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Anthea Rose & Lucy Mallinson

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ARTICLE



Teachers' perspectives on the delivery of transitional outreach activities and their potential to raise secondary school students' Higher Education aspirations during the Covid-19 pandemic

Anthea Rose and Lucy Mallinson

Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute (LHERI), University of Lincoln, Lincoln, UK

ABSTRACT

The role secondary schools play in raising student aspirations for, and encouraging progression into, Higher Education through supported outreach is important but often overlooked by both colleges and universities alike. This article reports on our work within Uni Connect's 'Raising Higher Education Aspirations' programme in Lincolnshire which delivers targeted university-inspiring transitional outreach activities to Year 9–13 students from disadvantaged backgrounds with low levels of social and cultural capital, little or no familial habitus of Higher Education and where Higher Education participation is lower than expected. Specifically, this article considers university-inspiring transitional outreach from the perspective of six secondary school Uni Connect programme leads. Semi-structured interviews conducted with school leads over a 12-month period between October 2019 and November 2020 provided a unique insight into the successes and challenges schools face in delivering aspirational Higher Education outreach. In particular, the study found that the Uni Connect programme was beginning to have a positive effect on students, with some school leads reporting a cultural shift amongst students in their attitudes towards Higher Education. Students were reported to be more open to the possibility of going to university, more willing to explore the different pathways available to them and more prepared to take part in next steps conversations. Key to the programmes' success was the relationship between school leads and the local partnership responsible for delivering the programme. However, continued and timely delivery of outreach, especially to Year 10 and 11 students, was viewed as the biggest challenge during the ongoing Covid-19 climate.

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Higher Education; student aspirations; transitional outreach; Uni Connect; habitus and social capital

Introduction

University-inspiring transitional outreach activities, such as campus visits to Higher Education Institutions, taster days, master classes, study skills workshops, mentoring and summer schools, amongst other activities, were originally defined by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), now the Office for Students (OfS), '... as activities that help raise awareness, aspirations and attainment among people from disadvantage or under-represented groups ...' (Barkat 2019, 1163). Whilst such outreach activities are well established and widely used across the educational sector, little is known about how they impact on non-traditional students' decisions towards applying, or even aspiring to, Higher Education (HE). This is mainly because evaluating their impact on non-traditional students, defined by Holton (2018, 557) as, 'first-generation university attendees from working-class or minority

backgrounds' whose knowledge of HE is limited, is acknowledged to be complex and difficult to do either rigorously or systematically (Barkat 2019; Younger et al. 2019). However, with university-inspiring transitional outreach activities in England costing the public purse some £176 million last year alone (OfS 2019), it is hardly surprising that the government is increasingly looking for robust evidence of impact (Harrison and Waller 2017).

In England, aspirational outreach activities are delivered in secondary schools and colleges by a range of different providers including universities, colleges themselves, private companies and local learning partnerships. For universities, such activity generally forms part of their Access and Participation Plan (APP) designed to help meet their widening HE access and participation targets as required by the government since April 2018 (OfS 2020a). All universities and Colleges in England now have a 5-year APP for 2020–25 which focuses on increasing the number of university admissions in key student target groups such as those from low socio-economic status households or students from Black Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities as well as relative performance and progression across the student lifecycle. Another key player in the field of aspirational outreach activities is the Uni Connect programme. Funded by the OfS to the tune of £60 million a year over four years, this national programme runs from January 2017 to July 2021 (OfS 2020b). Initially known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), in February 2020 the programme was rebranded as Uni Connect. The programme delivers targeted HE transitional outreach activities to young people in England in Years 9 to 13, via 29 local education partnerships. The focus of the Uni Connect programme is on geographical areas, specifically the 997 wards in England where the HE participation of young people has been shown to be both low and much lower than expected based on GCSE-level attainment. Evaluating the impact of activities in raising the HE aspirations of target learners (i.e. Uni Connect students) forms a key element of the programme. This article is based on one discreet aspect of the wider Phase 2 evaluation (August 2019–July 2021), namely the views and experiences of a small number of secondary school teachers (referred to as School Leads) responsible for rolling the project out in their schools in Lincolnshire.

The Phase 2 evaluation component of the local Uni Connect programme, delivered by LiNCHigher in partnership with local universities and colleges, is being conducted by a small team of independent evaluators from the Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute (LHERI), at the University of Lincoln. To contribute to the knowledge base of what works and for whom, all 29 local education partnerships involved in Phase 2 of the programme were required, by the funder (OfS), to include a local evaluation. In many instances the evaluators are part of the core team. However, in the case of LiNCHigher, they are based within and directly employed by, the University of Lincoln, one of the programme partners. As such they are not involved in either the planning or the delivery of the local Uni Connect programme. Their remit is limited to assessing the impact of transitional outreach activities and to remain objective at all times.

The role of teachers and the importance of school context in aspiring students to apply to HE

Much of the literature around the impact of university-inspiring transitional outreach activities centres on STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), for example, the work of Vennix, Den Brok, and Taconis (2017, 2018) and as such has limited value in the Uni Connect context. In addition, most of the evidence comes from an international perspective. For example, in their systematic review of evidence on the effectiveness of interventions and strategies for widening participation in HE, Younger et al. (2019) found just 16 studies, out of more than 3,500, that were relevant to the UK context and of high enough quality to be included in the final review. Likewise, the recent systematic review of studies by Heaslip et al. (2020) found just 26 UK-focused studies out of 847. The reviews, which aimed to explore how current research identifies and understands impact in outreach over a ten-year period between 2005 and 2015 found the majority (16) of the 26 UK studies were qualitative, five were quantitative and five took a mixed methods approach. Most studies, regardless of the type of data they collected, related to a specific

setting, such as a particular city or region and focused on a just one outreach initiative and were therefore limited in value. They also found little evidence that the activities had any long-term impact on non-traditional students in terms of HE engagement, with most studies focusing on the student experience either during or shortly after interventions were delivered (Heaslip et al. 2020, 40). Both reviews highlight the lack of good quality, robust evidence available in the UK in this field of inquiry.

One of the few robust studies that measures the impact of HE transitional outreach activities was conducted by Hoare and Mann (2012) which looked at the impact the Sutton Trust's summer school programme had on encouraging students from non-traditional backgrounds to apply to university. A national initiative that has been running since 1997 in four universities – St Andrews, Bristol, Cambridge and Nottingham – the programme is open to students who meet both their academic attainment criteria (which, at the time of the study were five or more GCSEs at A and A* grades) and certain social conditions such as attendance at a low performing school, being in receipt of the Educational Maintenance Allowance, or whose parents had no HE experience. In essence, students with little or no university familial or HE habitus (Bourdieu 1977, 1986). Hoare and Mann's evaluation of the 2008 and 2009 programme followed both attendees and a control group through a range of methods including UCAS (the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) tracking and pre and post questionnaires. The study found strong empirical evidence that summer school attendance had the potential to narrow the gap in the university application process with attendees more likely to engage with the university application process and more likely to apply to leading universities, concluding: *'summer schools make the biggest difference to the poorest students'* (Hoare and Mann 2012, 2).

A study by Harrison and Waller (2017) focuses less on the outcomes of HE transitional outreach activities for non-traditional students and more on the challenges and complexities of evaluating such initiatives. They acknowledge the increasing pressure placed on universities by the government (BIS 2014) over recent years to prove their effectiveness, impact and value for money but note this is no easy task and suggest the most effective way forward is to take a *'small steps'* approach, set within a theory of change framework. The framework, which is commonly used in education for 'planning, implementing or evaluating change at an individual, organisational or community level' (Laing and Todd 2015, 3) allows for the mapping and tracking of interventions in complex situations, such as schools, and helps explain how change occurs. As such, and in this context, it is not a theory per se, rather a way of organising the various elements involved in the evaluation and considering their effects. Laing and Todd (2015) outline four theory of change models: deductive, inductive, mental and collaborative. The most relevant to the Uni Connect project is the deductive model that involves reviewing literature to inform the gathering of quantitative and qualitative data as well as requiring organisations to reflection on what works and what does not. The central theory to this work comes in the application of Bourdieu's field, habitus and capitals.

Harrison and Waller identify the following five key challenges that they believe are inherent in evaluating outreach activities. The selection and self-selection biases, this is when students attending outreach activities may not necessarily be representative of the school or area they come from but are pre-selected as those that are most likely to positively respond to the intervention in terms of increasing their likelihood of applying to university. Priming and social desirability effects, leading to students giving evaluators the responses they perceive they want; sometimes known as social desirability bias. Deadweight and leakage, when activities fail to reach their intended targets and numbers are supplemented with 'relatively advantaged' students. This not only wastes resources but can potentially overinflate the effectiveness of the activity as the individuals taking part would, in all likelihood, have been more predisposed to applying to university. Complexity and bounded rationality, and a tendency to take a reductionist cause and effect view of impact rather than considering the more socially complex, often non-linear nature of both young people's lives and the delivery of outreach activities. Finally, realist evaluation, which places an individual's choice at the centre.

To mitigate these challenges and produce a more robust evaluation that effectively assesses impact, Harrison and Waller suggest evaluators should employ the following five principles or ‘*small steps*’ when evaluating transitional outreach activities; articulate a clear theory of change, be critical of causality, measurability and the use of appropriate and realistic timescales and focus on educational disadvantage and specific aspects such as the quality of information advice and guidance (IAG), parental or school input and participation rates. They believe evaluators should carefully consider each of these five areas at the evaluation design stage. Indeed, Harrison and Waller see them as potentially forming the building blocks of any good-quality evaluation concerning the impact of HE outreach activities.

More generally, some UK studies have found the role of teachers, and the inherent cultural nature of schools, can be influential in students deciding their post-school pathways, including the likelihood of them applying to university. Key factors include: whether or not a school has a sixth form (Foskett, Dyke, and Maringe 2008); the quality of IAG provided by schools which has been shown to affect the choices students will make at post-18 (Thompson 2019); and how prepared students are for the transition to university, particularly their independent learning skills and their level of academic confidence (Money, Nixon, and Graham 2019). Whilst the Uni Connect programme can do nothing to address the structural nature of schools, they can influence the quality of IAG and help better prepare students for HE.

Many of the studies, and subsequent discussions, in this area of inquiry have traditionally been underpinned by Bourdieu’s (1977, 1986) theories of habitus, field and cultural, social and economic capital (i.e. Leathwood and O’Connell 2003) as they are perceived to help explain some of the reasons why those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds might, in educational settings, struggle to attain and achieve to the same level as those who do not. Here the family and education are perceived as the fields and habitus is concerned with how individuals within one field, i.e. the family, negotiate and succeed in the other, in this case HE. Cultural, social and economic capitals are intrinsically linked to both and relate, in the context of the family, to the transfer of experiences, knowledge and understanding between a parent and a child. Families with little or no knowledge or experience of HE will have low levels of capitals in this area and are unlikely to be able to help their children fully maximise the opportunities the education system has to offer. This results in the reproduction of the existing social inequalities. Whilst these concepts can be problematic and even contested by some, they continue to be employed (Holton 2018; Roksa and Silver 2019; Rose, Tikley, and Washbrook 2019; Thompson 2019). Habitus is particularly viewed as problematic because it is often presented as deterministic and static (Reed-Danahay 2005), with the family in which you are raised dictating and limiting available life choices. However, it can and does change over time as a result of different experiences and connections, usually from outside the field (Rose and Atkin 2007). They are particularly appropriate and useful concepts in the context of Uni Connect. Indeed, they have been widely applied by those working in the area (Hayton and Bengry-Howell 2016) and helped shape the direction of evaluation in its early stages (Diamond et al. 2014).

Whilst there are some studies, mostly qualitative in this area, the majority focus on the situation post-transition to HE, (for example Young et al. 2019) few concentrate on the pre-transition period and how well secondary schools prepare their students for post-16 pathways. Set within a theory of change framework, which the OFS has encouraged Uni Connect partnerships to use as a basis for planning and tracking their evaluations, and drawing on Bourdieusian concepts of habitus and capitals, this study aims to fill this gap by exploring the subject from the perspective of secondary school teachers preparing students for post-16 transitions.

Methodology

This article explores the views and experiences of six teachers leading the Uni Connect project in their schools across the county of Lincolnshire. The six case study schools were geographically spread throughout the county with one in each of the local partnerships’ targeted areas. Three sets of data were collected from the School Leads via semi-structured telephone or video

interviews, over a 12-month period (October 2019 – November 2020). Interviews in June 2020 were conducted during the first national lockdown when all schools were forced to close due to Covid-19 and the November interviews during the ongoing pandemic. As such they provide a unique insight into the challenge's schools faced at this time in delivering aspirational HE transitional outreach activities to their students. The interviews formed part of the wider evaluation of the Uni Connect programme in Lincolnshire. Other evaluation activities included an end of year student activity survey, student focus groups and interviews with LiNCHigher local Area Engagement Officers (AEOs) and College Leads. AEOs work closely with a designed number of schools (usually 6–8) in specific areas of the county to deliver the Uni Connect programme. In Lincolnshire *all* year 9–13 students in LiNCHigher target schools received the intervention (which was not the case in all Uni Connect areas). Therefore, evaluation data were collected for both Uni Connect and non-Uni Connect students to enable impact comparisons to be drawn between the two. The evaluation received ethical approval through the University of Lincoln. The full interim report can be found at (<https://lheri.lincoln.ac.uk/current-projects/>).

The case study schools were selected in consultation with the AEOs to ensure the sample represented the full range of different types of schools across the county in terms of size, settings and the percentage of Uni Connect students on-roll. The key characteristics of each school is detailed in the table below. For the purpose of this article, the names of participating schools have been anonymised.

School	Area	% of Uni Connect students	Size/Students on role
East Coast Academy	East Coast	64%	Large ~950
Newport Academy	Boston	50%	Large ~1165
Rural North Secondary	East Lindsey	19%	Medium ~700
Market Town Academy	Grantham	61%	Small ~235
Fens Academy	South Holland	52%	Medium ~700
Inner-City Academy	City	37%	Large ~920

Ethics

The evaluation process followed the University's ethics procedures, in line with the latest British Education Research Association (BERA) guidelines (2018). All participants were given information and consent forms, prior to the interviews being conducted, and informed of their right to withdraw at any time and that all data would be anonymised. Interviews were audio recorded, with participants permission, and fully transcribed.

Findings

The findings cover three time periods: pre-Covid-19 outbreak (September 2019 – March 2020), the first national lockdown (March – July 2020) and the start of the new school year (from September 2020 onwards). A number of themes emerged including: the relationship between School Leads and the Partnership, anecdotal evidence of the impact of Uni Connect in raising students HE aspirations, the impact of Covid-19 on delivering transitional outreach activities, both in the immediate and short-term and how the crisis continues to shape plans for the 2020/21 school year.

Pre-Covid outbreak (September 2019 – early March 2020)

- *The relationship between School Leads and the local Partnership*

All School Leads were very happy with the working relationship they had with LiNCHigher, especially with their designated AEO. School Leads described it as: *'really great', 'absolutely brilliant', 'very supportive', 'brilliant' and 'excellent'*. The East Coast Academy (ECA) School Lead commented: *'I can't thank LiNCHigher enough, I think we work really well with them. Everything that we have from them is really well received.'* The Newport Academy (NPA) School Lead said, *'we have a good working relationship and there are lots of things that we just wouldn't be able to do without them.'* School Leads felt supported and listened to by their AEO, that communication was regular, effective and that AEOs were willing to attend school events when invited. The AEOs were viewed as reliable, delivering what they promised, when they promised. The ECA School Lead further commented: *'when we email, there's always a response within a few days. If they're organising a bus, they organise the bus. There's always communication.'*

School Leads particularly valued the funding that came with the project, which allowed them to deliver transitional outreach activities to their students that would otherwise be out of their reach, as the Rural North Secondary (RNS) School Lead stated:

I'm thrilled to be working with LiNCHigher because it does provide us with some funding to enable us to do opportunities that we simply otherwise couldn't afford. Visiting speakers, inspirational speakers, the mentoring programme. The cost is just too much and also, it's the links that they have . . . the network capacity between us is what's really really important.

LiNCHigher sustained a good relationship with schools despite all six case study schools experiencing some form of disruption either at the start or part-way through the year in terms of their allocated AEO. Two case study schools were assigned a new AEO at the start of Phase 2 (September 2019), one had a change of AEO in January 2020 and two changed AEOs during lockdown. In the case of the sixth school (Market Town Academy (MTA)) it was the School Lead that was new in post at the beginning of the school year. However, the experience of taking on the role had reportedly been a positive one, with the School Lead commenting:

It felt like I was on the back foot a little bit, but the AEO has been great, really supportive. I found that we've built up a really strong partnership. I was really pleased with how it's gone.

Other comments from School Leads on the transition from one AEO to another included:

I was surprised at how well the transition went actually. I thought we might have some problems but no, it was really good. (NPA School Lead)

We've had a lot of changes over the last few years, we've seemed to not have had the same sort of stability as some of the other schools . . . but every single one [AEO] that we've worked with has been absolutely brilliant. I feel that everything runs extremely smoothly. (Fens Academy (FA) School Lead)

It was absolutely brilliant; I can't fault the team. It's just disappointing that we've had changes again, but these things happen. (RNS School Lead)

The case study schools were also reported to be engaging with the Confident Choices initiative; the local careers initiative which ran alongside Uni Connect and was often coordinated by the Uni Connect School Lead. Three of the School Leads (ECA, NPA and Inner-City Academy (ICA)) specifically mentioned that they had found the AEOs support in this area of their work particularly helpful. School Leads appreciated not just the funding the programme brought, but the ongoing support they received from the AEOs in areas they historically struggled to advise and engage the students. The knowledge and expertise, or social capital, the AEOs were able to share with staff was viewed as invaluable.

Anecdotal evidence of the impact of the Uni Connect programme

All School Leads reported that their students, both Uni Connect and non-Uni Connect alike, were making good progress in terms of HE aspirations during the first two terms of the school year, prior to Covid-19. This progress was largely seen as a result of LiNCHigher funded outreach activities.

Impact was viewed in the broadest sense and included students increasingly engaging with outreach activities and their growing awareness of LiNCHigher and the programme of activities they fund.

Three of the School Leads (NPA, MTA and FA) felt there had recently been a cultural shift in student attitudes towards HE. Students were more open to university being a possible post-18 option and were more willing to explore the different pathways available to them; marking a departure from their familial habitus where such possibilities might not be considered as a matter of course. According to the MTA School Lead, prior to Covid-19, LiNCHigher activities were beginning to have a tangible impact on student HE aspirations with the School Lead commenting he had *'really noticed a turning point'* following the last College visit with Year 9 students. He described the impact as *'really powerful'* and that the visit had led to *'them having conversations and seeing the Year 9 students thinking about their next steps. It was almost a culture shift'*. The FA School Lead also reported a shift in culture at the school as a result of LiNCHigher activity commenting: *'we have found there is a difference. Students are talking about university more. They're talking about looking at higher level apprenticeships'*.

At NPA a more positive outlook across all year groups, alongside a cultural shift amongst students towards aspiring to HE, had been observed. The School Lead felt students were more aware of the options available to them post-18 and they were more willing to try new things. She felt students were taking *'steps in the right direction'*, growing in confidence and that some now felt *'able to compete with neighbouring schools'*, both of which are grammar schools and where HE social capital is much higher. Increasingly the school has been taking a more holistic approach to raising student aspirations, with outreach activities being followed up in lessons. The School Lead believed that this had stimulated discussion between both students and staff commenting:

We have tried to move away from a series of ad hoc events that are really good on the day and then forgotten about and building it more into a programme and for the students to recognise that is what is happening.

Some members of staff had reportedly enquired how activities might be replicated in-house. Activities are promoted throughout the school by staff and students, specifically through the Student Council. Student Career and Enterprise Ambassadors have also been introduced and part of their role is to further promote the HE outreach activities programme within school. The Enterprise Challenge was specifically mentioned as an event that had a positive effect on students. Further, the School Lead felt the immediate impact of students attending HE outreach activities was sustainable. Overall, LiNCHigher had become increasingly recognised and established throughout the school.

The ECA School Lead had anecdotal evidence of a positive impact on raising students HE aspirations as a result of LiNCHigher engagement. The School Lead reported positive student feedback from all the activities they had attended and that students were talking more about the events.

The ICA School Lead described LiNCHigher funded transitional outreach activities as *'hugely successful'*, specifically activities that focus on revision and study skills and around employer recruitment methods. Such activities were viewed by the School Lead as *'absolutely brilliant'* with extremely high levels of student engagement. According to the School Lead, the students *'gained a lot from them. They gained a lot of skills'*. According to the School Lead, First Story was another successful activity reportedly enjoyed by students. University campus visits had been particularly well received, especially the visit to their local campus. The visit, which included a lecture, a seminar experience and social media workshops, all appeared to have a positive impact on the students. The School Lead noticed that whilst the students were still on campus: *'you could see they were buzzing'*. The visits by Years 10, 11 and 12 students had resulted in several students applying for the university's residential summer school. The visits had opened the students up to the possibility of attending university and reportedly boosted their confidence with students willing to speak during the seminars and workshops. The School Lead commented on the impact of the visits:

We had quite a few that said: "oh my gosh, we absolutely loved that!" Just being on a campus and that idea of being there. I think in terms of confidence and confidence in a future in higher education, that was fantastic!

Whilst the RNS School Lead did not report any direct, visible impact of LiNCHigher outreach activities in the two terms prior to Covid-19, the project was said to be running well.

Overall, changes in behaviour, confidence and attitude towards HE along with the development of student social capital, across the case study schools was observed. This has the potential to break the reproduction cycle of social inequality and disadvantage, the habitus, traditionally found in the case study schools and their communities.

The impact of Covid-19 on delivering outreach activities (March – July 2020)

The first national lockdown in March 2020 saw the forced closure of UK schools to all children except those of key workers and those deemed as vulnerable. Effectively face-to-face teaching ceased overnight to the majority of secondary school students. Schools began delivering lessons, where they could, via online platforms to children at home. The shutdown inevitably had a dramatic impact on the Uni Connect programme and the ability of all Partnerships, including LiNCHigher, to deliver their outreach programme in the summer term. In-person delivery was not possible and all external activities such as campus visits, taster days and summer schools were cancelled. During this time, LiNCHigher launched its online learning platform, making several activities, including study skill workshops and three Enterprise Challenges, available online. The School Lead interviews in June explored the perceived impact of the lockdown on students HE aspirations and solicited their views and experience of the online learning platform. However, it should be noted that the interviews took place in the middle of the crisis when the full impact was still unfolding.

Whilst all School Leads felt it was too early to assess the full impact of Covid-19 on student HE aspirations, some had noticed subtle changes amongst several of their students in this respect. For example, students at the ICA were reported to be worried and concerned about what going to university in September 2020 would look like and staff there had welcomed the virtual university material on the learning platform which had helped allay students concerns. The RNS School Lead felt that some of their students would be concerned about the financial implications of going to HE and that following Covid-19 they would need convincing that the resulting student debt would be worth it. The ECA School Lead felt that some students might use the crisis as an excuse to fail their exams and remain local for employment and thereby reproducing local social inequalities:

I think a lot of them are going to have the attitude of “I’ve missed too much; I won’t be able to catch up” I do think there’ll be a defeatist attitude amongst our students. They will think that they can use this as an excuse for failing.

The MTA School Lead was concerned that the crisis would impact on student aspirations: *‘I think we were making really good progress in raising aspirations with our students, I just hope that this doesn’t set back that work’*.

The impact of Covid-19 was seen more in terms of school year groups, rather than Uni Connect and non-Uni Connect students, with the then Year 10 students causing the most concern. One School Lead (NPA) pointed out that Year 10 students would miss out on most of their post-16 progression work which, although drip-fed from year 7, mainly occurs at the end of year 10 and the start of year 11. The MTA School Lead also felt the crisis had adversely affected Year 10s: *‘I will go as far as to say it’s the Year 10s that are putting in the least effort, which is a concern’*.

The Covid-19 crisis had, in more general terms, thrown students out of their routine and disengaged some with education and learning. School Leads felt these would be some of the key challenges that would need addressing when schools re-started in September 2020.

The online learning platform was designed for students to access on demand, from home, using a personalised login allocated by LiNCHigher and sent to them by their School Leads. The platform was a direct response to the Covid-19 crisis to allow students some access to HE-related transitional

outreach activities whilst schools were closed. The first set of programmes (three Enterprise Challenges and two Made Training) went live in June 2020. Each programme, or set of modules (depending on length), had an evaluation module built in.

Whilst the online activities were generally welcomed by the case study School Leads, at the time of the interviews most of them had *not* accessed the online outreach activities. However, some schools (i.e. NPA, MTA and ICA) planned to do so during the last few weeks of the summer term. Some School Leads had been instructed by their Senior Leadership Team that all career-related activities would have to take a backseat and that the focus during lockdown was the delivery of core subjects.

The case study schools all took different approaches to how students accessed and used the online learning platform. For example, for some it was on an individual student basis, whilst for others, such as the ICA and NPA, it was delivered as part of timetabled PSHE (personal, social, health and economic) lessons. At the ICA it formed part of their Aspire curriculum, whilst at the NPA a teacher logged on and shared their screen before guiding students through the activities. The NPA School Lead commented: *'it's not a case of sending all the logins out for students to do just what they want, when they want, we have to put it into a timetable'*.

Whilst School Leads broadly welcomed the platform, several reported that they had been inundated with online learning activities from numerous organisations, including the Careers Enterprise Company (CEC), the universities and local colleges, during lockdown. They had been careful not to pass everything onto their students as they were concerned students might become overwhelmed or overloaded.

During the first national lockdown all case study School Leads reported feeling well supported by the LiNCHigher team. AEOs had kept in touch by email and telephone and took responsibility for cancelling activities and arranging refunds from providers. The AEOs had also kept schools informed of developments such as the online learning platform. The MTA School Lead commented: *'everyone's been really supportive. I think there's a strong relationship forming, and our school certainly appreciates it, and I know the students do'*. Unfortunately, some schools (RNS and ICA in particular) reported being unable to fully take-up the support offered by the AEOs during this time due to changing priorities within their school.

Plans for the new school year (September 2020 onwards)

At the time the second round of School Lead interviews took place (June 2020) the situation regarding how secondary schools would operate in the next school year was unclear. Consequently, all of the case study School Leads were in the early stages of planning for a mixed or 'blended' approach to delivering transitional outreach activities that would incorporate both face-to-face and online teaching across the school with the flexibility to switch between the two as and when necessary.

All School Leads planned to have a programme of HE transitional outreach that the ICA School Lead called *'meaningful activities in this climate'*. The RNS School Lead was planning to target their HE and careers activities specifically to individual student need, especially in terms of their Uni Connect students. Whilst recognising that this had not been the approach taken by schools so far during the project, with interventions available to all students, they felt that from September 2020 they would need to justify in-school activities more than ever and this would only be achieved by offering targeted interventions, the School Lead commented:

I can't see any other way for it, because we're going to have to play the card that these kids have got that entitlement . . . otherwise they're just not going to get those experiences because people [teachers] are going to say no.

The NPA School Lead commented: *'I have loads of things that I would love to do but it's how we go about doing them and who can offer what under the "new normal"'*.

All case study School Leads were in the process of working with their respective AEO to plan an appropriate programme of outreach activities for the academic year 2020/21. One School Lead (FA) had already booked an Enterprise Challenge day for Year 9s in early November and rebooked several of the events cancelled in the summer term.

Challenges of delivering outreach activities under the ongoing Covid-19 situation

When the School Leads were re-interviewed in late October/early November 2020 they were asked about the current situation regarding the delivery of outreach activities in school. At that time, three had finished planning and timetabling their outreach delivery and three had not. Some were delivering sessions over a series of four or five off-timetable days (namely FA and RNS) whilst others (ECA and NPA) were peppering delivery throughout the school year. The NPA planned to use some of their weekly Social Studies lessons to deliver their outreach activities. The MTA and the ICA were still in the process of finalising their delivery timetable. All schools were taking a blended approach making, where possible, activities available both virtually and face-to-face. In some schools, some activities, such as campus visits and Enterprise Challenge days, were deliberately being scheduled for the summer term (June and July 2001) to maximise the chance they would be able to run them face-to-face. However, during the first term few had delivered any substantial activities, (beyond introduction sessions) and several had already cancelled or re-scheduled events. For example, the FAs off-timetable Enterprise Challenge day initially planned for November was first moved to early January and then to early March. Likewise, the RNS had an Aspirational Day booked for Year 11 students in early October which was postponed until early December. In addition, at least two schools (MTA and FA) had cancelled student work experience for the entire year.

Schools Leads reported facing numerous challenges planning and delivering outreach activities during the autumn term, which also coincided with a second wave of rising Covid-19 infection rates and, in November 2020, a second month-long national lockdown. Whilst schools remained fully open during this time, schools were not operating as 'normal' but under enhanced Covid-19 restrictions with practices, such as the bubbling of students by year groups and the mandatory wearing of face coverings in school, designed to reduce the spread of the virus. Other changes to how schools operated, that impacted on the delivery of outreach activities included:

- schools having staggered start, finish and lunchtimes for different year groups;
- restrictions on students moving around the school;
- limited use of ICT suites, as these were being utilised in other ways;
- little or no tutor time;
- no after or out of school opportunities (such as trips or campus visits) on offer;
- very few of the schools allowing external visitors; and
- careers and aspirational work not being a priority for the Senior leadership Teams.

In addition, schools frequently had a substantial number of their students studying from home whilst self-isolating for 14 days having been in contact with someone who was either suspected of having Covid-19 or who had tested positive. A situation replicated nationally. At one point in mid-October ECA had 90% of their staff and students off school at home self-isolating due to Covid-19.

All the factors mentioned above severely impacted on a school's ability to deliver transitional outreach activities effectively to their students and, in turn, reduced student exposure to HE and other post-18 opportunities; halting, if not reversing any gains made, especially in terms of students developing HE social capital. Whilst online options were available at this time, some School Leads, specifically the FA School Lead, reported that their students were finding virtual delivery less than satisfactory. Students were not effectively or fully engaging with online delivery and preferred face-to-face interventions.

At the autumn half term, just three of the six School Leads (ECA, FA and RNS) had made definite plans for when and how outreach activities would be delivered during the school year and two had already re-scheduled some activities from late autumn to early in the new year. The FA Lead had already shifted one off-timetable day three times. Schools seem to be pushing activities further and further towards the summer term with June and July being favoured as the main delivery window. Therefore, it was still somewhat unclear if all planned activities would be able to go ahead, how exactly they would be delivered, how effective they might be or the long-term impact.

Discussion

Pre-Covid-19 School Leads felt they had made good progress in raising the aspirations of their students to be open to progress onto HE or higher-level apprenticeships. Anecdotal evidence from School Leads points to a cultural shift within schools, a changing habitus, driven by an increase in HE social capital amongst both students and members of staff as a result of the Uni Connect programme. This change has the potential, over time, to break the cycle of social inequality frequently observed in the case study schools and their local communities enabling students from families that have little or no knowledge of HE, i.e. the Uni Connect students, to be able to make informed decisions about the post-school options available to them.

The relationship between School Leads and LiNCHigher, especially their designated AEO, was shown to be strong, productive and open. The transfer of knowledge, expertise and understanding of HE between the AEOs and the schools was reported by the School Leads to be invaluable. Communication between School Leads and LiNCHigher generally worked well, in both directions, and School Leads valued the work of the partnership in raising the aspirations of *all* their students, not just Uni Connect students, especially in relation to HE progression.

Despite the challenges posed by Covid-19, all School Leads planned to keep raising student aspirations high on their school agenda in the new academic year to ensure their students were offered as much exposure to aspirational transitional outreach activities as possible. However, raising aspirations had largely been forced to take a back seat whilst schools, understandably, concentrated on making up for learning lost during the summer term and focused on keeping students and staff Covid-19 safe.

The anecdotal evidence from this study indicates that Year 10 and 11 students (both Uni Connect and non-Uni Connect) are likely to be the main losers of this strategy, at least in the short-term, as these are the year groups that usually receive the most intense transitional interventions throughout the school year; something those working in this area might wish to take into consideration when planning and designing future outreach programmes. If schools continue to push delivery into the summer term, as they look set to do following a third national lockdown which included the closure of all schools from 5th January to 8 March 2021, it may be too little too late, especially for the current Year 11 students who arguably missed out most during the first lockdown in the summer term of 2020.

There is little doubt that the delivery of university-inspiring transitional outreach activities and the opportunity to raise student aspirations in the case study schools has been severely hampered by the Covid-19 global pandemic. Whilst the authors acknowledge this is a small study, a snapshot of a very geographically specific group of schools, if the experiences of the schools reported here are representative of the situation in other secondary schools across the county (and conversations with the AEOs suggested this is indeed the case) and the country more widely, (which communication with other Uni Connect evaluators would suggest) the negative impact on raising student HE aspiration could potentially be far-reaching and long-lasting, especially for students currently in years 10 and 11.

At the time of writing the Covid-19 situation continues to restrict what schools are able to deliver. At the very least, the pandemic has severely hindered the raising aspirations agenda in secondary schools putting it on the back burner. The impact is likely to be greater in schools where students do

not usually progress to HE at post-18 than it in schools where such a culture already exists, where the habitus is already established and where students already have the social and cultural capital required to succeed in accessing and transitioning to HE. However, for students who do not have such capitals at their disposal, i.e. the Uni Connect students, which this programme is specifically designed to help them develop, the progress students made pre-Covid-19 may potentially be irretrievable and the impact on university APP targets detrimental, at least in the short to medium term.

Evidence from this study highlights the potential of the Uni Connect programme to change the familial and educational habitus of some school staff, students and their families alike, albeit slowly and over time. It demonstrates that habitus is not deterministic given the right conditions and that students can and do develop the social and cultural capitals needed to navigate HE and other previously unconsidered post-school options.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Anthea Rose is a Research Fellow at the Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute (LHERI), University of Lincoln and is currently leading the local Lincolnshire evaluation of the Uni Connect programme funded by the Office for Students (OfS). Anthea specialises in qualitative methods, especially case studies, and is particularly interested in social justice and issues around equality, gender and the impact of government policy on education practices. Recent areas of investigation include the effectiveness of school improvement initiatives and mental health and wellbeing in the education sector. Anthea is a co-convenor of BERA's mental health and wellbeing special interest group.

Lucy Mallinson is a Research Assistant within the Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute (LHERI) at the University of Lincoln. Lucy specialises in quantitative research methods, particularly in the design, implementation and analysis of large-scale online surveys. Lucy currently works within the team providing local evaluation for LiNChigher, part of the Office for Students Uni Connect programme.

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