

Perceptions of higher education and higher and degree apprenticeships

Executive Summary

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1 Introduction

The National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) consists of 29 local consortia aiming to rapidly increase the number of young people from under-represented groups progressing into higher education (HE) across England. Make Happen, the NCOP consortium based in Essex, commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to explore the views of local young people and teachers through qualitative research visits to schools and colleges in Essex. The research aimed to explore young people's views regarding HE and higher and degree apprenticeships and investigate the barriers young people may face in progressing into these routes. Additionally, the research looked at perceptions of what works well to encourage these young people to consider these routes and raise aspirations.

This executive summary provides an overview of the main findings from this research along with the overall conclusions.

2 Key Findings

2.1 Students' aspirations and knowledge of options

Students have mixed but realistic study and career aspirations. While younger students (Year 10) were not as clear on their plans, older students (Years 12 and 13) generally had firm ideas of what they wanted to do when they left school or college.

Staff believed that their students generally had realistic aspirations, but that their family circumstances and experiences mitigated these aspirations. Specifically, staff felt that those students from more disadvantaged backgrounds lacked exposure to the different options available to them (for example, not having any close family members having gone to university) and, as such, were unlikely to consider routes they knew little about, such as university. As a result, staff believed that students from more disadvantaged backgrounds generally had lower aspirations, compared to those from families that were more affluent, regardless of ability.

'... I don't understand the whole idea of universities. I only have one cousin who's gone to university, but I don't understand exactly what you can study, and what university basically is.' (Student)

'I would say that the family and the family circumstances has the biggest influence on whether they think they are university material.' (Staff)

Parents and family members have the greatest influence on study and career aspirations. Staff, school students and current university students believed that their parents, and other family members (including older siblings), had the greatest influence on their plans. The influence of parents highlights the

importance of parents being informed of the different options open to their children in order that they can have informed discussions with their children. This is particularly important for children from disadvantaged families who, as discussed above, may not have been exposed to the range of opportunities open to them.

Most students were aware of the main options; namely, university, apprenticeships or a job. Students had the greatest knowledge and awareness of university. There was less knowledge of apprenticeships, particularly higher and degree apprenticeships. University students explained that their schools had seen university as the default option, providing less information on other opportunities.

Most students were positive about university. This was particularly true of older students who were also better informed compared to younger students. Students felt the benefits of university were ultimately getting a better career or job, increased life experience and opportunities for meeting new people. The biggest challenge reported by students was student debt, which staff reiterated as being the biggest perceived barrier facing students. Other barriers included the extent of change that university represented from school life, having to leave home and a perception that the lack of work experience within a degree would prevent them from getting a job after graduation.

Students lacked sufficient knowledge of higher and degree apprenticeships to talk confidently about the perceived benefits and challenges of these, highlighting this as a key barrier in itself to pursuing these routes.

Students from institutions that were more engaged¹ in Make Happen: were more likely to have concrete plans for their future (particularly the older students); had found out about their options through school or events they had attended; were less likely to see student debt as a barrier to attending university; and had a greater understanding of higher and degree apprenticeships. In contrast, those students from less-engaged institutions: were generally less certain on their plans; were more likely to say they had undertaken their own research to find out their options; had greater concern over university student debt; and had less knowledge of higher and degree apprenticeships. In addition, these students were more likely to feel that they needed more information on the options available to them².

¹ High engagement was defined as institutions where: Make Happen was prioritised and closely linked with careers; lots of activities undertaken; and time given to undertake coordination role. Low Engagement was defined as institutions where: Make Happen coordinator lacked dedicated time to apply to the role; activities were less joined up with careers; and only a few activities undertaken.

² These findings do not infer causality.

2.2 Activities to raise aspirations

All institutions were working with Make Happen to varying extents to provide students with activities aimed at raising aspirations, often as part of a wider careers plan.

Activities to raise aspirations included motivational speakers, workshops, visits or trips, and mentoring. Staff believed all of these could be effective methods to raise aspirations, if planned and delivered effectively. For example, motivational speakers were most successful where they engaged with the students, facilitated an interactive session, and where students could relate to them or their message. Workshops were useful as students enjoyed their interactive nature but they needed to make explicit links to future careers to ensure students got the most out of them. Mentoring was a useful tool as long as the mentor motivated the students and encouraged them to reach their potential. There were instances reported of mentors being dismissive of students' goals, for example, a mentor in one school dismissed a student's goal of studying medicine because the student had not chosen the 'right' A levels, rather than exploring alternative routes into medicine.

All interviewee groups felt that the most effective activities were those that allowed students to gain experiences of the outside world. In particular, visits and trips to universities or businesses allowed students to gain real life experiences, which they may not otherwise have had, and helped to dispel stereotypes and raise aspirations.

'[The most useful activity is] seeing it in front of you, like university [trips] – going there and having a look around.' (Student)

Staff believed Make Happen was having a positive impact on students' aspirations, with those schools most engaged in Make Happen reporting the greatest impact. Staff felt that Make Happen enabled them to reach more students than they could afford to do otherwise and offer a wider variety of activities.

'[Make Happen has] brought careers education to life in the school as it enables the school to get students out to see what teachers are talking about in careers sessions.' (Staff)

2.2.1 Lessons learned

Given the extent to which parents influence their children's plans, it is unsurprising that staff believed that educating parents to dispel myths and increase understanding was the most important lesson they had learned for raising aspirations. Other lessons related to raising aspirations included:

- target students early in their secondary school career
- Improve understanding of student finance and other perceived barriers
- expose students to a range of experiences
- ensure all staff in the school are aware and informed of the post-18 options
- provide students with aspirational but realistic messages.

According to staff, the key lessons learned for Make Happen on running activities to raise aspirations were:

- book activities in early with schools and be mindful of the time of year activities are running for different year groups
- allow schools more involvement in the planning of activities
- share best practice and recommendations of effective activities and approaches between schools
- provide activities that are 'punchy', interactive and pitched at the right level
- provide both targeted and universal activities.

3 Conclusions

This research suggests that, in order to raise aspirations of those students who may not traditionally apply for university or for higher/degree apprenticeships, it is important to educate parents to improve their understanding of post-16 options. Similarly, school and college staff need to be informed of the options, or be aware of where to signpost students for further information. This is particularly true of higher and degree apprenticeships where there appeared to be very little information given to the students.

It is clear that, when engaging with Make Happen was a priority within school/college, staff viewed activities as effective, and students had greater awareness of the options available to them. In order to work effectively, Make Happen activities should be included in the overall careers planning of an institution.

Furthermore, it was considered important to start activities to raise aspirations early. Students with the greatest awareness of their post-18 options were in schools that started educating them on their options as early as Year 7.

The most effective activities were perceived to be those that enabled young people to experience the real world, such as trips to university campuses or businesses.

Overall, this presents an opportunity for Make Happen to review their activities in light of the above findings. For example, to ensure they prioritise the education of parents and staff, consider lowering the age at which they target their activities, encourage staff to fully integrate Make Happen activities into their careers plan and ensure activities provide real world experiences for students.

4 Methodological approach

This executive summary provides key findings from research undertaken in six schools and one college in Essex between November 2018 and January 2019. In total, we interviewed seven senior leaders in pre-18 institutions, seven Make Happen coordinators and undertook 11 focus groups with NCOP students in these institutions (totalling 69 students aged between 14 and 18 years). We also undertook one focus group with seven current students at the University of Essex.