. For example, when we saw from the SLN:COP learner survey that over half of NCOP learners had parents who went to university we explored the ways young people drew on their family and friendship networks as 'guides on the side'. In order to draw the data together, we selected a series of key findings which became the focus of this report.



Figure 6: Research and evaluation managers and Joint-Head of Widening Participation presenting their research findings at the NEON conference in July 2018.

9. Support, Consultancy and Community

As part of our commitment to ensuring our research and evaluation is conducted *with* and not *to* our partners running projects within SLN:COP, we offered support, consultancy and a research community.

9.1 Research and Evaluation Toolkit

We created an online toolkit for SLN:COP partners to support them with conducting research and evaluation of their projects. This comprised of guides on [best practice in evaluating widening participation and outreach](#), [research ethics](#) and [developing case studies](#). It also offered specific methodological guidance on conducting [focus groups](#), [interviews](#) and [surveys](#), along with case studies of how these methods have worked in practice. The toolkit can be accessed here: <https://www.sussexlearningnetwork.org.uk/resources/research-evaluation-toolkit/>

9.2 Consultancy and Training

We held several consultancy meetings with partners to discuss their approach to research and evaluation and offer our guidance. Outputs from this work included designing bespoke focus group questions for Chichester College and tailored evaluation forms for the Art History project.

We also ran two CPD training sessions for our SLN:COP further education college co-ordinators on *Using Focus Groups for Research* (15th February 2018) and *Designing and Writing Case Studies* (19th April). A session on *Impact through Communication* is planned for Spring 2019 to support partners in dissemination of their research findings.

9.3 Regional Fora

We facilitated a series of three regional fora in March 2018 (in Hastings, Brighton and Chichester) for SLN:COP partners to gather their perspectives on what constitutes outreach best practice in two key areas of focus – engaging parents and engaging young people. These events brought together a broad range of participants – from heads of widening participation to school teachers – to discuss areas of shared concern and network with colleagues. The findings from the fora were drawn together to collaboratively produce a [Practitioner Insights on Outreach](#) guide.

This document represents shared insights on best practice and, crucially, gives the voice to practitioners as experts. Moreover, it represents a research moment itself in providing us, as research and evaluation managers, with insight into the everyday challenges faced by those delivering outreach and/or working with young people.

9.4 Community of Practice

We brought together a Community of Practice (CoP) of research-active academics with relevant interests, working across the Consortium's three member universities, Brighton, Chichester and Sussex, alongside those in colleges and the community with research roles. The CoP met in October 2017, February 2018 and July 2018

This CoP has been used as an opportunity to raise the profile and publicise the work of SLN:COP within and around our local academic research community. This has included drawing attention to funded research opportunities within SLN and maximising the value of resource investment by attracting high calibre research proposals to our Innovation Fund scheme. Indeed, this interdisciplinary research-led approach has facilitated development and delivery of some highly innovative and impactful work through SLN:COP from areas as diverse as Art History, Media Studies, and STEM ; and including around supporting the higher education participation of NCOP learners including young people who are refugees; LGBT; care leavers; or excluded from school.

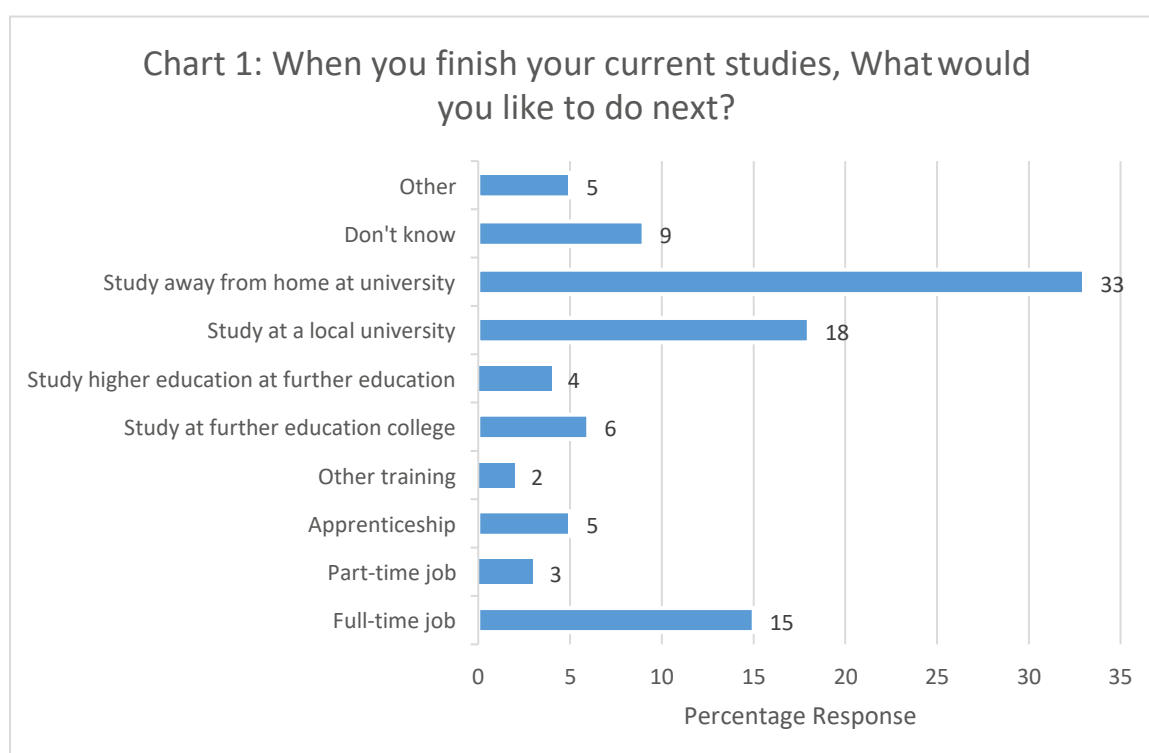
10. Evaluation Findings

In the sections that follow, for brevity, all data are rounded up to the nearest whole number and presented as percentages. However, full data tables are available on request.

10.1 Findings from CfE Survey

We distributed this survey to post-16 learners only due to ethical concerns around the tracking of younger learners in our consortia. A total of **907** participants took the survey online, **214** were NCOP learners. The following analysis will focus on NCOP learners only. The survey asked learners what they wanted to do when they finished school, their perceptions of higher education and the factors shaping their decision making. In this report, we will focus on two key questions around post-16 destinations.

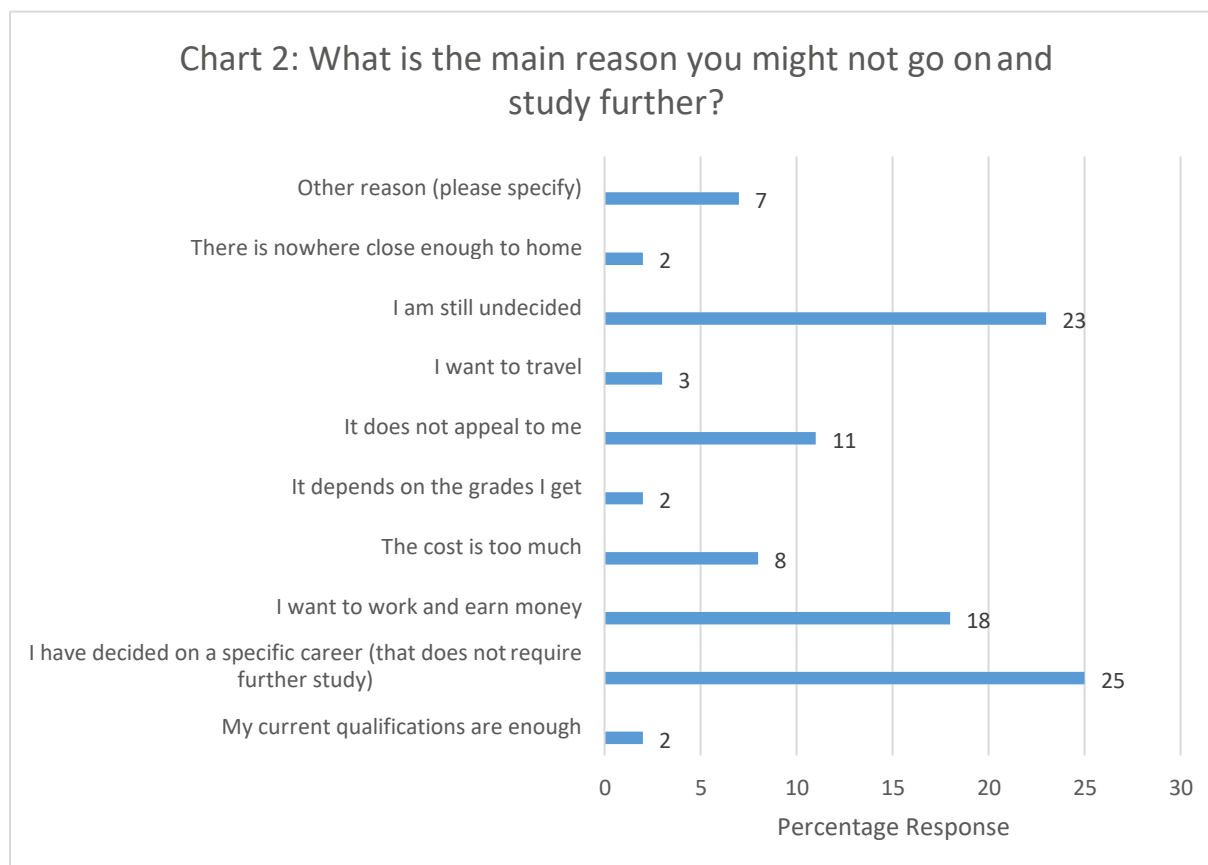
Q2b asked **When you finish your current studies, what would you most like to do next?** This question was completed by 131 NCOP learners (61% of the sample).



This chart above shows that 55% of learners surveyed wanted to go on to higher education. 33% - the greatest proportion - wanted to study away from home at university or another higher education institution. A further 18% wanted to study at a local university or another higher education institution and 15% wanted to get a full-time job.

A key finding from this is the clear significance of location in shaping young people's decision making - particularly the space that denotes local and away. While the SLN:COP region has three large universities (Brighton, Chichester and Sussex), they do offer varying course provisions and have different positions with sector hierarchies which can potentially shape the perceived 'value' of the course studied. Further attention needs to be given to *why* young people want to stay at home and, in particular, the role of cost in shaping this decision, to ensure young people are able to access the broadest of educational horizons.

Question 9 asked, **What is the main reason you might not go on and study further?** This is a follow up to an earlier question which asked how likely you are to apply to higher education. There were 61 respondents to this question (29% of the sample).



This chart shows that the most significant reason given for non-progression is a career choice that does not require higher level qualifications (25%). While this is entirely logical, it is important to ensure young people’s careers are future proofed for uncertainty and that they are provided with information around options to access further education and training as an adult. Consequently, careers education information advice and guidance (CEIAG) should focus on long-term, as well as short-term, options to ensure young people are provided with sufficient information to make choices. In [Section 11.2](#) we discuss in more detail some of the challenges with NCOP’s focus *only* on younger learners and the need for education providers to create and promote flexible and response pathways for lifelong learning.

However, most significant here is the large numbers of post-16 learners who are undecided (23%). Although, we do not have details as to *why* this is the case, this does suggest schools and colleges should focus attention on working with those closer to the moment of transition, to ensure they have solid progression plans that are tailored to the futures they anticipate and desire.

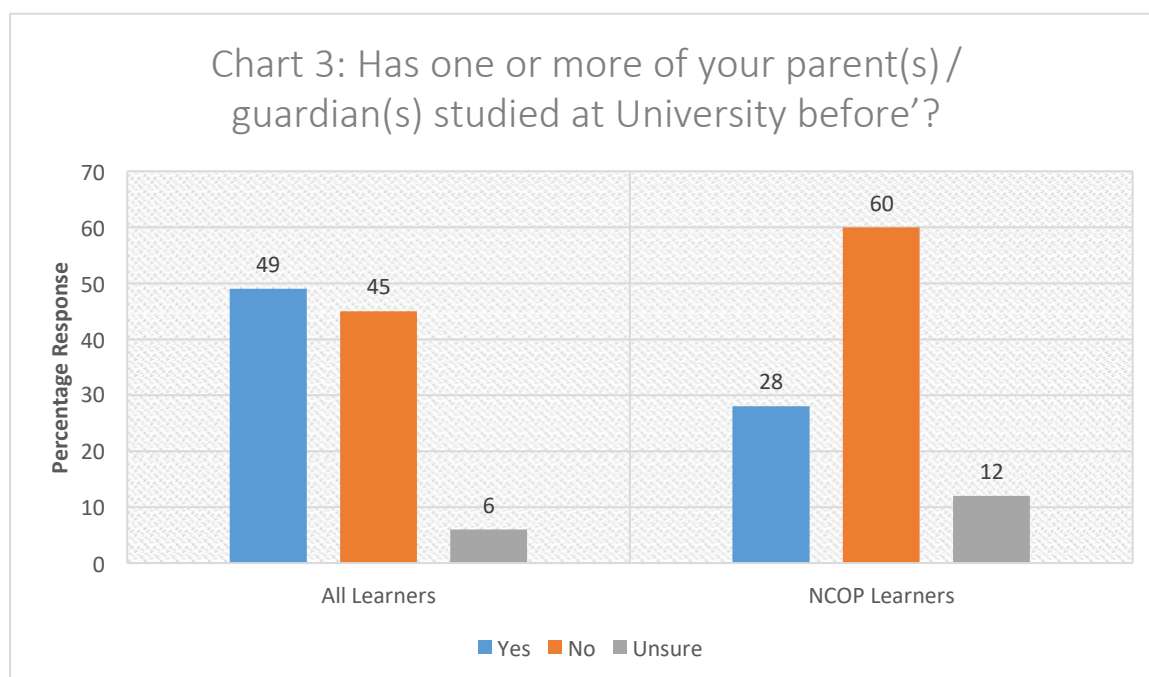
Due to the low response rate to this CfE survey, this was not replicated with the next year’s cohorts as in other consortia. Instead, we designed a learner survey that was bespoke to SLN:COP to maximise engagement and enable us to focus on the questions of most interest to us and our partners. That said, the CfE data provided some initial scoping information on to the decision making processes of post-16 learners in Sussex which we used to inform the development of our own data collection tools. For example, we wanted to know detail about the nature of the barriers facing

young people in making decisions and in being able to pursue their intended plans which we integrated into our survey and focus groups.

10.2 Findings from SLN:COP Evaluation Forms and Learner Surveys

We received a total of 1,150 evaluation forms from learners who have taken part in our projects. IN addition, the online learner survey received 351 responses, of which 246 were NCOP learners. As both of these followed a similar format, we drew together questions where the data was comparable, giving us a total sample of 1,501 responses. 1,139 of these included postcodes and from this, 43% lived in NCOP wards, representing 32 out of 38 NCOP wards covered by the SLN:COP. The age-breakdown of the sample were Year 9 (32%), year 10 (23%), Year 11 (32%), Year 1/12 (7%) and Year 2/13 (6%). The gender breakdown was 51% Male and 47% female and 2% other.

A key question of interest was parental educational history. First-generation status (being the first in your family to go to university) is used as a proxy measure of disadvantage by higher education institutions in the UK to grant reduced offers or access to support programmes or scholarships (Thomas & Quinn, 2007). Definitions of first-generation vary and can, for example, include siblings who have attended. The measure is aimed at recognising differentiated access to privileged economic, cultural and social capitals. Consequently, we asked the following evaluation question: ***'Has one or more of your parent(s) / guardian(s) studied at University before?'***

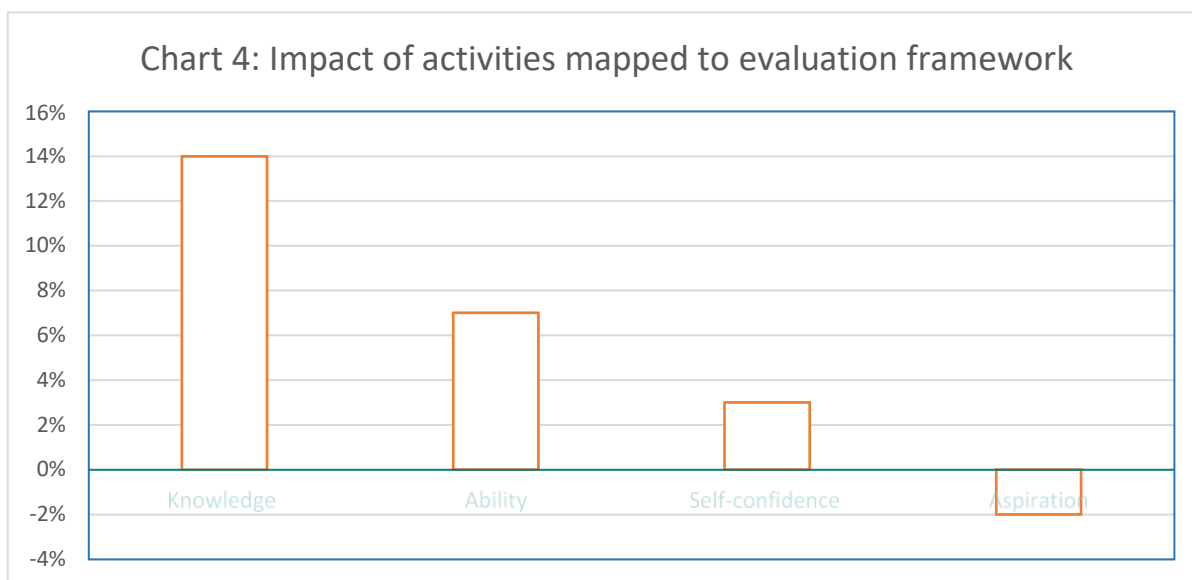


The chart above indicates that NCOP Learners are more likely than their peers to be first-generation and potentially experience the identified barriers of being so. However, the numbers of NCOP learners with parents who had gone to university is higher than might be expected given the symbolic identification of NCOP ward as being 'aspiration poor'. This reflects similar findings from the CfE survey in which 48% of NCOP learners said they would be the first in their immediate family to go to university. An additional point of interest is that 12% of NCOP learners *did not know* whether their parents had been to university. It is therefore simplistic to assume educationally rich families talk to their children about their higher education experiences and support them unequivocally with this 'insider' knowledge. This finding confronts assumptions about the nature of the link between parental education and other proxy measures of disadvantage, as well as

highlighting the complex ways ‘knowledge’ about higher education is passed on (or not) through inter-generational discussion.

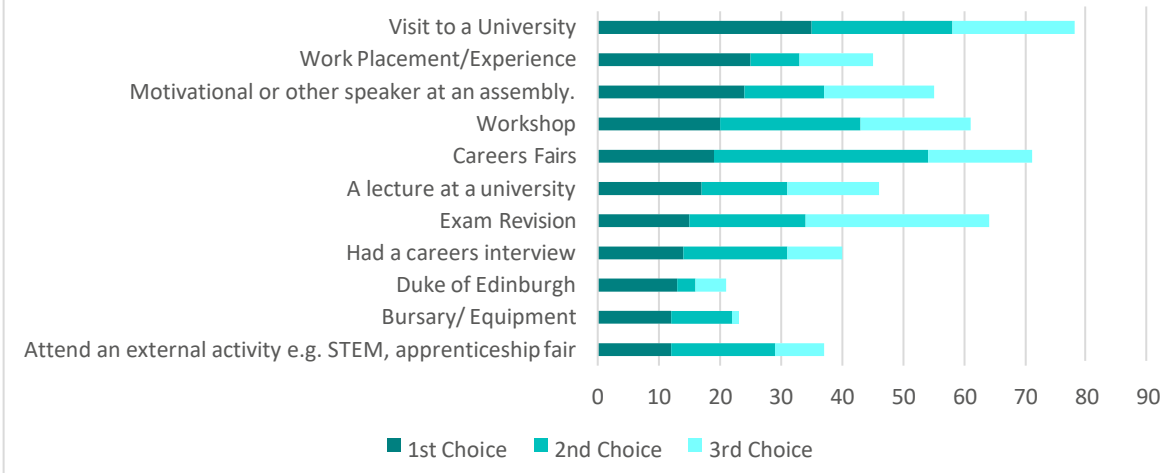
Learners were also asked, as part of the evaluation, to report their perspective on outreach activities they had taken part in. Questions were themed around the 4 elements of the research and evaluation framework of the impact of activities on learners’ knowledge, self-confidence, aspiration and ability. For example, the questions *I know about the higher education choices available to me* was about **knowledge**, *I am confident that I would ‘fit in’ in higher education* was about **self-confidence**, *I am planning to go into higher education in the future* was about **aspiration** and *I feel equipped to overcome any obstacles I may encounter in accessing higher education* was about learners’ **ability**.

1. Three out of four areas of the evaluation framework described above saw a positive impact in responses of Strongly Agree/Agree, with a mean of **6% increase overall** (a 14% mean increase across knowledge, 7% across ability, 3% in self-confidence and -2% in aspiration). Taking the online survey data alone, **all areas saw an increase**. However, this had a higher representation from Year 9s, suggesting the likelihood to ‘aspire’ to go to higher education decreases over time.



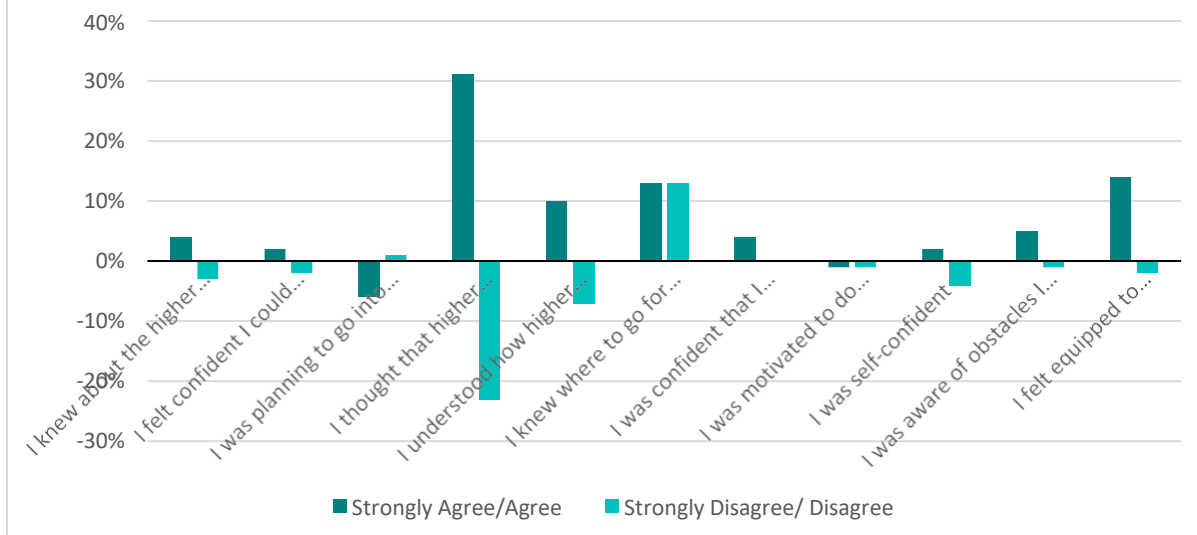
2. The outreach activities young people rated most highly in the learner survey were **visits to a university** followed by **work experience** and **motivational assemblies**. The reasons given in the qualitative comments focused on gaining real-life, experiential insights into higher education e.g. *‘They were able to give me a bigger view in my future’*; having practical experiences that they wouldn’t have had otherwise e.g. *‘because you’re actually achieving something by doing this’* and gaining useful information *‘I feel I learnt the most’*.

Chart 5: What were the top 3 activities you took part in?



3. The question with the strongest evidence of change relates to **Aspirations** – ‘I thought that higher education is a realistic option for me’ at 31% increase in Strongly Agree/Agree combined. The question with the weakest evidence of change was ‘I was planning to go into higher education in the future’ at -6%. This suggests that increased outreach may not result in increased participation but that, through SLN:COP work, young people are overall better informed about their future education and employment pathways.

Chart 6: Evaluation responses with evidence of positive/negative impact



10.3 Findings from Practitioner Survey

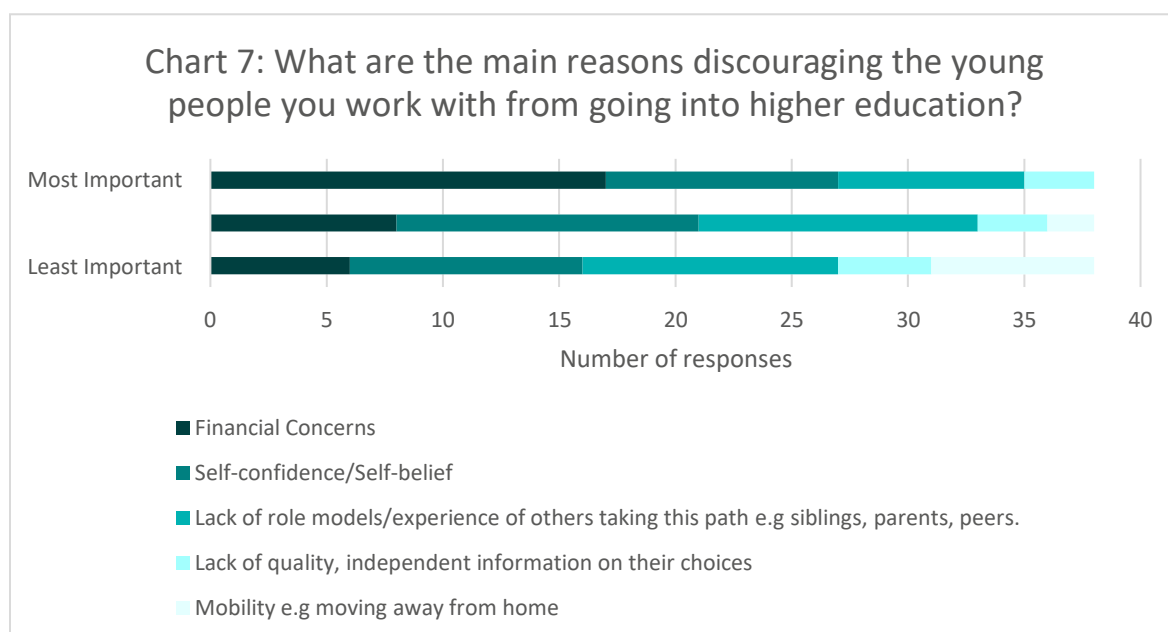
A total of 38 responses were received from the practitioners survey 69% response were from individuals who worked within schools (32% from schools with a sixth form and 37% from schools without a sixth form), 18% from further education colleges, 11% from community/charity organisations and 3% from Local authority. 16 respondents only had one role within the SNL:COP

project 13 or respondents only managed the project and 3 administered the project. While 22 of the respondents were responsible for delivering more than one aspect of their SLN:COP Project.

Practitioners were asked which of the areas they think the projects they ran will take from their activities. 82% stated their learners were taking away increased knowledge of knowing where to go for information about higher education. 79% said they were going away with greater understanding about the availability of their higher education choices and about higher education funding. 76% said their projects gave a key take away of self-belief that higher education was a realistic option for them. 66% saw a key outcome being the motivation to go onto higher education and resilience equating to awareness of obstacles and resources to overcome these. 63% saw increased confidence and the ability to achieve education ambitions as being impacts of their projects on learners. 47% referred to an increase in learner’s sense of belonging to higher education. However they also recognised that there were other outcomes of their project not mentioned above such as making new links with community and employers, raising self-esteem and self-awareness, learners being exposed to subject areas they might not have had the chance to and the importance of former students talking to current students. Many of these findings are paralleled in our own research, for example the need to focus on learner mental health as a key factor shaping higher education decision making in [Section 11.9](#).

The practitioners generally felt that the most successful type of outreach, progression and widening participation where ones that are individualised to the students and provide 1:1 support. Again, this was also reflected in our finding around the need for personalised, tailored and meaningful outreach activity, as discussed in [Section 11.4](#). This can also include subject specific taster days. This was closely followed by University Visits and having the opportunity to meet current students from a similar background to themselves. Others noted that the most successful intervention where consistent and where they occurred for a long period of time and not just one off such as summer schools as this left students with a memorable experience.

Practitioners were asked what they feel are the top 3 issues discouraging the young people they work with from going to higher education. Financial concerns, followed by self-confidence were cited as being the most significant:



Other issues raised in the qualitative comments were the fact that learners already have a career plan mapped out and to fulfil this they don't need higher education at this moment in time. This has close parallels with findings from the CfE survey, discussed in [Section 10.1](#). Another issue raised was the distrust of institutions, which would explain why campus visits and meeting former students like them who have taken a higher education path is useful and important as it can dispel some of that mistrust. We go into further detail around some elements of this distrust in [Section 11.3](#) particularly in terms of young people feeling they were being 'sold' to, rather than advised by educational institutions.

We asked practitioners if money was no object, what things they thought would be important in outreach work. There was a strong agreement that outreach activity should be sustained and long term. This enabled a consistency both in its delivery but also the person/job role delivering it. This was something specifically mentioned in Archie in [Section 11.3](#) who felt a strong close connection to the outreach advisor in his college which he saw as being crucial to supporting his transition. Mentoring was cited as being highly significant in supporting young people, particularly those without parental educational experience. This could be delivered 1:1 both by high quality programs such as the [Brilliant Club](#) or [The Girls Network](#), or student mentors who are currently at university. They also stated the importance of inspirational role models – such as alumni – to come in and act as motivational speakers. High on the agenda was also immersive weeks such as summer schools and taster days where learners can experience university life and be exposed to a wide range of subject areas. Some other suggestions given were more impartial IAG, academic support, working with community organisations, employer events and being able to visit universities across the country.

What these recommendations share is a commitment to meaningful and engaging outreach that is tailored to the needs of young people. Practitioners also spoke of being inspired in their work to ask young people what would benefit them, so that they are part of the design of the programme – such that it is done *with* them, not *to* them. This is something we also feel is highly significant and is discussed in further detail in [Section 11.3](#).

11. Research Findings

This section draws together a rich spectrum of qualitative research collected between November 2017 and December 2018 reaching **108 participants**. This comprises of:

- 22 interviews with teachers, education professionals and heads of community organisations. These included the heads of outreach in all universities and selected further education colleges across the region, teachers and careers advisors in the 4 sampled schools (Beach Green, Townside, Church View and Academy School) and heads of projects in the community, which were similarly geographically distributed between East Sussex, Brighton and Hove and West Sussex.
- 39 Year 9 NCOP pupils taking part in two focus groups across 4 schools (Beach Green Townside, Church View and Academy School).
- 37 Year 12 NCOP pupils taking part in two focus groups across the same 4 schools
- 10 in-depth case studies of 7 further education NCOP learners and 3 parents. These participants were spread across the SLN:COP regions. We also accounted for gender and ethnicity distribution and attempted to present a range of pathways and experiences.

We have summarised our research results into 10 key findings. Each finding begins with a case study of a learner, parent or related educational professional (drawn from our interviews) which characterises, in the words of those that matter, what it is we are trying to claim. This is followed by our analysis, illustrated with excerpts of research data.



Figure 7: Young people attended an NCOP funded STEM festival

11.1 Space, place and complex lives

Young people are more than just a postcode. As a proxy measure of educational disadvantage, the use of postcode was felt to be too blunt and did not enable attention to other relevant aspects of identity and experiences. This included ethnicity, gender and the fluctuating and, sometimes chaotic, lives of the most marginalised young people.

Zelda's Story

Zelda is studying A-Levels at a further education college in West Sussex. She describes being *'desperate to go to university'* from a very young age *'I've been thinking about it for years'* and has a clear vision of the place and subject she has in mind.

She has a strong network of 'guides on the side' that have supported her to make this decision. Her parents both went to university and provided plenty of support and advice – from taking her to open days across the country to sharing their personal experiences of university life and learning. Yet this help still has time and financial penalties, particularly in visiting different campuses: *'I kind of have to drag my mum around'*. Her older brother, in particular, is described as being a key influence in wanting to go to university: *'dropping him off...made me want to go'*. She joked about how her Dad wrote her brother's personal statement.

She was surprised to know she was a NCOP student *'I didn't know my postcode could impact my university at all'*. She stated that *'I live in quite a nice part of Bognor but different ends of the beach aren't quite as nice as each other'*. She also remarked how the majority of her school friendship group went to university *'so I just assumed everybody does'*. However, when I asked about her peers that lived locally and what they were doing, she paused and reflected how she was on a different path to some.

Her main worries about going to university were the financial costs – *'you take out loans and things but it's still so expensive'*. She was also worried about the transition to independent learning and whether this might exasperate her mental health concerns, particularly around anxiety. These worries had gotten worse as university and exams loomed closer *'I'm a bit overwhelmed. I'm in a state of stress. I put a lot of pressure on myself as I like having things set out, I want to know what my future holds'*. As a consequence, in her research on different institutions, she looked closely at the broader support offered, as well as the course and campus life.

As part of the SLN:COP, she took part in 'Access your Future' – a programme in which young people were trained in research skills and supported by PhD student mentors. She talked about how engaging and valuable this was to her in *'really working in a way that was kind of similar to university'*. When we spoke about what else colleges and universities could be doing to support her, she hoped that talk about university was made more *'everyday, like in my lessons'*. She also talked about the need to continually challenge the perception of university only as a middle-class *'elitist'* space for highly intelligent people – *'it's much more diverse than that''*.

SLN:COP activity focused on those living in specific postcode wards which had low levels of young participation (POLAR3 Q1) and lower than expected levels of young participation, considering Key Stage 4 attainment and/or ethnicity (Q1 or Q2). In Sussex, we had a total of 38 NCOP wards and 17, 893 eligible NCOP learners.

In our interviews with teachers, young people and outreach professionals, they all revealed some scepticism at using postcode as a proxy measures of educational and/or social disadvantage. While many recognised that those from particular wards or schools might need additional support or resource, postcode was seen by most to be a crude measure, which failed to take into account the complex identities of targeted young people. As revealed in Zelda's story, she was an NCOP learner whose parents and older sibling had been to university who supported her in visiting universities and in writing her personal statement. She consequently described being surprised that she met the NCOP criteria. Indeed, as described in [Section 10.2](#) 28% of NCOP learners responding to the SLN:COP learner survey had parents who attended university. While Zelda faced her own unique challenges, her account reveals the diversity of learner experience captured under 'NCOP' which may not entirely replicate assumptions about those traditionally targeted as in need of intervention.

We asked teachers in the 4 case study schools what their initial thoughts were when they produced or were given their 'NCOP learner list' to target their activities towards. Some recognised these learners as '*deserving*' and saw close parallels with other related grouping such as pupil premium or first-generation. Others were more surprised:

'You've got to have some measure, haven't you? But, you know, not all those students from these postcodes are in any way disadvantaged. You've got all measure of students on there, from high fliers to people that possibly could be NEET.'

(Teacher 2, Townside)

Getting outreach targeting right was seen as incredibly difficult. Many expressed uncertainty over whether to 'reveal' to young people that they were NCOP and how to deal with young people and their parents who asked why they had (or hadn't) been selected to take part in additional trips or events. This was doubly compromised when they were unsure, as with Teacher 2 above, that the list captured those most in need. Consequently, all the teachers we interviewed felt that they were best placed in their roles to do the most effective targeting. Yet evidence from Gazeley, Hinton-Smith and Shepherd (2017) suggests that teachers' attitudes are not purely objective or immune to their own deeply embedded ideas about certain learners or educational pathways. This is reflected in the following account from a WP lead in a university:

'Well, we've had another example of a student who was put on the bus and the deputy-head, when they saw this pupil that was about to get on the bus to go to his uni trip, like marched him back into school. They're not going on that trip, they're not behaved.'

(WP Lead 2)

This indicates a possible need for a mix of objective and subjective measures for outreach decision making and some flexibility in how these are operationalised.

We also asked young people in focus groups what they thought about the focus on postcode. One young learner described it as a '*bit of a stereotype*' in that:

'I come from a poor estate and I want to go to university. But there are people on rich estates who don't want to go to university'

(Year 9, Beach Green)

Another learner described how different places had a range of types of housing and people and that identifying 'good' and 'not so good' areas and dividing resources for interventions and support this way was too broad:

'In a deprived area, it's difficult to, sort of, know where that area starts and finishes, difficult to pick out which areas are less well-off and which areas are more well off. And sometimes that will go wrong, and people who are already quite well off will end up getting resources that could be going to someone who's not so well off.'

(Year 12, Townside)

This description of NCOP targeting as 'clumsy' chimed with an account from a senior manager in a further education college who also described some of the subtleties underlying a postcode:

'They're in an affluent postcode but they're not in an affluent place because their parents were on a smallholding, their parents didn't go to university, their parents haven't got that financial wherewithal.'

(FE Senior Manager)

This quote above highlights some of the multiple factors shaping a young person's educational decision making including the house they grew up in, how this house reflects others in the neighbourhood, including those of their peers in and outside of school and the influence of their parents.

We asked outreach professionals in universities what a suggested way forward might be. While they similarly felt postcode targeting to be problematic, they recognised the potential imperfection of all targeting and a need to pragmatically find something to work with.

'There's never going to be a perfect set of things that fall into place and we go yes, we should be working with those young people, because we'd all have done it by now...But I think post code is very crude.'

(WP Lead 2)

A key finding from discussions with these outreach leads was the need for multiple measures of disadvantage including postcode/POLAR, eligibility for college scholarships, first-generation and free school meals/pupil premium. This is closely reflected in UCAS's Multiple Equality Measure which brings together gender, ethnic group, where people live, school sector and income background (UCAS, 2019). Discussions with teachers also highlighted the need for a degree of flexibility in decision making where multiple factors could be drawn together to target support and resources for young people. To counteract some 'hidden' or unrecognised disadvantages by teachers in making selections, there should also outreach and support given to whole cohorts.

11.2 Circumstance, 'choice' and support

The most marginalised young people experience chaotic lives and engage in complex decision making, with few support structures. The strategic, well-informed student, making 'logical' choices from a plethora of higher education products, supported by an educationally rich family is atypical for many NCOP learners. This suggests the importance of coherent, independent and consistent education and careers guidance for young people that recognises that the nature of these barriers is not purely psychological (e.g. can be overcome via grit and resilience training). Moreover, NCOP's focus *only* on young learners making a traditional linear trajectory into higher education is problematic for learners who may need to access higher education later in life.

Kelly's Story

Kelly is studying A-levels at a further education college in West Sussex. Her decision to go to university was made around the time she studied for her GCSEs and she reported how higher education was strongly promoted at school *'they put quite a lot of pressure on us'*. She noted a clear divide in her school peers at that point between those who did A-levels who were going to university and those who took alternative pathways. She was particularly inspired (and was also simultaneously inspiring) her older brother who was thinking about applying to university after leaving school to go straight into work *'Because like he's not been able to get into any career. He's just been in like entry-level jobs. And I think it's made him and me realise that like you do actually need to get an education to do something. To get ...a good life'*.

Her dream is to study Economics at the University Sussex. She said that her parents were now pleased with her subject choice as being more *'useful'* than her original idea to study History *'well, it's more directly applicable to a job at the end'*. She spoke of her drive to achieve and the value higher education offered to the life she wants to lead *'it feels like it matters more...it just feels like more valuable. Because like, most people in my family are like builders or they work in trade'*.

Most of this research into her options was done online and alone – *'I don't really know anyone that's been to uni other than like teachers and stuff....I just kind of looked online if I wasn't going to do it myself, like no one else would really help me'*. She later went to a fair at her college and some open days but was a bit uncertain about what she had to do when she was there *'it's a bit like you don't really know what to ask, do you?'* When we spoke about what colleges and universities could do better, she was keen on attending subject specific taster days *'where you could just like go and actually see what it's like for a day'*.

She is aware that she gets contextual offers *'places around where I live are kind of like not the best. That's why I get the postcode thing'*. At her college, the current practice was not to openly target NCOP students but she wasn't sure this was the best way *'it's good to be open about it because...I don't think it's like a stigma... It's just that we're just happy to like get anything'*. While she recognised the value of the postcode criteria in supporting her, she also spoke about her school and the need to provide funding directly to them to improve the opportunities for everyone *'if someone's getting a better education than you are then they've got more chances than you have'*.

Kelly's story above indicates a range of factors shaping her educational trajectory. She saw how the promised opportunities of meaningful paid work straight out of school did not emerge for her older brother and recognised, from his experience, that going to university might provide *both* of them with improved work and life opportunities. She hinted at receiving a different quality of education than other potential applicants and the need for additional support and resources to enable her school peers to have the same opportunities as others. Moreover, her account of choosing a university was a relatively lonely one. She explored a plethora of options online and, while she attended open days, wasn't entirely comfortable with what to ask. Without a supportive 'guide on the side' (O'Shea, 2016) her choice-making *could* have been highly informed and strategic, but it was certainly not supported, either from her schooling or via an educationally rich family knowing and sharing 'the rules of the game'.

Indeed, our research found that young people's decision making was complex and contingent. This was highlighted particularly in a discussion with a young woman in Year 12 in Academy school. We asked her, what she'd like to do when she leaves her sixth form and she responded:

'I've always wanted to be a Primary School Teacher. My whole life. And so I'm definitely going to university. I'll need to do some sort of teaching degree because I don't want to be a teaching assistant... I think I'm going to stick around Sussex because I'm living with my Dad now. But I'm not sure whether I'm going to go to the MET [Local FE college] to do Hair and Beauty first. So once I have finished that course, I can then go to university and have a job as a hairdresser whilst I am at uni.... I thought I'd get it to be a fall back whilst I'm at uni to earn money.'

(Year 12, Academy School)

The young woman's description of her possible trajectory is confused. On one hand, it could be interpreted as highly strategic for her to gather a qualification that might secure a regular income to support future studies. On the other hand, while we do not have reliable data on those who enter higher education directly after studying vocational courses in further education, this 'extended' route is likely to be atypical of those she'd meet on the, highly competitive, teaching courses offered at the local universities. In addition, her decision making around higher education took place against a dominant concern about staying local to live with and support her family. Learners like this young woman, Kelly and others were making decisions within a complex constellation of choices, some of which were not seemingly 'logical'. Crucially also, they described making them alone.

Unsurprisingly, these decisions were informed by broader worries around debt and financial pay off as the following quotes reveal:

'The main reason I probably wouldn't go to university is a loan, student loans, it's way too high. Because knowing me, I'll go to university and never use it, and then have to pay it off'

(Year 9, Academy School)

'Young people struggle to get jobs nowadays so you might have the qualification just working or you might as well just go into a job straight away because then you'll get money and you can actually pay for your apartment and stuff. In the sense like, it's not qualifications that make the world go round. It's money that does. So what's the point?'

(Year 12, Church View)

Loans, debt and the financial costs of studying dominated every focus group discussion with young people. This varied from worries about how to balance part-time work and study to choosing

subjects that would have a more profitable career trajectory after graduation. Moreover, the idea of being paid to study was something young people, particularly those in Year 12, found highly appealing. They were conscious of the instabilities of the labour market and the ability of a university degree ‘paying off’ to give them a secure future. Degree apprenticeships were seen as less risky in comparison but also fairly elusive in that they struggled to find high-quality information about these, in comparison to that offered by higher education institutions. Importantly, financial fears were very real to these young people and could not necessarily be ‘thought out’ through aspiration raising or grit and resilience work, which can dominate outreach practices and apportion ‘blame’ at an individual level (Sellar and Storan, 2013).

The role of a mentor to support and encourage young people as ‘guides on the side’ through this process – whether a parent/guardian, teacher, sibling or friend – was seen to be so valuable that those without it were positioned at a disadvantage. Indeed, while parental support was identified as being crucial to supporting young people’s decision making, it is important to recognise that parents and guardians should not be positioned in deficit or as being unwilling to offer support. A Senior Manager working in FE reflected on some of the challenges facing parents who are newly negotiating the world of further and higher education, alongside their children:

‘Now to move into the sphere of going away to university, studying specific topics to a very great detail, parents are not going to be able to support their children. That’s immensely intimidating for a lot of parents and that’s immensely difficult to deal with. So it’s not that they don’t want their children to do better than they have, because they already are, it’s the fact that they can’t help them they feel guilty about’.

These findings around the challenges facing young people (and those who support them) as they negotiate ‘what next’ after school or college highlight the importance of quality and independent careers education, information advice and guidance (CEIAG). While the focus of this taking place ‘in-school’ is important in enabling it have the broadest reach at key transition moments, it is important that those outside formal schooling, such as Kelly’s brother, are not ‘left behind’ as a consequence. Indeed, NCOP’s focus *only* on young learners making a traditional linear trajectory into higher education is problematic for learners who may need to access higher education later in life. An approach that is sensitive to the holistic learner lifestyle and is inclusive of older learners by being embedding in the broader community is crucial going forward in ensuring higher education is not a youth life-stage for some but an integral part of a future knowledge society for all.



Figure 8: Pupils attending an NCOP funded Fashion and Textiles taster day at an FE college

11.3 Outreach should be delivered *with* and not *to* young people.

Young people revealed an often ‘weary’ attitude towards outreach activity. They felt as if their needs and interests were rarely consulted and described university as being ‘sold’ to them through a range of disconnected providers. Instead, they welcomed personalised approaches to progression that enabled them to input into the design of outreach provision.

Archie’s Story

Archie came from a small town where he felt there was not much going on in terms of opportunities. His parents were broadly supportive but hadn’t been to University themselves and were worried about the cost for him. Archie didn’t feel his school had been helpful in providing information about university including the financial arrangements. He had chosen to come to a local FE College after attending open days at several places and finding the tutors and general environment at the College he had selected to be particularly welcoming and supportive. This first impression had been borne out by Archie’s experience since, and he was now studying A levels, alongside the GCSEs in English and Maths that he had failed to achieve a Grade C in at school. He explained that *‘I come here expecting nothing, because I didn’t really know what my future entailed’* and that *‘I never thought I’d be able to do it. I actually didn’t really have the courage and I know it may take some courage to try and do something new. But now I’m open and gone out of my comfort zone a bit, I can now experiment a little more with different things.’* He now felt that *‘I want to show myself and show others that I’m capable of doing it myself.’*

When we met in December, Archie had submitted a UCAS application to five Universities, having selected these with a view to pushing himself outside his *‘comfort zone’* by applying further afield from home. He was extremely positive about the support he had received at his College, which came both from his subject tutors, and Careers Guidance staff intervention funded through NCOP. He spent a lot of time talking with staff, feeling that he could *‘confide’* in them, and that *‘that’s let me see what I want to be.’* Archie had spent *‘multiple meetings’* with Careers Guidance staff looking at University information and refining a shortlist together, which he saw very much as a collective endeavour. He had then visited a University of his choice some distance away by train, supported by the College both financially and through text messages throughout the day to check how it was going. Archie identified that he would previously not have considered managing such a journey alone.

Through his experience Archie was able to feed back into the outreach work of the College to support the decision-making of other students, modelling the ideal of Widening Participation work being done with rather than to young people. One of Archie’s A levels was Photography and he had been asked by the College to interview staff and take photos of his University visit to share with other students back at College.

Other activities that Archie had found particularly valuable included a cinema trip to watch an inspiring documentary about an acclaimed designer, whose work Archie had subsequently used in his work; and a visit from a College alumna who was now very successful in her industry and had spent a long time talking individually with Archie. Archie had also been part of College open evenings. This enabled him to contribute to supporting the College’s work to introduce new students while also, as he identified, providing him with experience of public speaking to evidence in his UCAS Personal Statement. Archie felt that it was important for him to be able to *‘spread the word to other students just so they can go further afield. Because you don’t have to just be in your hometown to go to uni.’*

Young people in our focus groups, particularly those in Year 12, often felt overwhelmed by the outreach activity they received. For example, one young woman described having visited one local university for organised events on four separate occasions, but not having been elsewhere. In contrast, those in Year 9 had received less activity or were unsure whether what they took part in constituted higher education outreach. It is perhaps unsurprising that the intensification of this activity ramps up as the progression from school or college to elsewhere gets closer. However, the specific critique levelled by young people towards outreach is revealing. Some felt, at best, that it was misleading in its attempts to be encouraging and, at worst, that it was a dogmatic 'hard sell':

'Well we're not stupid. We know there's going to be issues. ...they can't just try and sit there and say, oh yes, it's going to be all smooth, it's going to be all happy days. It's not... They just try and make it seem so much better than it is. We want to know the bad as well as the good bits...But we just want, I feel like realisation rather than just a smack in the face when we get there.'

(Year 12, Academy School)

Young people's awareness of what university is like from older friends or siblings made them hyper-aware of what messages were silenced, particularly around the pressures of independent working or the cost of living. They knew that studying at university can be challenging and that people drop out for a variety of reasons. However, the vision they were presented with was hyper-positive, potentially leading to a sense of being unprepared for what might be to come or to being suspicious of such 'marketing hyperbole'. In addition they reflected on multiple providers coming in to talk to them and being unsure how to connect these together. This finding reflects the shifting agendas of the widening participation sector which has blurred the lines between outreach and recruitment (Johnson *et al.*, 2019), with the consequence that a key performance indicator of outreach is return on investment in student numbers. This has clearly filtered down to everyday outreach practice and, while in a marketised system, potentially unavoidable, it does raise questions about how young people can access independent advice to navigate their way through.

When we asked young people how they'd like to be supported in their decision making, they called for personal, caring approaches that took account of *who* they were. Archie's story above clearly highlights how he valued the close support of Careers' staff working in his college – from regular discussions about what to next, to a supportive text message asking how he was getting on at an open day. This emphasis on personalised approaches was mirrored in young people's desire to hear from relatable role models:

'You have talks from universities, they're often people who you don't know and might come from a completely different place. So, they might not understand where you were born and stuff. So, if someone who is from your local community came and spoke to you, it might feel more personal.'

(Year 12, Beach Green)

Many teachers understood this and took personal responsibility for offering additional experiences or opportunities to their young people:

'Teacher 1 will take a load of kids in the minibus after school because we think it's the right thing to do. Not all schools have got the capacity to do that.'

(Teacher 2, Beach Green)

'The main thing that I know from working with young people and speaking to young people, they want to know that you care.'

(Community Education Worker, East Sussex)

The majority of those designing or leading on outreach and progression in schools, colleges, universities and the communities described themselves as ‘caring guides’. In addition, our practitioner survey, discussed in [Section 10.3](#), highlighted how much mentoring was valued by outreach professionals in providing such care. However, professionals identified conflicts in doing this work. The teacher above, for example, recognised that this work was fuelled by goodwill and recognised as being unsustainable. This has parallels with Woolhouse’s (2015) work that saw SENCOs in schools define themselves in a ‘learner-centred warrior’ role. This emphasis on the personal and on the ‘care’ involved in outreach highlights the, often unrecognised, emotional labour of outreach work, as well as the need for personalised approaches to young peoples’ progression.

One way through this complex contextual background of outreach as shaped by a competition for student numbers; the desires for personalised support to navigate the complex options being presented to young people and a recognition that staff supporting young people are working on reduced resources is the notion of increased student involvement in outreach. We describe this as doing outreach *with* and not *to* young people. One young person, when we asked what she thought about outreach events she had taken part in so far said, strikingly:

‘You don’t get to do it. You just get told it’.

(Year 9, Townside)

We unpacked this theme further in our discussions and many described being taken on a bus to be talked at or talked down to. Some of these events were simultaneously described as being valuable and inspiration. It was certainly not all bad news. However, rarely had young people being asked what they would like to attend or take part in or able to contribute to the design or delivery of outreach before they take part in higher education. Yet this was seen, by outreach practitioners, as being an idealised value of their work:

‘I think we could be listening to them [young people] more. I think that becomes hard to do because we’re looking to achieve our own targets and there isn’t always space within the WP teams for that work to happen and I think it gets missed’.

(WP Lead 1)

There are considerable practical challenges in involving young people in outreach. However, this focus on student-orientated delivery should be, at the very least, inspiring future outreach strategy. For example, Archie describes how he was able to bring back the things he learnt at a university visit to inspire other students, modelling the ideal of outreach being done with rather than to young people. As part of our second focus group with young people in schools we asked them to design an outreach activity and explain their rationale. Two fantastic suggestions included:

- **Meet the Professor** - an event with different stalls available in a school where learners could approach experts with questions about specific subjects and university study, supported by their teachers (Year 9s, Beach Green)
- **Honest Online Chats** - a chat with a current higher education student from your school to help you make choices about what to do next (Year 9s, Townside)

What these suggestions share was a personalised and supportive approach to young people’s future education and career trajectories. This was in sharp contrast to what some experienced as being told *what* to think about higher education rather than *why* and *how* to think about it.

11.4 Meaningful outreach for the real world

The most successful outreach offered young people meaningful and realistic experiences of higher education. Teachers, parents and young people saw the value of outreach that showed a picture of everyday life where people 'like them' lived, worked and studied, showing many a 'new world' that they would be motivated to work towards. Moreover they valued activities that offered meaningful opportunities to develop skills to add to their CV or to support their existing studies

Grace's Story (Parent)

Grace had not been to University herself, having dropped out of college due to her mother's illness. Grace and her husband had two children, and saw their success at school as not about where they live, but being *'purely down to the parents and the family... the family values that you have.'* She was keen to emphasise that while she could tell *'just from looking'* at some people in their area that they would not support their children to achieve in life, this was not the case for their family: *'it's a shame when people look at a postcode and automatically think they can define you as people based on where you live. ... wherever we lived we were always going to push for our children to be successful.'*

When Grace was asked about the Higher Education progression activities that her children had had access to, she talked about these enthusiastically, and drew links between these and the wider context of further enrichment, extra-curricula and out-of-school activities that they had been able to support their children in being part of. Grace talked about her husband's former successful career travelling internationally. They felt strongly the need for young people to be out experiencing *'the real world'* and learning transferable skills such as problem-solving that would prepare them for career success.

Grace was extremely positive about the higher education progression activities that her daughter had experienced, *'the support that she's been given has been outstanding.'* This included a trip to a local university through school, and Grace saw this as extremely beneficial in offering *'a taste'* beyond simply learning about University from a distance, by travelling to the University, being there with friends, and taking part in practical workshops: *'open days give them the chance to actually go and have a try at things, and see what life is like once you've taken that path. I think that's the most beneficial thing for them. They can read about it all they like, but until they've actually been and set foot in halls of residence, and actually sat in a lecture room, and seen how things work face-to-face, I think that is definitely a big one for them.'*

Grace also made recommendations as to the potential benefits of more extensive provision, including that *'if mentoring could be rolled out to all kids at sixth form level, as a whole, I think you'd probably have a higher percentage of children carrying on in higher education.'* She also had further ideas that *'running (more) summer schools to get kids out to actually see what it's like would be brilliant. If they could attend and actually have a go, and the same with more physical sides, like apprenticeships'*, and a perceived need for more work experience opportunities: *'if they were then given the opportunity to e perhaps for a week they could go and shadow somebody that was in that job, that would be brilliant. Because I've noticed a lot that you don't seem to have work experience very much anymore.'*

Grace concluded the importance of these interventions because *'each individual should be given just as much opportunity and support as the next, regardless of their background, where they've come from, where they live, what they plan to do.'*

Grace describes wanting her children to be given real-life experiences of university and work and that this should be provided through an enhanced school curricula that provided extensive, meaningful opportunities to all. She recognised the value of what her daughter had taken part-in so far but called for greater emphasis on what it is *really* like out there. While this has time and resource implications, the focus on effective outreach for the real world is something significant that is echoed in our discussions with students, teachers and professionals. This also reflects our learner survey responses, as discussed in [Section 10.2](#), in which visits to a university, work experience and motivational assemblies were rated highest by NCOP learners. For example, when we asked Year 9 students in Beach Green to design their own outreach activity and explain their rationale, the focus was strongly on the ideas of genuine exposure to a particular future:

- **Study into Work** - a work experience day in a graduate job followed by a university taster day, including an overnight stay in halls.
- **Summer Revision Camp** – a week of classes and activities focused on subjects studied at school but delivered at a university by a partnership of academic faculty and school teachers to get a real sense of the higher education experience.

Moreover, the summer revision camp idea also emphasises that outreach might also have more immediate benefits in providing support for studying school subjects or in fostering broader life skills. Others spoke of being given opportunities to enhance their CV and provide examples to include on their university application forms. For example, Archie’s case study in [Section 11.3](#), described how he could evidence the public speaking skills he’d developed supporting outreach for young learners in his College on his UCAS form.

The tone and pitching of outreach also needs to be dynamic and age-appropriate. One young woman in Year 9 from Townside, spoke about how she felt the content she saw on open days was unrepresentative of ‘real’ university learning:

‘It felt kind of like they were dumbing everything down for us, like that kind of thing...that wouldn’t be what it was actually like at university, so it doesn’t show you like, what the actual experience is like...I know we have to make sure that students coming in understand it, but you also don’t want to make them feel like, oh, we basically made this PowerPoint up for you, it’s just a tiny little bit, and it gets really, really hard by the way. Because...it’s like a put down. And that’s not how you want to encourage people’.

Effective pitching is possible when close partnerships are built between the ‘deliverers’ and ‘subjects’ of outreach. The finding from [Section 11.3](#) on doing outreach *with* and not *to* is also crucial in ensuring activity is most engaging. In addition, both teachers and young people valued outreach work that included experiential learning through hands-on activities.

The focus on ‘real’ life was seen as crucial to give young people a sense of an imaginable future to work towards. As one teacher in Townside remarked, poignantly, ‘*you can’t aspire to a future you don’t know*’. Young people spoke of their uncertainty about what university might be like and few had concrete experiences to draw on to construct this as a future they could imagine being part of. They described wanting outreach that showed a picture of everyday life where people ‘like them’ lived and studied. The following quotes exemplify some of this:

‘I would like to take all students to at least one visit to a higher education institution. That would be a real ambition of mine. If I can take young people to places that open their eyes, and if... we, as a school, can make them believe that they could do that, then we would be doing our jobs properly’.

(Teacher 2, Townside)

'You can't sort of look at university and go, I think I'll be alright at this or I might struggle at this, because it's just not things that we really know'.

(Year 12, Townside)

'I would want it to be quite an exciting experience, really pleasurable...that's going to make me work harder, it's going to motivate me to work harder because it was so good'.

(Year 9, Church View)

The quotes above suggest young people valued outreach that showed them an exciting 'new world' that they would be motivated to work towards. Projects like [Future First](#) – an organisation that connects alumni back to their schools and colleges - could be crucial in this respect as a way to build a network of relatable role models to get involved in school-based activity, in addition to the need to physically visit campuses. Indeed, teachers stated the importance of '*getting a feel for university*' and spoke of the need to take students to universities to show them something they would not normally see. This forms a key part of the experiential learning identified as important to formally provide WP students with as a mechanism to supporting their engagement and success in their higher education journeys (Speirs *et al.* 2017).

Young people also made specific comments on the terminology of summer school being off-putting, particularly in peer-groups where extra opportunities for 'school' would not be valued.

'Summer school, no one's going to do that...But you see, if you say 'workshop' it just sounds a lot more fun. I'm not sure if I was to say, oh yes, I'm going to a workshop, rather than I'm going to summer school, because I think even my friends would judge me, if I went to summer school'.

(Year 12 Academy School)

Words such as 'workshop' fared better, along with outreach that offered opportunities to learn specific skills e.g. creative arts, were praised as appealing and meaningful opportunities to take part in. This suggests the need for outreach work to consider terminology carefully in relation to their target group.

The findings described above reveal some potential key priorities for outreach work as being both meaningful and realistic. Many NCOP projects that were discussed within the research did these things already but others might have needed to emphasise them more explicitly. Young people were resistant to outreach work that simply *told* them the benefits of higher education and wanted to *experience* it for themselves in ways that identified with their own identities, experiences and future pathways.

11.5 Parents, near peers and siblings as under-utilised key influencers

Near peers and siblings are highly significant in shaping young people's futures. While the role of family in educational decision making is known to be highly significant, the focus is predominantly on parents and carers. Our research revealed how near-peers, siblings and friends are key social influencers in young people's lives and are often under-utilised in outreach.

Chris' story (Parent)

Chris and his wife live in an NCOP ward and have two daughters in Years 9 and 12 at Church School. Chris was not born in the UK and neither he nor his wife had the opportunity of higher education themselves. He explained that *'I don't have a lot of information about universities, and which universities have what subjects. Which universities are best for which different area.'* He also relayed potential for parents to have concerns around the cost of university not only in terms of course fees, but also that parents may not be able to afford the accommodation and food. This conveys a vital need for outreach to engage with informing and addressing the concerns of parents directly as well as young people.

Higher education is very much part of the future that Chris imagines for his daughters, and he does not perceive any barriers to them achieving this future. While, he was careful to identify that this depends on it also being what they want too, he sees his daughters as being ambitious and *'quite clued on'*; and doesn't have any concerns about their academic progress. Chris perceived the potential benefits of his daughters' higher education participation widely, including offering the opportunity to develop careers that would not only benefit them financially, but would also give them *'the ability to do different things, and experience different things'* and to have a positive impact on their families, community and society.

Chris perceived a central role for parents in taking part in university decision-making, encouraging their children, and ensuring they felt supported as they took decisions that could mean moving across the country to attend university. When asked what made for effective higher education progression support, Chris saw supporting *'engagement between children, parents and schools'* as vital to this *'because sometimes those three don't go well together, and if they don't go well together, if one link is missing, either the school, the parent, or the child then the triangle will never stick.'* Chris also felt it important for young people to be supported in understanding the link between what they choose to do with A level and potential degree subjects, in order to ensure that these are aligned in a way that *'makes sense.'*

He understood how NCOP was targeted and felt this was a positive opportunity: *'if there is something that will help children from certain areas that normally they don't go to the higher education, or don't have the opportunity to, I think that will be a good thing.'* Chris is impressed by the opportunities that his daughters have for information, guidance and engagement around higher education, and particularly emphasised the benefits of young people receiving information from near-peers. His older daughter had participated in outreach activities that included existing students *'talking about their experiences in those universities.'* Chris felt *'it was a good thing that the young people that are at university can share their experiences with the new students that will be coming in.'* In Talking about his two daughters, he explained his hope that they would be able to share their experiences and that his younger daughter would also benefit from her older sister's higher education knowledge and experience, describing this as *'good leverage that they can share.'*

Our findings showed the strong influence of family on young people's decision making, indicating the importance of parental engagement as reflected in SLN:COP intervention resourcing. Chris' story reflects the strong desire the majority of parents and carers have to support their young people on their educational and career trajectories. It also reveals the influence of multiple factors on the nature and extent of that support – from relevant experience themselves, to their personalities of their children and the extent they feel this is appropriately covered in school or college. In addition, parents who feel alienated from those in authority can experience outreach as just another parenting lesson.

Our evaluation findings, discussed in [Section 10.2](#), that a surprising number of NCOP learners did not know whether their parents had been to university attests similarly to not making simplistic assumptions about parental education and the directness of the subsequent knowledge transfer that may or may not occur. In addition, the costs and experience of higher education has changed drastically between generations, meaning that parental and carer experiences may be too distant from that of their children. For example, there was a recent BBC Radio 4 Desert Island Discs programme with comedian Bob Mortimer, who studied Law at the University of Sussex in the 1970s. He described feeling alienated after turning up to a black tie drinks reception on campus in his Middlesbrough football shirt. While these mismatches and feelings of being 'out of place' (Reay *et al.* 2009) still exist, they are noticeably different in form in 2019 at many places. The role of parents is undoubtedly important but, is not straightforward and can no longer be thought of as so.

We identified often simple yet highly effective approaches to engaging parents positively as equal partners in young peoples' educational progression, being utilised by our NCOP partners. These included teacher phone calls to parents to commend children's good behaviour and progress, which were often the first positive communication parents had ever received from school; as well as university outreach events that included the offer of a meal and invited parents to attend alongside young people. Inviting parents to attend talks by former student alumni was identified as a positive resource for those with little experience. We identified however how some universities have learned from negative experiences of having little success in inviting 'disengaged' parents into education environments including schools and universities, particularly the most marginalised groups such as Gypsies and Travellers. Responsive approaches such as relocating school parents' evenings to local community centres had proved effective in ameliorating such disengagement.

We also identified a need for resilience work with parents as well as young people. For example parents with little higher education experience could be quick to support a young person unhappy in their first term at university to drop out and come home, whereas others with more experience might recognise this as a normal phase to pass through. Parent ambassadors could provide a vital resource in coaching other parents through such difficult experiences. Parent ambassadors offered a valuable source of near-peer advice for parents that could be experienced as less patronising than a professional for people who might feel alienated from education professionals. Recognising the critical role of parents informs the need for new conceptions of the school-parent-pupil relationship whereby we acknowledge the need for schools to support parents to support their children, rather than only expecting parents to support schools in supporting pupils. While stretched schools lack the resources to support all parents, they can support those with least resources, for whom this will make the most positive difference to young peoples' trajectories.

We also found a key role played by other key influencers – particularly siblings, older cousins and friends – in shaping young people's educational trajectories as the following discussion revealed:

'I was surrounded by my friends and they were all: We don't want to go to university, we don't want to do this. Then you're just going to be like why do I have to do that?'

'Yeah, if my brother asked me what university was like... He'll get a more realistic view from me'

(Year 9s, Academy School)

Near peers were the predominant source of advice for the specifics of going to university, given their recent experiences of a rapidly changing sector. In addition, university transition was a socially mediated process in which friendships and peers had a huge role in affecting whether a young person might consider university. This was a factor noted by community practitioner, teachers and parents, as well as young people:

'The influence of siblings and older siblings and aunts and uncles and cousins is tremendous with us....So it doesn't have to be the parents necessarily to get the influence'

(Teacher, Church View)

'If they do participate in HE they're going to come back, they're going to inspire other people around them. They're going to inspire their communities to think about it. They'll be role models. Especially if they're the first person in their family gone to university. It's definitely inspiration to siblings'

(Community Worker, East Sussex)

'Since she's the eldest I think she puts a lot of pressure on herself. Because she like needs to show the youngest because she's the eldest of four. So, sometimes she says mum I feel pressured because I need to show an example'

(Parent, Church View)

The quote by the parent about the pressures of needing to set an example is important to note if outreach work seeks to include siblings and peers as key influencers. It suggests that their role is not to inspire and lead 'perfectly' but to share their experiences honestly and in ways that are supportive for their own development.

This was recognised in Church View and, consequently, a cross-year group mentoring programme was set up between Year 9s and Year 12s. This focused on using the university search facility and application tool, [Unifrog](#). Year 9 learners were partnered up with a Year 12 and they guided and coached each other through choosing GCSE option and higher education. Both older and younger learners were highly positive about the benefits of support from their school peers in navigating such decisions

'They talk to us about how we're doing, we talk to them how they're doing as well. We help each other. It's not just a one-way system'

(Year 9, Church View)

This finding offers an example of NCOP good practice that is relatively cost-effective and addresses the significance of near-peer influencing. However, it requires supporting through a whole-school curriculum strategy and need to have demonstrable benefits for both parties in opening up a shared conversation about their futures.

While the role of family in shaping young people's decision making is known to be highly significant, the focus is predominantly on parents and carers. However, siblings, cousins and friends were regularly cited as being key education influencers, suggesting a need to consider how decisions about higher education are made within this 'social' context. It also opens up a space to value and use near-peers in outreach activities in ways that offer beneficial and meaningful experiences for both parties. Cross generational mentoring schemes are common in outreach work (for example having current university students as ambassadors on open days). However, this could go further. For example, open days could provide family-focused or social activities to involve younger siblings and friends in the experience of higher education such that these messages can cascade in numerous ways.

11.6 The need for whole community approaches to outreach.

Those studying and working in NCOP regions spoke of their deep connection to their wider communities, suggesting the importance of outreach that thinks beyond the education sector for its solutions. This suggests the value of collaborative multi-agency working with community members, local business and public sector organisations as well as schools, colleges and universities.

Gemma's story (Teacher)

Gemma is the Careers Guidance lead teacher at a coastal strip Academy. She described the gap between popular perception, *'people think of a nice coastal town'* and a contrasting reality, *'we have got a lot of very, very poor families in this school'*, and that *'some of the wards in [this area] are the most socially deprived in the country, and the rates of... the death rates are higher in that area. The life expectancy is ten years lower. Even, you know, in this day and age.'* Gemma saw the geography of the area as significant to this in terms of the coastal location lacking the *'360 radius'* of job opportunity that other non-coastal areas have. Gemma felt frustrated that despite the lack of opportunity many young people never moved away from the area, or even had any experience travelling outside it to the nearest bigger town. She tried to take them on as many trips as she could, *'FE colleges, universities, all sorts, because they will never get that from their home'*, having been inspired by *'a conference once where they said young people can't aspire to what they can't see. And I think of that all of the time. So I think if I can take them places that open their eyes, and it... and we, as a school, can make them believe that they could do that, then we would be doing our jobs.'* This was a challenge in terms of resources that included both costs such as coach travel, and also engaging teachers struggling to manage in a school that was consistently evaluated as under-performing. NCOP funds had been used to support some of this activity that would not otherwise have been possible.

Gemma perceived a lack of aspiration that she saw as including young people, their parents and also many teachers. This included that *'a lot of their parents, they've got, you know, they've got very difficult backgrounds. A lot of their parents, they're... fairly often, they don't work at all'*, as well as that *'I think we could do more. So not just about the student, staff in schools as well'*, and *'I just think more people in the classroom would help them, as well, sort of invigorate some of the teachers that might be a bit stale, shall we say?'* She perceived wide benefits of encouraging young people to leave the area, in terms of growing their experiences, skills, salaries, as well as bringing expertise and economic benefits back into the area on their return. She felt strongly about the importance of engaging the wider local community in improving young peoples' futures. Successes had included an *'employer session'* with school alumni, *'the feedback from them was really good, because I think those ex-students helped to sort of inspire them.'*

Gemma's ambition was to be able to offer her students a much more inclusive, larger-scale, whole community event in the form of *'a really big careers fair'* that would include local businesses, schools and universities as she had seen modelled in other areas, where she felt they had more going on in terms of supporting opportunities, reflecting that *'I'd love to have something like that in [this county], because we haven't got that.'*

Gemma's story identified several important themes around space, place and community in evaluating the value and success of outreach. She describes her school, and the learners within it, as being deeply connected to a geographically isolated community. The young people she taught rarely ventured far from home, nor saw the wider opportunities that studying, working or living elsewhere might provide. This was exacerbated by family and social networks that were also historically embedded in this particular community, with little direct experience to offer of 'outside'. The local town had 16-18 provision in schools but not in a further education college and, due to the 180 degree outlook offered by living on the coast, few opportunities to access a broad range of graduate level careers. Consequently, Gemma's role as a teacher was to '*open their eyes*' in showing them that people like them and, crucially, people from *this* town, were able to access and benefit from higher education and/or enter broad range of careers. This was echoed by young people in other schools across the region:

'We're in quite an isolated town and people don't see anything beyond that, so they just stay in like a little bubble I guess'

(Year 12, Townside)

'I've always been quite interested to go somewhere I've never been before... just thought it would be nice to go somewhere else away from where I'm used to, but I think I'll be a bit more comfortable sticking with where I am'

(Year 12, Academy School)

Young people spoke of their sense of both isolation and connection to their communities where higher education, and the opportunities it might provide, were rarely visible. One young person in Townside described how she would not want to write the place she lived in her UCAS form in case people would judge her negatively as a result. In the discussion that followed (not captured in audio) the three Year 9 girls in the group debated whether they should be ashamed or proud of where they are from and stated how people from these areas weren't all the same nor all '*bad*' (Skeggs, 1997). They appeared to be torn between aspiring a different life to their parents but also feeling worried and sad about leaving home and their networks behind. On one hand this provides some evidence on the value of NCOP and household data as telling us something significant about the experiences of those who are targeted in terms of space-based aspiration. Yet on the other hand, it also reveals some of the nuances of the target learners' lives – that higher education/career success is associated with escape and the emotional connections to home – that aren't captured by postcode.

Teachers talked about the value of 'local' role models, and young people reflected on whether they might become them by returning to their communities after they studied elsewhere. One group of Year 9 girls in Townside fed back to the whole group some of the benefits they had discussed of going to university:

'Like, we said, you could go maybe really far away to learn at university and get a degree and then you come back to your home town and you could use the skills that you've learnt at university or at apprenticeships and use it in your... Like in that area in your home town. So if you become like a specialist doctor, you could use that in your local hospital. And so you're giving back to your home town where you grew, where you went to secondary school'

They explored how university could offer benefits to their communities, as well as themselves, challenging the dominant narrative that university is only ever conceptualised as individual self-investment. Educational professionals spoke of the importance of role models from the same place,

with many schools and colleges displaying or planning to display 'inspiring' posters of their recent graduates who had gone on to higher education:

'Because university is not spoken about a huge level in our community, that's what we're trying to break, really, is to celebrate those that do and to make sure it's in the press, and to make sure people know that students from here go off to university'.

(Teacher 1, Townside)

Importantly, these alumni were valued in providing accounts not just of 'escape' but of *valuing* the experiences of where they grew up and went to school.

The school as understood as part of a broader community is important to recognise when planning outreach activity. Senior colleagues in widening participation across the three universities spoke of some of the benefits and challenges of more community-based outreach:

'I would like to do more community work and more community engagement with parents. We ran a very successful Space Festival in July last year and we had over 900 people on campus. Well, that's more than we ever have had. So you've got people coming to university that they might not have come to, seeing what goes on. And I think it's, it needs to be somewhere that is open, that is friendly, that is, breaks down those barriers, so they don't feel like they're going to an alien place'

(WP Lead 2)

'I know Hastings are particularly inundated with people and money and funding saying, we know what you need. We know what's good for you'.

(WP Lead 1)

The quotes above reveal several things. Firstly, the notion of community described by the first participant involves the university as a fundamental part of it, with a broad range of experiences/opportunities to offer the local population. An informal event, such as this festival, attracted a broad reach and showed the community 'the best' a university could offer. However, this still involved the community coming into the institution, rather than the university reaching outwards, which was what was valued by Gemma and some of the teachers and young people in Townside. In addition, the quote about Hastings as an intensely 'targeted' community heeds a warning not to do onto' but to do with. Working in a community orientated way involved *outreach* and 'getting out', but also requires sensitivity to the particular dynamics of local communities.

This 'community' approach is fundamentally about recognising that schools are embedded within their particular geographic and social locations. This parallels a report by the Sutton Trust (2019) into the regional attainment gap found that a 'sense of place' is a key determining factor in social mobility and that local buy-in is important in allowing areas to interpret and shape national policy in ways that works for them. Consequently, outreach solutions need to recognise the complexities of this and also think of ways to collaborate with the community more broadly. This is about recognising how NCOP targeting does not indicate a shared or static community experience. Potential solutions could include, as Gemma desired, events that pull together local employers, educational settings, parents, young people and employers. Collaborative multi-agency working with community members, local business and public sector organisations as well as schools, colleges and universities would, however, potentially require a broader organisational structure to co-ordinate this work in order avoid unnecessary burdens on teachers and young people in schools.

11.7 Regional solutions for localised contexts and challenges

NCOP offered the opportunity for regional solutions to the challenges of coastal and rural population. The specific challenges in Sussex include a large agricultural base with low wages, coastal regions with a 180 degree outlook as well large commuter populations with resultant increased costs of living. However some of these issues went beyond the remit of higher education to technical and vocational qualifications in order that regional skills gaps are effectively addressed. This suggests the importance of NCOP integrating with careers and enterprise strategies to ensure that higher education and career progression is locally contextualised and appropriately targeted.

Tom's story (Apprenticeships trainer)

Tom works at a local consultancy contracted to deliver apprenticeship training in the region. This involves working with Local Authorities and schools, where they take part in information events including assemblies, presentations, workshops and careers fairs to publicise apprenticeship routes. Tom felt that *'the story about what higher education is and what it can do has become quite blurred and muffled;*' and that the drive to encourage people from disadvantaged backgrounds into university had resulted in a *'two or three tier system'* of university participation. He saw young people as having been *'mis-sold'* unrealistic expectations about the job and salary benefits of being a graduate. Tom saw this as contrasting with *'employers, saying to young people, you don't need to have a degree. I don't want you to go and study media or sociology or golf studies, I want you to come here and graft. I think that's now quite confusing for a lot of young people.'* Tom talked about working with disadvantaged young people, some of whom had the grades to university but who *'aren't considering university at all'*, and some who had even *'turned down Oxbridge offers in order to work.'* He explained how in *'engineering, they can get a position within two or three years, and a 50 grand job, and still create that environment, when they are learning new things and meeting new people, in a way that unlike university, they don't leave with 50 grand debt'*.

Tom identified the particular importance of geography to young people's HE progression opportunities in the region, particularly the lack of options for young people from rural locations, *'stuck out in the middle of nowhere.'* He saw opening up to new experiences and greater diversity as developing young people by *'opening your eyes'* and developing networks, perceiving that *'it's world view isn't it? There is a real danger if we only learn, work, play, eat, whatever, within four square miles or whatever. Even down here, there is a challenge, to try and get people who live in Hastings to go and study in Bexhill, or something like that, it's really hard. People don't want to move beyond often quite a small local area.'*

Tom felt frustrated at a perceived mismatch locally between universities' agreement to deliver Apprenticeship degrees, and the availability of industry placements and support for these. Tom saw this as amounting to *'false advertising'*, *'confusing for teachers, it's confusing for parents, it's confusing for careers advisors. It's confusing for businesses that are looking to recruit;*' and symptomatic of *'policies in flux.'* He saw the situation as being particularly acute in Sussex compared to some other regions because of the *'number of small businesses versus big ones'* meaning a lack of major interests to advocate for apprenticeships: *'there aren't any big corporates here to rattle their cages and say, actually, we are going to stand up for this area because we need this sort of talent pipeline'* and that *'places like London are weathering that better, and some of the industrial places are weathering that better, because they have got these big businesses that are, you know, have got a seat around the table.'* Tom explained that *'Sussex is losing out, and you can see it in the numbers.'* A further issue that he identified was the smaller businesses making up many local placements lacking the knowledge to support young people appropriately in the workplace.

Tom reflects on some of the challenges in delivering work around apprenticeships. The opportunity to earn as you learn was enticing for young people and employers reported placing high value on those with industry as well as academic knowledge. Yet there were mismatches between the promises of degree and other apprenticeships and what placements were available in industry locally. This was seen to be unique to the Sussex region which, while it has pockets of wealth surrounding Brighton and Crawley, also had fewer larger companies willing to invest in hiring and supporting apprenticeships. The coastal and rural nature of Sussex also meant strategic challenges in travel across the region, as well as this sense of isolation instigating a local 'comfort bubble' where commutes of more than a few miles were seen as problematic. A real benefit of SLN:COP was in being able to build an outreach offer that took account of regional and local concerns and priorities. The geographical diversity of the region did not make this a straightforward task but having an emphasis on locally tailored provision was highly valued:

'I think it's quite diverse actually, when you think the challenges that we have are rural, coastal and then city, urban problems, which are all very different. And so as Sussex, it's actually multiple deprivations and different types of deprivations, and so one size won't fit all. One mode of outreach that we could deliver in Brighton, you can't necessarily replicate in one of our rural areas'

(WP Lead 3)

Those leading on the design and delivery of outreach from universities and further education colleges saw NCOP as placing valuable strategic emphasis that one size does not fit all and that what might work in rural Plumpton would not work in coastal Hastings. This was recognised by the Sussex Learning Network who ensured funds were distributed across the region via schools, colleges and universities, as well as through cross-regional projects by community organisations. Some of these projects, such as [Apprenticeships in Sussex](#), were more specifically focused on employability and this connection between higher education and the careers profile in the region appeared to be crucial. A senior manager of a college reflects on this link between work, further study and the strategic priorities of the college:

'We have a large agricultural base here where the wages are very low, it doesn't matter how well-qualified you are, if you're likely to work on a small or medium holding, the opportunities... are very, very small. So for every hundred agricultural workers there might be one senior manager...And then you go to the opposite extreme, which is the Crawley end, which is you need basically a Masters to get job in the first place. Very high tech, very intense. And Crawley is really interesting because... I can't remember the exact statistics but it's over 100,000 that drive out of the area each day to work and over 100,000 that drive in to area each day to work. So the wages in Crawley are actually remarkably high but the wages of the people who live there are not. So I won't put on courses that don't fit...an expectation of specific jobs. So for every course that we put on here, I will research what jobs there are'

(FE Senior Manager)

This in-depth knowledge of the region enabled this college to provide 'market driven' course that providing skills to local and regional businesses. This was justified in terms of an ethics of care towards students investing in further study that this will pay dividends in realistic employment possibilities. Many of the courses provided at this college were Level 5 and below and focused on

technical and vocational qualifications in order to address crucial regional skills gaps. In many of our conversations with teachers, parents, young people and education professionals, the idea of distinct and un-crossable vocation and academic routes prevailed. Consequently, support for young people appeared to be separated out at an early age between those who might progress to higher education and potentially leave the region and those who might stay, work locally and undertake lower level qualifications. While professional expertise on different pathways is likely to create these different support routes, it is essential they do not become wholly divorced from each other. Industries need both apprentices *and* graduates (and these can be the same people at different points in their lives). This suggests a need for NCOP and consortia to integrate with regional careers and enterprise strategies to ensure that higher education and career progression is locally contextualised and appropriately targeted and delivered. This should be done in ways that do not create two distinct and separate pathways but opportunities to move within and between, in order to prepare young people for a future world of work that requires this sort of flexibility. An example which highlights this was given by a WP practitioner. He spoke of an area of Sussex, Peacehaven, which is dominated by ‘white van’ home base industries – from roofing to electricians. Here, many young people moved into these same industries as they appeared to offer the security of a known future. Yet this practitioner expressed concerns over whether the local need for these businesses can absorb these future generations in the long term. What appears to be needed as a consequence is providing teachers, young people and their parents with up to date industry-based information that enables consideration of short and long term career planning. A closer relationship between NCOP or future incarnations and Careers’ Strategies would foster this sort of work going forward.

An additional area of importance around providing regional solutions is that moving away from home was both a physical and psychological barrier:

‘Thinking about how they finance their education, which also stops them from perhaps moving away from their local area. And I think there’s a lot of talk about that, about young people needing to move away and I don’t think I always want to move away and I don’t think it’s necessarily a problem if they don’t’

(WP Lead 1)

‘The furthest I’d go is London. I will not go any further from home than that, because if there’s a family emergency, I need to be... So I was even looking at just Sussex, to be honest’

(Year 12, Academy School)

As identified in [Section 11.6](#), the place of home and the community is crucial in young people’s decision making. This could relate to pragmatic worries about the costs of setting up a new home or being close by for caring responsibilities. It could also relate to worries of not feeling comfortable within higher education environments that might be perceived as alien to those who feel they live in a remote place. There could also be something around exacerbated feelings of exclusion for those living in deprived areas such as Brighton that are represented as wealth hubs or ideal spaces for living the good life. These thoughts revealed themselves in fragmented ways in the research but geography and the role of space and place are highly significant in outreach work. NCOP recognises this in its household targeting and regional consortia but further work needs to consider how these barriers to leaving are built in order to see their potential to be broken down or for higher education systems to enable flexible models that do not presume a trajectory of moving away.

11.8 The benefits and needs of a distributed model

Distributed funding to schools offers significant value but requires enhanced cross-sector understanding. Schools are ideally placed to provide education and careers guidance for young people that is embedded into everyday classroom conversations at an early age. SLN:COP funding enabled schools to offer a range of additional, complementary provision that was most successful when embedded into whole-school strategies and with senior-management buy-in. However, this raised the importance of cross-sector understanding and effective CPD for teachers to ensure consistent good practice.

Moira's story (parent):

Moira was unable to work due to a long term illness, and had become a single parent after leaving a violent relationship. She had three children, of whom Kara, currently in year 9, was her oldest. Moira saw Kara as a positive role model to her younger children, and although she didn't want to put pressure on her, she was keen for Kara to do her best to achieve and go to university. She saw university as introducing young people to *'the real world'* and a wider perspective in terms of the opportunities available to them...*'these days without a degree I mean you can get a waitressing job for example. But I think it's good because you've always got a back-up plan having a degree.'*

Moira felt that the government were doing well in working to support young people from different backgrounds in their educational progression. She saw it as important for her to support her children educationally, including through buying extra books to support their school work where necessary. Kara had expressed concerns about the cost of university, but her mother had encouraged her not to be put off by this. Moira perceived parental support as key to young peoples' higher education progression, and some parents as being lazy and to blame for their children's under-achievement. She disapproved of parents expecting young people to take on paid work while they were studying.

Moira saw the main barrier to achievement as being self-confidence, saying that *'If you think you can achieve it in some way or another you'll get there eventually.'* She saw Kara as being confident and applying herself well to her studies, and therefore didn't perceive any barriers to her achieving well academically. She explained that *'she's very independent. She's like she knows what she wants. She's got a sense of direction'* and that *'if she's struggling with something she'll go out and beyond to try and understand it. Or she'll go to the teacher and try and explain. Or she'll go to the library and read a book. She'll come around to getting to understand the work.'* In contrast Kara saw her younger child, just going into year 7, as being hindered by a lack of confidence.

Moira was very positive about her daughter's school, including both how approachable the school was, and the range of activities available to support educational success. She perceived the importance of effective communication between parents and children, and parents and teachers, and described regularly receiving emails from Kara's school congratulating her for achievement in one of her subjects, as well as how she felt able to phone the school or go in to talk to teachers as necessary. Moira encouraged her children to take advantage of extra-curricula activities on offer such as opportunities to *'stay after school with the teacher'* and extra classes, saying of these that *'one thing I've learnt is that they do help a lot with the children when they're struggling.'* She also spoke about the educational *'outings'* that the school organised to universities, that had included open days as well as taster drama and dance classes: *'they had these tester sessions during school time which I thought was brilliant.'* She said that her children *'come back, and they tell me, oh I've learnt a lot'* and that *'It's good for them to see just before they decide whether they want to go to university or which university. It's good to have like an open day for them to visit the university before they have a final decision.'*

Moira reflects on her own journey through education and how she hopes to support her two daughters into a potentially different kind of future. She was particularly keen for her eldest, Kara, to go to university and sees how independent and driven she is towards achieving her goal, whereas her youngest she feels is much more reticent. Moira saw many factors shaping her girls' educational trajectories including their own personalities and interests, the input and support she gives them as a parent and the role of the school in facilitating access to different opportunities – from open days to extra curricula enhancement. An obvious point to note from this is that, despite Moira's girls both living in the same house, with the same parent and both being categorised as 'NCOP learners' they are clearly very different. This confirms, as in [Section 11.1](#), that postcode is a blunt criteria to understand the complex constellation of factors shaping young people and their decision making. Another observation is the crucial role of schools in being providers and gatekeepers of outreach opportunities for her children. This was a common (but not entirely contested) finding across our research. Schools were seen to benefit from SLN:COP work, particularly in receiving direct funds that enabled them to direct work towards the needs of their learners. Teachers, for example, saw themselves as being ideally placed to know which young people should be accessing additional opportunities such as higher education outreach:

'Teacher 1: I don't think anyone has got the system right for identifying which students need the support. There are definite flaws in the identification of pupil premium. And there will be with NCOP as well... In an ideal world it would be perfect if each school had their own authority to identify which students are disadvantaged and then could allocate funding accordingly...'

Teacher 2: They are more than just a bit of data to us, aren't they?'

(Teacher Group Interview, Beach Green)

[Section 11.1](#) describes in more detail some of the challenges of targeting as hinted at here. In addition, it is clear that schools valued more close involvement in the school outreach practices as a way to support the learners in their school. SLN:COP funded higher education champions in six 11-16 schools who were predominantly existing teachers or careers leads taking on an additional responsibility. In our interviews with four of these champions, there were divergent experiences with some representing the school senior leadership team and able to make broad changes across the school and others feeling more isolated in their work. We were particularly struck by the experiences of a colleague in Academy School who faced initial difficulties with the short-term funding and quick deliveries required by SLN:COP funding. This was all the more worrying as this school had one of the highest numbers of NCOP learners in the region. This is reflected by WP leads in universities who reported how many schools struggled to balance increased curriculum demands with additional opportunities for outreach, leading to more insular working:

'I think the schools are very hard-pressed and for them to think about letting young people out of the classrooms so that they can have other experiences becomes harder. And I would say that we've seen that over the last nine years, the willingness to let young people out has grown. And, at certain times, especially for schools in special measures or if they've got an Ofsted inspection coming up then they just hunker down'

(WP Lead 1)

This suggests that distributed funding to schools was significant in overcoming the lack of curriculum time for additional activities, this funding needed to be properly integrated within school management strategy in order that work was effectively embedded across school curricula. This was recognised by a group of Year 9s in Church View who designed an activity where the teachers are

given the intervention in order that they can filter down these messages to the largest number of learners:

'Our activity is, the schools leadership team to get information from universities and the government about what's going on. And then we do a weekly workshop where they tell, like, people about it'

This also suggests the need for training and support for school (and other) staff in delivering outreach to ensure they are aware of best practice and updated with sector developments. Indeed, there is no formal training or route into an outreach career or regular opportunities to network or knowledge exchange. Organisations such as the National Opportunities Network ([NEON](#)) do fantastic work but the events they schedule are costly and targeted primarily at colleagues based in university widening participation. A key opportunity for SLN:COP and other consortia is in providing high-quality continuous professional development (CPD) to ensure that the benefits of distributed funding are not outweighed by a lack of up-to-date or accessible CEIAG.

A key benefit of NCOP and the model in SLN:COP of distributed funding has been to open up relationships between schools, universities and colleges. Yet this is not always easy in a context in which competition for places across the education sector is rife. This came out strongly in discussions with heads of widening participation at universities whose desire to collaborate together was threatened by target driven managerial contexts:

'I think, on the ground, we try to do what we can within the various teams to not overlap work or to work together as much as we can. But in terms of a strategic collaboration within the universities, that doesn't exist. So we do it on the ground as much as we can but we all, as institutions, are still having to meet our own targets'.

(WP Lead 1)

This was not unique to universities with further education colleagues and heads of sixth forms also rehearsing similar arguments:

'The schools are keeping the good students to go to sixth form and any of them that aren't good students, they will farm out, to places like here'

(FE Senior Manager)

SLN:COP has enabled a broad representation of colleagues in school, college, university and community roles to do outreach work and, in so doing, has recognised that this work has increasingly proliferated outside of university WP departments. This demands enhanced cross-sector understand to foster relationships between these different constituents to ensure an appreciation of different roles, as well as the sharing of expertise. Yet despite collaboration being a key aim of NCOP, competition for funds in sector where cuts are rife, coupled with the marketisation of the education sector, makes this problematic. While the giving of funds challenges the neutrality of an organisation, the benefit of a more partisan consortia approach as modelled in SLN:COP has been to direct work and opportunities more broadly and to provide a central hub for information, advice and guidance.

Enhanced cross-sector collaboration and understanding is becoming increasingly important in a context where numerous and varied professionals and organisations are engaged in forms of outreach work. Schools are a vital part of this picture, in being able to offer tailored and personalised support to the learners (and their parents/carers) that they know best. Consortia such as SLN:COP are ideally placed to deliver independent CPD or sector knowledge to partners to ensure distribution of outreach does not dilute its quality.

11.9. Young peoples' decision making in a climate of risk

Outreach has to consider the emotional realities of higher education decision making. Young people commonly used terms such as 'pressure' 'fear' and 'uncertain' when talking about their educational futures. This reveals how making choices is an emotional, not just a strategic, process, and consequently the imperative for outreach to learn lessons from and make connections with mental health provision in order to effectively support young people.

Jodi's story

Jodi is studying a BTEC in Sport, alongside retaking her GCSEs at a college in East Sussex. She plans a career as a personal trainer and is currently undecided about what to do next. She feels the 'pressure' at her age of *'finding that aspiration of a job'* and making big decisions.

Apart from two of her aunties, she is the first in her immediate family to go to university. Her parents *'aren't really pro-university. They would rather I went into a job'*. In her chosen career she is aware of multiple routes into it, particularly through on the job training, and worries about whether a degree would be practical or useful for her in the graduate labour market. She is also concerned about the costs of university and is confident that, if she did go she would go locally so that she could live at home and continue *'to help support my parents as well as myself, then that would really help'*. Access to part-time work locally alongside her studies was also seen as essential *'so that it takes that pressure off a little bit, so that you've always got a back-up plan'*.

On the other hand, she was aware of the opportunities offered by higher education *'if you have a degree, then that opens up lines to employers that will help you in the future, because it will show them that, look at me. I'm experienced. I went away and did something by myself'*. A degree was seen as a route into enjoyable work that can be flexibly employed, should she want to change direction in her career. In addition, she is also keen to be a role model for her younger siblings *'all this experience I'm getting, I'm passing it along generation'* and knew that going to university would inspire them into different routes than they might have expected.

A key turning point was taking part in a university summer school funded by NCOP and she spoke of how this changed her perceptions about higher education. Before going she said *'I don't think I want to go to university. It proper scares me. I don't think I'm educated enough'*. Yet she left buzzing after *'inspiring talks'* and getting information about bursaries and the support university provides – *'it's not as scary as people make it out to be... even if you are at university. It's not all on your own.'* For her, opportunities like this were highly motivating *'you see, physically, what you could be, living better, possibly...than what you are at the moment'*.

When I asked what else might constitute effective support for her she spoke of highly personal and tailored guidance from the college that helps you imagine an alternative future *'being able to see a vision of what you want to do... really helps. In order to see that, you need someone to help you understand that'*. She spoke of having approachable, friendly mentors and teachers who are *'just there if you need them'*. Because of the positive experience she had from being supported by others, she has recently become a peer coach, working with other students around their transition into and through college. She said *'I can give them the help and advice of how I managed to pick myself up and say, right. This is what you've got to do'*.

Compared to previous generations, the world in which today's young people come of age is characterised as one of unsureness as to both individual and collective futures. It is against this backdrop of insecurity that young peoples' higher education decision-making takes place as the 'risky business' characterised by Reay (2003) in terms of the time and financial investment of a higher education; choice of institution and course in which to invest these; and the likely return in terms of skills, qualifications and graduate career market currency to be gained. We found young people and parents to be negotiating higher education decision-making often within a climate of unsureness and misinformation around costs and benefits. This included young people who conveyed that amongst all of the outreach activity they had received, there was a lack of concrete information around key aspects of understanding:

'All these people are coming, this is a really good thing, and they actually, while saying that they don't actually give that much information about what it's really like.'
(Year 9, Beachside)

There is also mistrust from some parents and young people alike around whether the information received from the government, universities and schools is accurate, including one parent who went to a popular money advice website for student loan information because they said that they trusted it more than then university. Young people also described to us their scepticism about whether the messages they were receiving about higher education were accurate:

'It's just they don't really tell us the things that we might get scared about. We all want to go to university and they still don't tell us things. It's just what it feels like.'

'They try and make you feel like everyone's always there to help you when that's not the case, I know it's not the case.'
(Year 12, Academy School)

Young peoples' mistrust around the messages of outreach represented part of a wider landscape of scepticism around the espoused benefits of higher education. Far from a misguided lack of ambition, their ability to decode dominant narratives of promised gain and recognise the of precarity of benefits lying behind these shows a grasp of the insecurity of graduate outcomes that is in line with the analyses of expert commentators (e.g. Shildrick *et al.* 2015):

'We are going to need degrees to get most jobs, so it's going to benefit you in the way of, you're going to get a better paying job. But also it's a huge risk, like it's such a gamble because if you go there for four years and then at the end you pass or you don't pass or you just go back to the job you had before, then was it worth it?'
(Year 12, Townside)

Young people also conveyed understanding that while higher education could by no means guarantee to deliver a secure future, for others this may be achievable without university:

'Some may be like, their family have a business... They are well off now, they've like, got this great business you know like, they're comfortable and everything. And I just think, if you don't have to go to uni and could do something like that, why wouldn't you?'
(Year 12, Townside)

Jodi's story above of her decision making around higher education illustrates this balancing of risks with pay-off, informed by her emotional anxieties as well as more pragmatic concerns around debt, accessing part-time work and future careers. Jodi wants to be a personal trainer and used sports

analogies of training and success to overcome challenges as a way to narrate her future. But the word 'pressure' reoccurred again and again. This was not unique to her story. In our discussions with young people, we were struck by the dominance of terminology associated with emotions and mental health – words such as worry, risk, pressure, fear, unclear and overwhelmed. They described how higher education might be an additional pressure to perform and succeed and that this was overwhelming after experiencing the demands of GCSEs and A-Levels:

'A level is such a jump and it's just like, so stressful and with university it's another jump and like, I'm a bit scared'

(Year 12, Townside)

As researchers of widening participation for over 10 years, this felt 'new' to us as a barrier to accessing higher education, and concerning. While we recognise that societal focus on young people's mental health has increased the likelihood of such terminology being more commonplace, the specific link between mental health and higher education decision making is significant and worthy of further investigation. Indeed, 'stress' was so normalised in young people's lives that they found it unusual that this was not something talked about often in outreach work:

'You deal with stress here, you've dealt with stress during your GCSEs. College isn't perfect, but I enjoy college. I enjoy going to school here. And that was stressful. I don't see the point in saying, oh yes, uni is perfect...Just don't tell us what we want to hear, tell us what we need to hear. Because otherwise we're going to be in for a big shock'

(Year 12, Academy School)

Following this statement, we stepped out of our researcher selves momentarily to tell these learners that there are things such as access to different forms of support for students at universities, including counselling. The student responded:

'You're not really told about people who you can go to about mental health issues that you can go speak to someone... if you're worried about your health and stuff like that. That would be just a nice thing to know before you go. Because we didn't know that until today.'

(Academy School Year 12)

Staff also acknowledged the mental health impact that progression to university could entail for some young people:

'It is scary and I can fully understand not being a parent. I can fully understand why some parents are thinking, oh my God. What... That next step is huge. And the academic shift from Three to Four is massive. We have so many students at Level... When they go from Two to Three and now suffering mental illness and they are not coping with Level Three pressures.'

(Local Authority Education Lead)

These insights suggests that outreach or support for young people's higher education decision making should be integrated with, or learn lessons from, mental health services, recognising that making choices around higher education is a deeply emotional, not just a strategic, process.

11.10 New and globalised approaches to outreach

Outreach operates in a constantly modernising and globalising world. Further and higher education is in continual flux, with increased globalisation, marketization, digitisation and commodification. This requires higher education policy makers and institutions to offer flexible provision that meets the need of a changing global workforce by more flexible opportunities (including part-time, adult education and distance learning), as well as look beyond regional and national borders to ensure students can have equitable access to global education and career opportunities.

Claire's story (WP lead)

Claire saw herself needing to adapt to meet changing needs for young people and the sector. She recognised some current challenges facing WP including managing funding initiatives that were short term, and from outside the university; and the increasing move of widening participation into Marketing and Recruitment that put pressures on collaborative working across universities and informing young people more objectively about the best options. Despite pulls against collaborative working at a strategic level, Claire felt that WP teams themselves *'on the ground'* did their best to continue to work together, with young peoples' best interests at their heart. She also recommended that WP funding should focus on: *'creating and thinking about sustaining that work longer term and embedding it in work that's already going on.'* Recognising the often complexity and not always straightforwardly linear nature of individual educational journeys, Claire expressed regret for the current policy focus on supporting young people into Higher Education at the expense of opportunities for mature returners, reflecting that: *'where the biggest drop is in terms of mature students and part-time students. And we're still continuing to work and think about how we work with those groups.'*

In the time that she had been working in WP Claire had found it progressively challenging to engage schools as they faced increasing pressures from both the financial climate and regulatory requirements including around attendance and attainment. She saw alternative outreach provision that could target young people in other ways rather than through school as a key way forward. Claire saw it as important where possible to provide inclusive higher education progression opportunities to avoid targeted young people feeling labelled. She also perceived that young people often felt positive about university but that this could be compromised by contrasting messages from parents concerned about the cost, and by misconceptions perpetuated by the media. In terms of wider surrounding context Claire indicated the significance of the *'real deprivation'* in some surrounding areas, and limitations to the job opportunities on offer to young people – for example those relating to hospitality.

Claire also suggested a need to listen more to the perspectives of young people themselves, which she felt could become lost amongst the drive to meet WP targets: *'We should respect more what they want they want from their education. Rather than imposing on them on what we think would be a really good thing for them to do.'* This included questioning dominant narratives around going away to university straight from school or college for a traditional student experience as the only or best way. Instead Claire identified the need for a much wider approach acknowledging that many young people prefer to remain at home, take time out before committing to higher education, and may find alternative routes such as apprenticeships or more flexible pathways provided through institutions such as the Open University, to better suit them. She suggested that FE colleges could be better at responding to the needs of diverse students than HEIs, including with greater flexibility of provision; and that testing out what they wanted to do through placements or Foundation studies could also be valuable options.

Clare reflected on some of the current challenges facing those leading outreach in universities – from short term funding and blunt target driven practices, to broader concerns around fees and traditional course structures (full time, 3 year) that offer a one-size model to a group of learners with vastly different experiences, motivations and interests. Part-time students undertaking undergraduate study have declined by 45% overall since 2010, with those aged 35 seeing the biggest drop of over 59% (Callender and Thompson, 2018). Clare saw this in terms of a real policy mismatch of NCOP’s focus on those age 14-19. In addition the opportunity cost of higher education was seen to be relative to the local job market, with the need for closer links to be made between careers and higher education information, advice and guidance (as discussed in [Section 11.7](#)). When we asked heads of widening participation in our three regional universities what they thought should be the focus going forward, they emphasised flexibility of provision and tailored support and guidance to meet the needs of future higher education learners of all ages.

The notion of higher education institutions providing flexible provision is important. The expansion of higher education within further education, along with the provision of online and distance has offered a broad range of options to learners seeking alternative and more ‘flexible’ pathways. Yet due to the ‘privilege’ economy that ranks and values higher education differently, these are understood in hierarchy to one another and consequently are likely to produce different outcomes for learners’ futures (Bathmaker, 2016). Moreover, moving between courses, institutions and academic/vocational pathways is not straightforward. One learner talks about her desire for flexibility:

‘Say I choose to do medicine or something, if I feel like I’m uncomfortable with that I can go back to uni and try and do it again with the qualifications maybe. Instead of doing medicine [unclear] journalism. So you can always go back and try again.’

(Year 9, Church View)

To change between medicine and journalism is technically possible, but costly and time consuming. We also met a young woman studying in an FE college who took a BTEC course on the understanding she could use it to apply to medical school. When she attended a Medicine open day at a local university, the admissions officer laughed at her and told her to go back and do her A-Levels. This woman was academically very gifted but had anxiety issues that meant exam based learning through A-Levels was incompatible. Because she had switched routes previously she could no longer access her further education for free and these financial worries were compounded by her being the main carer for her mum. Something had gone seriously wrong for this young woman and the lack of flexibility in the system meant she was stuck in a course that would not lead to her desired career. Arguably she should have received more honest and realistic CEIAG. However, this case also indicates a need for the higher education system to modernise its systems of credit-transfer and provide a broader range of courses in terms of length, flexibility to move in, out and between and diverse modes of delivery including high-quality online and distance learning. This modernisation is needed to future proof learners and their qualifications, particularly in a context when some claim that 85% jobs that will exist in 2030 have not been invented yet (Dell Technologies, 2017). We may not know what these jobs may be or the kinds of higher education they require but it is likely that traditional models providing for the traditional professions will not be compatible. Outreach professionals can only promote the current courses on offer and this presented an ethical dilemma for many of them. What these professionals can do (and many do) is increasingly work with the

recognition that the higher education student is *not* universally young, geographically mobile, financially and domestically ‘carefree’ nor well-informed or supported in their decision making.

An additional factor raised in discussions with senior managers of universities and colleges is the need to provide broader opportunities for an increasingly global workforce:

‘Because the world is competitive and you’re not just dealing with... You know, when you apply for a job here, you’re not dealing with 30 other people from this town. You’re dealing with, you know, 150 people that come from China and Japan and Europe and wherever. It’s global’.

(FE Senior Manager)

Higher education outreach is a predominantly nationally focused industry formed through the specific concerns and priorities of particular nation states. One of its fundamental aims is therefore to invest in their universities in order to provide skilled workers for the industrial needs of the country. Consequently, very few outreach opportunities encourage study abroad or international summer schools, including access to programmes such as Erasmus. Yet international opportunities are a new privilege marker that middle-class and/or educationally rich families tend to engage in more than those from lower-socio economic backgrounds (Ballatore and Ferede, 2013; Waters and Brooks, 2013). The playing field of trade in educational capitals is not levelling in this respect but always moving, with the rules being rewritten just as one group ‘catches up’. Student mobility is a signal of distinction and privilege for UK students and, in order to continue to meet higher education equity gaps, access to international higher educations should be made available to the broadest population and promoted through outreach work.

A third finding around the future of WP is the need for future meaningful collaborations that move beyond institutional boundaries:

‘There needs to be a better sector understanding. It’s no use Sussex working its socks off, like we do, and you’re working their socks off; there’s no... They need to pull together a picture of what’s really happening across the sector. It’s too kind of institutionally based at the moment’

(WP Lead 3)

Collaboration is a central tenet of NCOP. However, in practice this rubs up against existing institutional barriers shaped by marketisation – from reputation building to student recruitment. However, practitioners saw clear value in NCOP’s approach of offering a strategic national direction for higher education outreach. Key benefits included offering students a broader range of courses beyond their own institutions, encouraging collaboration between universities on different programmes and providing large scale data and guidance in order to frame regionally-based solutions. This is something which needs to be developed in future incarnations in order for outreach to be most successful for funders, as well as learners.

13. Recommendations: Young people's educational futures and the 'value' of outreach

Throughout the first phase of NCOP, SLN has invested in developing a robust evidence-informed approach to informing and evaluating the resourcing of intervention activities in terms of their meaningful contribution to supporting education progression outcomes for young people in regional NCOP wards. Our triangulation of strategic Research and Evaluation insight through learner and practitioner surveys, intervention evaluations, and in-depth qualitative research, and targeted analysis of these; alongside close working with partners through regular, structured knowledge-exchange opportunities, have contributed to a comprehensive understanding of both the successes of NCOP and ongoing areas in need of future targeted resource investment.

These headline recommendations look to the new phase of NCOP as an opportunity to build on past successes and learning to secure the success of the next stage of WP for future generations. The recommendations include suggestions for improvement in delivering and evaluating outreach; and stretch across implications at the levels of policy and practice, and the local and the global. Centrally, they suggest the need for a joined-up approach between the multiple relevant stakeholders involved in achieving these.

1. The need for a lifecycle approach

To be effective, outreach must take a holistic approach that acknowledges and responds to the long, complex, and highly individual nature of learner journeys. This includes a need to extend and embed activity right back through the education process; igniting and engaging young peoples' ambitions before aspirations become dampened and they make poor education choices, and to encourage them to focus on an educational goal in mind. We must look for opportunities to support **long-term 'drip drip' regular contact approaches to outreach that can overcome the challenge of curriculum constraints and stimulate resilience by starting early in giving young people positive messages about their potential**, that can be knocked out of them by life experiences by a later age. Alongside this, activity that effectively addresses educational exclusions and inequalities must also reach forward to extend opportunities to those who may have suffered the hardest knocks in life, and through this been hindered from embracing the opportunities available. **The next phase of NCOP offers an exciting and important opportunity to reach this left-behind group through the opportunity to work with Level 2 and Level 3 adults.** A third dimension of embracing a lifecycle approach to WP is the **need to seek out opportunities to look beyond securing access, to understanding and improving equity of experience, retention, attainment and employment outcomes for WP students.**

2. A need to stop talking, and start listening

For outreach to work effectively it must have buy-in from key stakeholder groups including the young people who it is aimed at, their near peer networks, their families (including their siblings), and the school and college staff who must find time and other resources within pressurised timetables to support it. This means engaging with these groups as the expert voices informing what the issues are and what is needed; and delivering *with* and not *to* young people, parents, and teachers. Our experience has been that not only disadvantaged young people and parents, but also schools can feel alienated and disengaged with an evangelical model of WP that they feel judged and chastised by. In this context the approach of individual outreach leads is pivotal – one particularly disadvantaged school within our NCOP had not engaged with outreach opportunities until a lead was appointed who approached the relationship particularly sensitively.

An effective WP for the future must provide amplification and credence to previously silenced voices, and recognise the concerns they raise as legitimate, rather than resorting to ‘missionary models’ of ‘taking the message of higher education to...’. SLN’s work through Phase 1 of NCOP has generated important new insights into previously unlistened to perspectives of pupils, parents, teachers and practitioners. This is key to developing new understandings that can inform user-friendly and accessible interventions of the future, as part of a new approach to WP strategy that shifts the agenda from exclusively focusing on changing young people, towards affecting change by using young peoples’ user-insights to change policy and practice level assumptions and approaches. Young people in our research described feeling as though their needs and interests around higher education progression were too seldom consulted, and described university as being ‘sold’ to them. Our small-scale piloting of workshops in which young people are invited to design their own vision of effective outreach activity, suggest a real **need for scaling up of opportunities for young people to be able to input, shape and lead the nature of this outreach provision that they receive**. SLN’s strategic approach of engaging user insight in Phase 1 of NCOP has laid strong foundations for **funnelling this into active, collaborative design of exciting new user-informed WP initiatives and evaluation at Phase 2 of NCOP, which we see as a key priority**.

3. The need for robust evidence informed policy and practice

SLN:COP has invested in resourcing high quality, expert informed Research and Evaluation embedded within the core team from phase 1 of NCOP. This has involved harnessing diverse, interdisciplinary expertise from academic researchers and practitioners from universities within our own NCOP and beyond, engaged through a number of mechanisms including creation of a Community of Academic Practice; close project working between academics and university WP teams; and investment in a number of competitive pump-priming initiatives involving academic experts working in collaboration with community partners on innovative small projects. Importantly, this has involved the consideration of a broad range of evidence ‘types’ from narrative case studies to survey data, challenging the notion that ‘robust’ must equate to the numeric. We **see high quality Research and Evaluation as key to the next generation of WP**, through calling practice to account and ensuring resource-effectiveness of investment. SLN:COP’s success is underpinned by commitment to a strong triad of research, policy and practice in constant multidirectional communication.

4. Staying the distance: developing strategies for sustainability

Schools and WP practitioners have told us that while they appreciate the value of all resources to support young peoples’ progression journeys, the way in which much outreach is administered through short-term funding streams and piecemeal opportunities for interventions, can be resource intensive in terms of setting up projects and learning how things work, only for them to come to an end. This can be experienced as frustrating by staff and also by young people, who do not understand why they don’t have access to experiences they saw cohorts above them benefitting from. Such successive short-term and small-scale initiatives may also fail to capture the needs of learners with most to gain from support, by falling short of offering them a joined-up experience that approaches them as a unique and complex whole person. Further, such piecemeal initiatives can be challenging to ensure and evaluate the success of in terms of return on investment through the number of students counted in return for spend. It requires longevity to meaningfully experience and evidence the benefits of intervention. We should expect to see an upsurge in higher education participation in two years’ time as today’s Year 10 NCOP learners who have had strong support from Year 9, come to their decision making. However unless there is ongoing investment, this may appear as more of a ‘bubble’ than a sustained upward trajectory. **We recommend it as imperative that**

practice should be informed by a philosophy of meaningful outreach that offers young people sustained and realistic experiences of higher education. SLN have been commended for being the best performing NCOP in terms of sustained engagement with learners. Teachers, parents and young people have told us that they value activities that offer meaningful opportunities for skills development; as well as those that accurately represent where and how people ‘like them’ live, work and study. Recognising the inevitable challenges of time-bounded initiatives, SLN is committed to the need to foster sustainability through supporting development of Communities of Practice, including those between schools; and university experts. Further activities oriented to ensuring legacy and sustainability include policy engagement and production of open-access online resources for equitable knowledge-sharing of our expertise with users beyond SLN:COP, and to ensure impact.

5. Capacity-building professionals for best practice

A key aspect of this legacy and sustainability work is our commitment to supporting capacity-building through training and CPD. CPD for professionals working with young people is key to ensuring sustainability of WP investment and gains beyond short funding streams. Distributed funding to schools offers significant value but requires enhanced cross-sector understanding. Schools are ideally placed to provide education and careers guidance for young people that is relatively independent, personalised and embedded into everyday classroom conversations at an early age. However, there is a need for more embedded cross-sector training and understanding. **We identify an important need moving into Phase 2 of NCOP for investment in high quality CPD for teachers and other relevant professionals to ensure that good practice can be shared and replicated. In order to make this as accessible and engaging as possible to our diverse partners, this CPD should take varying formats – from more intensive credit bearing study to ‘snapshot’ email sector updates.**

6. Mentors and key adults - nurturing sustained engagement for success

A key dimension of sustained investment for meaningful added value to emerge clearly from SLN:COP’s work so far is the importance of building relationships with key individuals to act as ‘guides on the side’. This includes the positive influence of trusted teachers and other adults who are able to work with young people in a sustained way and show their belief in them. It also importantly includes the role of mentors, particularly those with ‘near-peer’ experience, who can be easier to relate to. This includes not only young people, but also parents, for whom for example the ‘Parent Ambassador’ activities resourced under SLN:COP have provided a successful model of parental engagement that we suggest should be utilised more widely within WP. **We further recommend that a similar yet bespoke model may offer an important support resource for Foster carers in supporting the HE progression journeys of young people in their care.** Mentoring can be especially valuable for learner groups who may experience particular marginalisation within the education system, including care leaving, Gypsy Roma and Traveller, and LGBT young people. We recommend future investment be aimed at developing more sustained engagement through such targeted, bespoke mentoring development. We also identify the important contribution of near-peers for supporting young people’s progression journeys, beyond formal mentoring through informal knowledge-sharing and confidence-building by experience between siblings and wider family, friends and communities. In terms of formal outreach, effective activities may include open days that target whole families; student-led focus groups and tutorial resources; and student alumni talks focusing on overcoming challenges in progression journeys – these can also be presented as stories on school walls.

We recommend the need for more targeted research into the role and contribution of such informal as well as formal near-peer influence; to inform design and resourcing of future intervention.

7. Locating wider responsibility: Moving beyond models of individual deficit

NCOP's focus on the significance of geographical locality to young people's higher education progression is particularly welcomed in the recognition this implies that deficit of aspiration cannot straightforwardly be assumed as residing in young people themselves, but comes rather from the wider context around them. This implies the need for a radical shift away from lagging behind assumptions and approaches to intervention that persist in focusing on individual psychological accounts of engagement and perceived need for resilience raising. There is a need to recognise instead that young people from less advantaged backgrounds have very often had to draw on much greater personal resilience than their more privileged peers, and that the deficit of aspiration to be addressed is too often in the teachers and other adults working with disadvantaged young people, rather than in the young people themselves. This implies a need to consider school level factors for why some young people from less advantaged backgrounds under-achieve. We therefore recommend the urgent need to change mindsets in much outreach understanding and practice, to come into line with more nuanced and honest messages around such relevant concepts as aspiration, resilience, and the risks and benefits of higher education. Postcode is a blunt instrument. A WP for the future further needs to acknowledge the complexity of young peoples' identities as being delineated by multiple factors beyond and in complex interplay with geographical locality; including ethnicity, gender, school environment, and the social and economic contexts of family background. **This implies the urgency for development and use of effective multiple and interconnected measures of educational disadvantage informed by high quality research.**

8. University in uncertain times: young people, wellbeing, mental health and vulnerability

The higher education investment that today's young people must negotiate is characterised by multiple layers of risk that include the individual fees regime and precarity of the graduate job market. Young people we have researched commonly used terms such as 'pressure', 'fear' and 'uncertain' when talking about their educational futures. The older adults involved in supporting the participation agenda must be mindful of this in our promotion of higher education, and to consider the emotional realities of higher education decision making. **We must commit to providing high quality, comprehensive and joined-up networks of support around would-be, current, and recent university students, that include support not only for academic and employment outcomes but also for wellbeing and mental health.** We must be particularly aware of supporting the needs of the most vulnerable groups, including young people who are LGBT, care leavers, or refugees. SLN has invested in innovative small-scale targeted projects focusing on these groups as part of Phase 1 of NCOP. These areas of research and recommendation should be taken up and forward within the sector more widely. The way in which the institutionalisation of WP responsibility has informed an increasing eclipsing with Marketing and Recruitment agendas risks ingraining a culture of 'quick wins' at the expense of genuinely improving opportunities for the hardest to reach young people who are furthest away from the prospect of higher education participation and success. The view in some outreach practices that 'a rising tide lifts all ships' is dangerous in implying that it does not really matter which groups are targeted so long as numbers are increased effectively. This is not the case, there are no quick wins in the complicated lives of real people. How do we ensure we are working with the most marginalised groups? There is an acute need to focus on the nuances of success in WP, rather than just bean-counting, self-congratulation. This is central to holding on to an intrinsic social good agenda for higher education alongside the instrumental, neo-liberal economic

model; including emphasising the contribution that students from diverse backgrounds make to the university, society and economy. **A WP for the future must approach university recruitment as being about enriching society by attracting and nurturing the great thinkers of the next generation, rather than as individual opportunity investment.** A renewed emphasis on the intrinsic individual and collective civic benefits of higher education is important in the context of the unsureness of financial or employability gains, particularly for groups already marginalised in higher education such as BAME students.

9. Higher education for the world around us

The reality of the world that we are preparing young people for is very different to that experienced by older generations; and within this context outreach can be argued to be promoting an outdated message. There is a pressing need to more critically consider what we are really preparing young people for, including the extent to which there is really an imaginable future for them or if this may be something of a 'cruel promise'. The world of further and higher education is in continual flux, with increased globalisation, marketization, digitisation and commodification. This suggests a need for higher education policy makers and institutions to offer provision that meets the need of a changing global workforce by more flexible opportunities (including part-time, adult education and distance learning). This constantly changing world around us implies new challenges for higher education that WP must be responsive to. Of particular pertinence in the UK context is the unsureness of the prospect of Brexit and the as yet unknown quantities of such sweeping possible outcomes as the future universities themselves as universities, the way in which participation is funded, and the employment opportunities available to graduates. Many aspects of university life are less prepared than other organisations with Brexit strategies, and this includes WP. In the immediate future there will be a need for outreach to engage swiftly and self-reflexively with what the outcomes of Brexit (including the uncertainty that it has produced, should it not go ahead) implies for the young people we work with and therefore the responsibilities of our own professional practice and policy engagement. Among other things this will require the need for the second phase of NCOP **to integrate more closely with careers and enterprise strategies locally, including to ensure that higher education and career progression is locally contextualised and appropriately targeted** to meet the specificities of local employment opportunities. In SLN:COP this means **working creatively together to develop innovative regional solutions to the challenges for coastal and rural population with low levels of industry employment. There is a further need for developing knowledge-sharing opportunities between NCOP Consortia with similar demographic characteristics and hence challenges.** At the same time **there is a need to look beyond regional and national borders to ensure that UK students can have equitable access to global education and career opportunities. Access to internationalisation opportunities has increasingly become a privilege marker that acts to further distinguish NCOP learners from middle-class students or those with multigenerational experiences of university study. The uncertainty of programmes such as Erasmus post-Brexit is likely to deepen this divide further.** This implies an imperative for outreach to modernise and globalise to think beyond national borders such that **these opportunities are made inclusive to the broadest population.**

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15. Appendices

Appendix A



How would you design a University enrichment activity for other young people?

Task

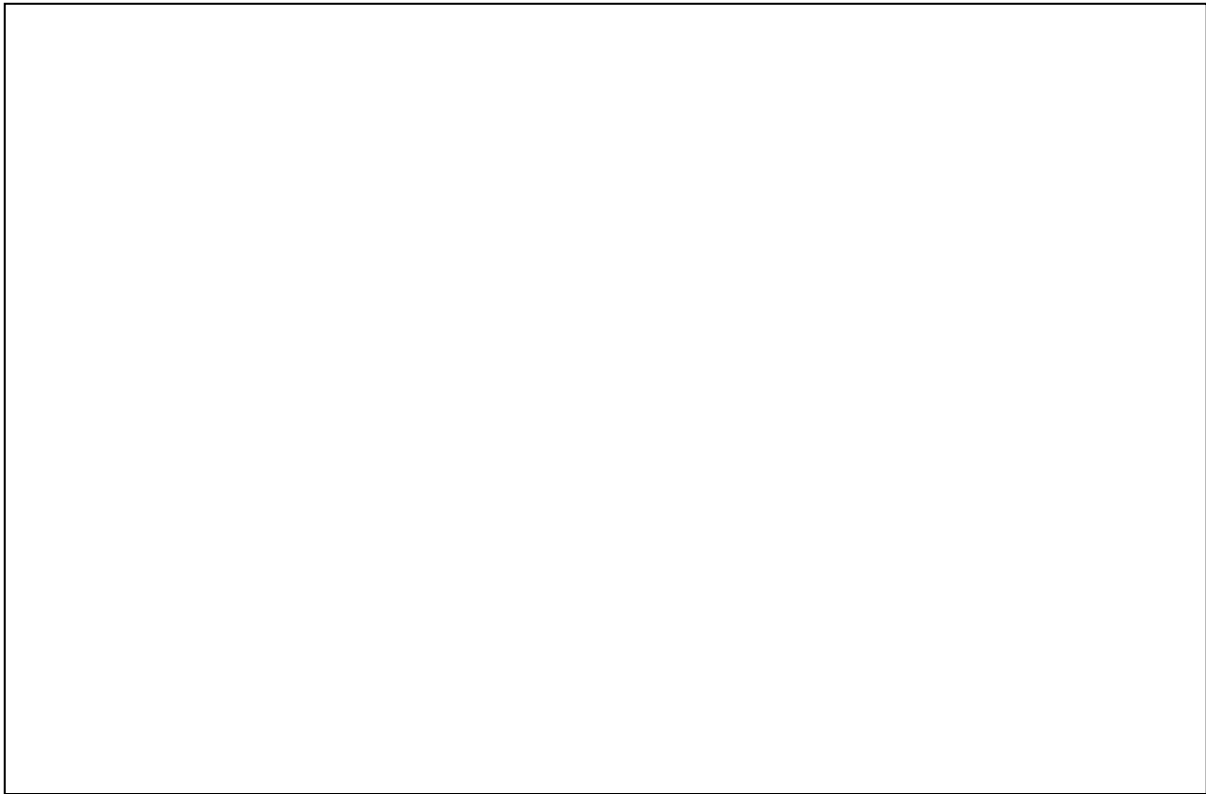
We would like you to imagine that you are in charge of a budget to design a 'Widening Participation' activity that you think would be effective in supporting young people from diverse background to consider going to University.

Your School:

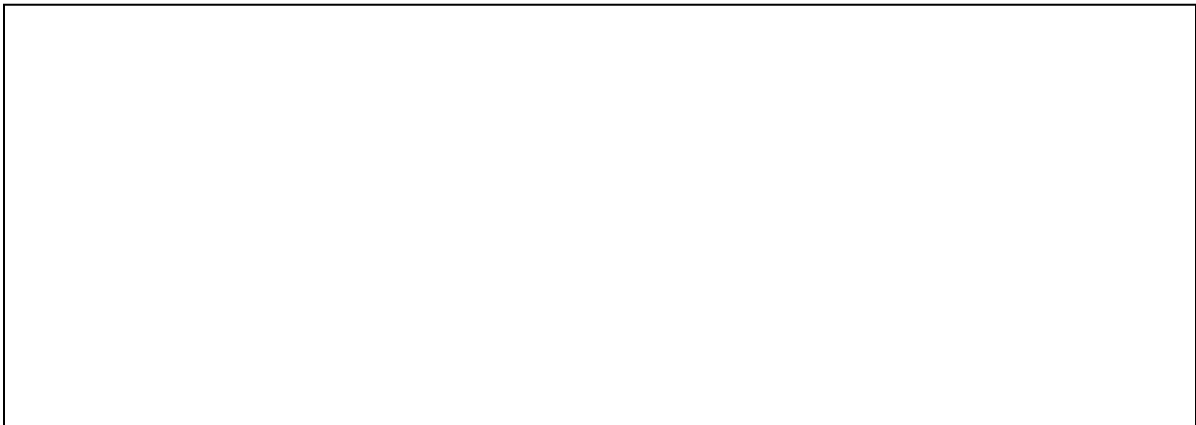
Your Year group:

Some issues to consider include the following:

1. Begin by thinking about any University related activities you may have experienced yourself, either formally through school or informally through your own life – e.g. having a family member, friend or neighbor who has University experience.



2. What did you like or not like about this introduction to University? How can you draw on this experience in designing your own activity?



3. Is there a particular group you are going to target? (This might include gender, ethnicity, parents' job, where young people live, and/or other things your group thinks are particularly important). Why do you think it's particularly important to support the groups you have chosen?

4. What will your activity be?

5. Where will your activity take place and why? (e.g. school/college/university/community group/online)

6. Who will be responsible for delivering your activity? E.g. teachers, parents, university students, older school or college students, people in employment in particular graduate jobs, others? Why have you chosen this approach?



7. How do you hope your activity will benefit young people who take part? What will they get from it?



8. Why have you designed your activity the way you have? Does it draw in any way on your own experiences of University related activities?

9. Were there any disagreements in your group about how to design the activity and who for?

10. If so, what were these? Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience of this activity?

Thank you for taking part!