
TRIGGERS AND TIMINGS

INSIGHTS INTO THE HIGHER EDUCATION DECISION MAKING PROCESS AMONGST
LEARNERS FROM EDUCATIONALLY DISADVANTAGED AREAS

Dr Neil Raven | August 2019

This study was commissioned by Higher Horizons, part of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme funded by the Office for Students. The National Collaborative Outreach Programme is a government-funded initiative which aims to increase the number of young people accessing university from target wards where university participation is low and lower than expected based on GCSE attainment. Higher Horizons is a partnership of universities and further education colleges led by Keele University. It delivers widening access interventions to young people in Y9 to Y13 across target schools in Staffordshire, Shropshire and Cheshire and has offices at Keele University, Staffordshire University, Harper Adams University and the University of Chester.

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FOREWORD

It is a great pleasure to introduce this new piece of work produced by Dr Neil Raven, which builds on the *Bucking the Trend* (2017) study conducted by Dr Raven for Higher Horizons. *Bucking the Trend* concerned itself with young white men from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who had progressed to university, with many stories of none-linear routes to higher education emerging. With *Triggers and Timings*, we were interested in examining the transition points along the educational journey to see when and where young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (here defined as wards with lower than expected rates of progression based on GCSE attainment targeted by the National Collaborative Outreach Programme) make decisions about their educational progression.

Clear themes emerge from discussions with participants about the transition to GCSE, and to Further Education and Higher Education. Whilst it is encouraging to see that young people are gaining a greater understanding of what is involved in Higher Education and how it may benefit them, the study highlights that there is less certainty about immediate next steps to post-16 education, especially where this next step involves moving to another institution at the age of 16. Delivering clear, impartial guidance on routes and pathways from GCSEs to post-16 study at College or Sixth Form continues to be a challenge for the sector.

Following years of funding cuts and Area Reviews, Further Education Colleges are increasingly operating in a marketised, competitive environment. The Augar Review (2019) discusses how this has led to a devaluing of College-based provision, particularly at Levels 3, 4 and 5, while the National Collaborative Outreach Programme: Year One report (2018) suggests that for those studying A Levels within their school sixth form or Sixth Form College, the journey to university is a much more straightforward one than for those studying BTECs at Level 3 within an FE setting. The findings from this study encourage us to create clear and easy-to-follow pathways and routes from Colleges to Higher Education, and examines widening access practitioners' role in this space and the importance of providing an impartial platform for informed decision-making.

There is certainly still work to do: breaking myths around student finance, challenging and aiding the narrative around 'value for money', supporting FE learners through the summer to make sure they transition to HE in the autumn, and enhancing positive perceptions of university with both young people and their supporters. Increasingly, there is a piece of

work around challenging the traditional 'uni isn't for me and I won't fit in' attitudes, in order to help young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds feel like they belong at university. Maybe the challenge is not just around myth-busting sessions and a plethora of campus events for our young people—as valuable as they are—but to start to challenge our universities to develop a more inclusive and understanding climate for young people, post entry, from under-represented groups.

What is clear is that multiple touch points with our young people are vital. The days of large scale one off events are being resigned to the WP history books. To make an impact, we must turn to sustained and progressive programmes of activities which build knowledge and experiences of educational progression, and the routes available. We must engage learners at an early age and support them through their educational journeys. The sooner we start the better.

I hope that you will enjoy this excellent piece of work and I would like to thank Dr Raven for his support once again.

Ant Sutcliffe

Head of Higher Horizons

1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 CONTEXT AND RATIONALE

Those engaged in outreach have often sought the views of the young people they seek to support (Raven, 2015; Office for Fair Access [OFFA] and Higher Education Funding Council for England [HEFCE], 2014). Indeed, a clear imperative exists for doing so, in terms of contributing to the evidence base and helping to determine the effectiveness of outreach and widening participation interventions (Office for Students [OfS], 2018a). In most instances, the focus has been on gathering the feedback of the recipients of these initiatives, with many of the approaches to evaluation concerned with the more immediate post-intervention responses of beneficiaries (Dent et al 2013).

However, the last few years have seen a greater emphasis placed on taking a longer-term view of outreach (Tazzyman et al. 2018, 55; OfS, 2018b, 3). There has also been an increasing interest in capturing the *learner voice*, in terms of involving young people in the ‘on-going development’ of outreach programmes as well as ‘individual activities’ (OfS, 2018a, 20-21. See also Tazzyman et al. 2018, 59).

1.2 A QUALITATIVE LONGITUDINAL APPROACH

The research this paper reports on has sought to address both of these objectives. It does so by deploying a methodology (a form of qualitative longitudinal research) that is relatively new to outreach. This involved surveying on three separate occasions over an 18-month period a sample of NCOP students from school years 8 through to 13 at three case study institutions. Prior to this - and to provide context - the views of local outreach practitioners and the teaching professionals based in the same three institutions were gathered using semi-structured interviews.

1.3 KEY THEMES

The rich, detailed insights this survey was able to generate are considered in three sections. These correspond to three recognised phases - or transition points - that young people are likely to experience between the ages of 12 and 18, and are associated with:

- Post-14 study and the start of GCSEs
- Post-16 study and training, and the commencement of advanced level courses
- Post-18 destinations and the HE option.

For each of these transition points, consideration is initially given to the particular challenges likely to be encountered. In this respect, a review of the literature is followed by an assessment of the evidence offered by interviewees and the insights provided by learners. The focus is then turned to learners' motivations for wanting to overcome these challenges, the accompanying self-regulated tactics some come to adopt, and the case they make for receiving support. Finally, attention is directed to current school-based and outreach initiatives aimed at facilitating next steps progression, along with the ideas offered by interviewees and learners for additional support, including interventions that would help to ensure more are in a position to opt for HE should they wish to do so.

1.4 FINDINGS

1.4.1 CHALLENGES

Learners' concerns about the first of these transition points focused on the **demands of GCSEs**. Similar anxieties were expressed over **what level 3 study would entail** and **what the move to college would involve**, especially for those who were obliged to change institutions because their school did not possess a sixth form. Likewise, for a number of those surveyed, **university was judged to demand high levels of dedication and self-reliance**, and where considerable **debts were likely to be incurred and difficulties 'fitting in' could arise**.

1.4.2 MOTIVATIONS AND MINDSETS

Despite these concerns, a large proportion of those surveyed were positive about their next educational steps. Amongst younger learners, GCSEs were seen to provide an opportunity to **select subjects that would be of interest**, whilst success at this level would **improve employment prospects** and help to **secure access to college and university**.

The chance to **pursue subjects of interest** was also identified as a **key driver in the transition to post-16 study**, with success at advanced-level helping to enhance future opportunities. Meanwhile, the **move to college** afforded the **chance for greater freedom** than had been experienced in school. Colleges were also considered to offer a **wider range**

of courses, present an opportunity to **meet new people** and **represent a ‘middle step’** between school and work or university.

Similarly, a range of motivators for pursuing **higher-level study** emerged during discussions, including **improved job prospects**, the opportunity to **broaden one’s learning** and **explore career options**. Reference was also made to the chance to **meet others with the same subject interests**, to **experience new cultures** and **build one’s levels of confidence**.

1.4.3 TACTICS AND BEHAVIOURS

Accompanying the desire and determination to do well, the survey of young people identified a range of **self-regulated** and **often independently devised tactics and behaviours for managing these transitions** and improving prospects of success at the new level. For each transition point, similar themes emerged, although there was also evidence of growing levels of sophistication related to age and the stage on the learner journey participants had reached. They included the value of listening to and **working with teachers, gaining subject knowledge** and developing effective **time management practices**. A range of tactics were also described to facilitate classroom study, including **note taking** and **maintaining** up-to-date **records**, whilst older learners discussed effective approaches to writing, including **planning and structuring answers**, as well as techniques for **mastering revision** and **managing exams**.

1.4.4 THE CASE FOR SUPPORT

The penultimate component in each of the main sections explored participants’ views on the case for support. In many respects, **responses reflected their widening participation backgrounds**. For those embarking on their GCSEs, reference was made to feeling **disadvantaged because they did not have family members who had gone through the education system** (including to university), **and** who could **provide examples of the benefits** it could bestow. Similarly, for those about to start their **post-16 studies**, concerns were expressed about **a lack of information** about the courses available and the college option more generally, whilst their older counterparts talked about possessing **a limiting understanding of HE**, because, as one participant observed, ‘no one in my family has been to university’. There are, it was added, ‘some people who know things [but] I had no idea.’

1.4.5 CURRENT AND SUGGESTED SUPPORT

1.4.5.1 TRANSITION TO GCSEs

Whilst those from the youngest year groups talked about receiving some guidance on their GCSEs options, there was judged to be a need for more support in preparing them for post-14 study, including insights into **what the subjects would cover, what they would need to do to secure good grades**, and how to **manage the workloads** and **revise effectively**. The initiatives advocated for addressing these needs included interactive **revision workshops**, along with **opportunities to talk with those who had been successful at their GCSEs**.

1.4.5.2 TRANSITION TO LEVEL 3

For older learners, the support provided for the transition to level 3 study included sixth form induction days and the provision of refresher booklets (summarising the GCSE syllabus). However, various gaps in their knowledge were also identified, especially regarding what A-level study would demand. Accordingly, there was judged to be a benefit in providing **guidance to year 11s on where their GCSEs could lead** and insight into the advanced-level syllabus in those subjects they were interested in pursuing. Reference was also made to activities that would familiarise them with **research skills**, along with the provision of **revision guides** that would help them develop techniques for retaining the detailed information associated with advanced-level of study.

In addition, whilst the role of careers tutors was praised in preparing learners for the transition to college, there was a general consensus favouring **earlier guidance** in order to inform learners **about the range of courses local colleges offer** and **their entry requirements**, as well as **the differences between sixth form and college-based study**.

In terms of how this information and guidance might be delivered, reference was made to assemblies taken by colleges, and of **colleges attending school-hosted careers fairs**. Visits to local colleges were also identified, along with **opportunities to experience college life** and gather the **insights of current students**, as well as those who had **recently completed their college courses** and could talk about what it had taken to succeed.

1.5 PROGRESSION TO HE

Participants talked about a range of outreach interventions they had received, including campus visits and presentations in school, as well as summer schools and other

'residential'. Generally, **assessment of these interventions** was **very positive**. In a number of instances, these interventions were described as **having an enduring impact**, in terms of the academic skills acquired, and the knowledge and insights into university life and study they had gained.

However, **participants identified gaps in their knowledge**, including in terms of **the reality of HE study**, and **how to apply for a university place** and prepare a personal statement. There was also a limited appreciation of work-based routes into HE. In response, a number of **suggestions** were made for activities that could complement existing interventions. These included a step-by-step **guide to the university application process** and **school visits by university students** - preferably those **from comparable backgrounds** - who could inform learners about the routes they have taken. The value of **hearing from recent graduates** was also highlighted, since **they could discuss the benefits of HE** and provide insights into **their experience of the transition to university** and the support available to new students.

In addition, participants talked about the chance to **shadow a university student**, in order to gain an insight into the typical day for an undergraduate studying a subject they were interested in. Finally, reference was made to the value of **offering outreach interventions to more** of their peers, **including** those outside the 'top sets', as well as to **older learners** who had yet to decide on their post 18 destinations.

1.6 APPLICATION OF FINDINGS

From an outreach perspective, it is argued that these findings have the potential to be used in a number of ways, including:

- Acknowledging the concerns associated with each of the transitions points when engaging with different year groups and in considering the objectives of particular interventions
- Using the positive viewpoints (and the motivations that underpin these) as messages that can help to counter concerns about next steps progression
- Taking account of the assessments made about current interventions (along with suggestions for their improvement) when reviewing existing provision
- Using the ideas for additional ways to facilitate progression when developing new outreach interventions.

2 RECOMMENDATIONS

2.1 THE TRANSITION TO GCSEs

Recommendation 1

Recognise the challenges - and accompanying concerns - that progression to GCSE-level study represents for some learners. These include:

- Increased workloads, including the prospect of more homework and an
- Increasing focus and emphasis on tests and examinations.

Seek to address these challenges and concerns when engaging with those in years 8-11.

Recommendation 2

Recognise the positive perceptions and motivations learners have for succeeding in their transition to - and studies at - GCSE level. These include:

- The opportunity to select and pursue subjects of interest
- The potential to improve employment prospects and enjoy a 'better lifestyle' by succeeding at level-2 study
- The need for good grades to access further and higher education.

Consider ways to use these 'positive messages' when seeking to counter the challenges and concerns expressed about GCSE-level study.

Recommendation 3

Recognise the (self-regulated) tactics that learners may have developed to help them in their transition to - and success with - GCSE-level study. These include:

- Listening to and working with teachers
- Engaging in after school classes
- Gaining subject knowledge and insight, including through seeking the advice of teachers and by participating in extra-curricular clubs
- Cultivating subject interests
- Deploying time management strategies, including compiling schedules of work
- Adopting note-taking and record keeping practices
- Recognising and working with preferred learning styles
- Using past papers to support revision and scheduling regular breaks into the revision process
- Revising on an on-going basis.

Consider how others from the NCOP cohort can be informed of these tactics and explore ways in which they can be encouraged to adopt them (see some of the initiatives and interventions identified in Recommendation 4).

Recommendation 4

Recognise the limitations of the tactics developed by learners in helping them with the transition to - and success at - GCSE-level and, in particular, the questions and uncertainties that are likely to remain, including:

- How to prepare for GCSEs
- What the syllabus in particular subjects at this level will include
- What teacher expectations will be
- What is required to secure good grades
- How to manage the greater workloads (including increased amounts of homework)
- How to revise effectively.

Consider the development of initiatives and interventions capable of addressing these concerns and perceived gaps in understanding, including:

- The provision of a series of practical revision workshops (with the suggestion that these are aimed at those in year 10)
- Engaging with students who have recently and successfully completed their GCSEs, including in the subject areas younger learners are considering taking or have embarked upon.

2.2 THE TRANSITION TO POST-16 STUDY

Recommendation 5

Recognise the challenges - and accompanying concerns - that progression to level 3 study represents for some learners. These include:

- The standards and expectations associated with advanced level study
- What the syllabus in the subjects learners are interested in will cover, and
- The different routes available for post-16 study (including the work-based pathway).

Seek to address these challenges and concerns when engaging with those in years 10-11.

Recommendation 6

Recognise the positive perceptions and motivations learners have for succeeding in their transition to - and with their studies at - level 3. These include:

- The opportunity to pursue subjects of interest
- That success at level 3 will enhance employment prospects
- That success at level 3 will enable progression to university-level study.

Consider ways to use these 'positive messages' when seeking to counter the challenges and concerns expressed about level 3 study.

Recommendation 7

Recognise the (self-regulated) tactics that learners may have developed in order to help them in their transition to - and success at – level 3 study. These include:

- Working with teachers
- Developing subject knowledge through reading widely
- Deploying time management strategies (including the scheduling of regular breaks, and in the use of ‘free-periods’)
- Developing approaches to writing (including planning and structuring answers, using subject-specific terminology, and elaborating on theories and concepts)
- Employing a range of approaches to support revision and facilitate recall (including devising revision schedules, learning from example exam answers and completing practice papers).

Consider how others from the NCOP cohort can be informed of these tactics and explore ways in which they can be encouraged to adopt them (see some of the initiatives and interventions identified in Recommendation 8).

Recommendation 8

Recognise the limitations of the self-help tactics developed by learners in helping them with the transition to - and success at - level 3 study and, in particular, the questions and uncertainties that are likely to remain, including in terms of:

- What the level 3 syllabus will cover (and how the syllabus will differ from GCSEs)
- The demands of advanced level study

Consider the development of initiatives and interventions capable of addressing these concerns and gaps in understanding, including:

- Classroom-based activities that inform year 11 students of where their GCSEs can lead
- Insights into the A-level syllabus (and the syllabus related to other level 3 route-

ways) in the subject areas that learners have an interest in pursuing

- Activities that familiarise learners with the research and independent learning skills required at level 3
- Provision of revision guides that help identify and develop techniques for retaining the level and detail of information that is associated with A-level study in particular.

2.3 THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE-BASED STUDY

Recommendation 9

Recognise the challenges – and accompanying concerns – that progression to a different learning institution for post-16 study, especially a further education college, represents for some learners. These include:

- Encountering an unfamiliar environment and culture
- Teachers and tutors they do not know and who, in turn, will not know them
- The levels of support available and the need to be more self-reliant.

Seek to address these challenges and concerns when engaging with those in years 8-11.

Recommendation 10

Recognise the positive perceptions and motivations learners have for succeeding in their transition to college. These include:

- The greater independence and autonomy associated with college-based study
- The opportunity to express themselves in a 'less conforming' (rule-based) environment
- A wider choice of subjects and pathways
- The chance to meet new people
- The perception that college-based study constitutes an intermediate step between school and work/university (including in terms of new approaches to

learning and experiencing greater levels of independence than previously).

Consider ways to use these 'positive messages' when seeking to counter the challenges and concerns expressed about college study.

Recommendation 11

Recognise the (self-regulated) tactics that learners may have developed and initiated in order to help them in their transition to college. These comprise:

- Allowing time to become orientated to a new environment and different culture
- Engage with teachers who are likely to be new to them
- Effective use of free-periods.

Consider how others from the NCOP cohort can be informed of these tactics and explore ways in which they can be encouraged to adopt them (see some of the initiatives and interventions identified in Recommendation 12).

Recommendation 12

Recognise the limitations of the self-help tactics developed by learners in helping them with the transition to and success at college and, in particular, the questions and uncertainties that are likely to remain, including those associated with:

- Variations in the provision offered by different local colleges
- College entry requirements
- The differences between sixth form and college-based study
- The practicalities and costs of travelling to a new institution.

Consider the development of initiatives and interventions capable of addressing these concerns and gaps in understanding, including:

- School assemblies facilitated by colleges
- Colleges attendance at school-hosted careers fairs

- Visits to the local colleges that learners are considering attending
- College taster events that provide an opportunity to experience what college life and study would be like (including insights into the potential challenges faced by those who have made the move, and how these challenges can be overcome)
- School and college-based post-16 events supported by current and former college students who are able to draw on their insights into what college will be like, and can provide guidance on how to succeed at college and in post-16 study.

2.4 THE TRANSITION TO HE

Recommendation 13

Recognise the challenges – and accompanying concerns – that progression to higher-level study represents for some learners. These include:

- The perception that HE will involve passive, classroom-based study
- That it will require a high degree of self-reliance
- The fear that they will not ‘fit in’
- That they will not be ‘good enough’ to succeed at HE-level
- The perceived (prohibitive) costs of HE study (including living costs as well as those associated with tuition).

Seek to address these challenges and concerns when engaging with those in years 8-13.

Recommendation 14

Recognise the positive perceptions and motivations learners have for progressing to HE-level study and succeeding in this transition. These include:

- Improved job prospects and enhanced CVs
- The chance to pursue subject interests
- The opportunity to broaden one’s knowledge and explore career options

- The chance to meet those who share comparable subject interests
- The opportunity to experience new cultures
- An experience that will boost levels of (academic and social) confidence.

Consider ways to use these ‘positive messages’ when seeking to counter the challenges and concerns expressed about higher-level study.

Recommendation 15

Recognise the (self-regulated) tactics that learners may have developed and initiated in order to help them prepare for their transition to higher-level study. These include:

- Conducting their own research (internet-based and through discussions with current university students encountered)
- Drawing on the support and encouragement of parents and others in their networks (and recognising in this context the sense of pride in potentially being the first in their families to go to university).

Consider how others from the NCOP cohort can be informed of these tactics and explore ways in which they can be encouraged to adopt them (see some of the initiatives and interventions identified in Recommendation 16).

Recommendation 16

Recognise the limitations of the tactics developed by learners in helping them prepare for the transition to higher-level study and, in particular, the questions and uncertainties that are likely to remain, including in terms of:

- The reality of HE-level study and what life at university will be like
- The application process (including preparation of personal statements)
- The different route ways into HE-level study (including the work-based pathway).

Consider the development of initiatives and interventions capable of addressing these concerns and gaps in understanding, including:

- A step-by-step guide to the university application process
- School visits by current undergraduates (including those from similar backgrounds to the school students) in order to provide insights into the routes taken and the different pathways available
- School visits by recent graduates who can discuss the benefits of HE-level study
- Workshops taken by HE tutors that provide an overview of what HE study will involve in subjects of interest to learners
- Panel discussions with new undergraduates that focus on the university transition experience, and that highlight the academic, pastoral and other support available
- The opportunity to shadow a university student taking a subject of interest and that will afford an insight into a *typical* undergraduate day
- Visits to university halls of residence and guidance on the costs of travelling to and living at university

Also explore the opportunity to offer outreach interventions - including those judged to have been particularly effective (such as summer schools and other residential events) - to a wider cohort of learners, including (GCSE) boarder-line students and older learners who have yet to decide on their post-18 destinations.

2.5 GENERIC PROGRESSION SUPPORT

Recommendation 17

Consider the establishment of regular peer-based discussion groups comprising NCOP students, that:

- Provide an opportunity to identify and share tactics that can support progression
- Have the potential to explore underlying motivations and mindsets
- Offer insights into the effectiveness of current support practices and interventions
- Inform the development of new support initiatives.

2.6 FURTHER RESEARCH

Recommendation 18

The 10-month time frame adopted in this study places limits on its ability to capture significant changes in the views and intentions of participants. Consequently, consider the option of running a fourth round of discussions with the same groups of young people who took part in the first three sets of conversations. These could be held in the autumn of 2019 and would have the potential to:

- Capture the views and ambitions of these NCOP students after two years of schooling and having experienced two full cycles of outreach activity
- Harness the 'learner voice', by providing participants with an opportunity to assess the value - and relevance - of the recommendations detailed in this report
- Further explore the self-help tactics described by these young people (including where these tactics originated from, how they were developed, and what they consider to be the most effective methods for sharing them).

Consider returning to the teaching professionals and outreach practitioners interviewed at the start of this project, with the aim of exploring how the recommendations made in this report might be translated into practical measures.

3 INTRODUCTION

This report is based on the insights of a sample of NCOP learners from school years 8 to 13 studying at three institutions. These comprised an 11-18 academy, an 11-16 school and a further education college. The latter represented the principal post-16 destination for students from the 11-16 school. (Although it should be noted that during the course of conducting this research, it was confirmed that the academy's sixth form will close in the near future). These insights were gathered over a 10-month period - between January 2018 and October 2018 - with students participating in three rounds of focus group conversations.

In terms of the objectives of Higher Horizon+, this study was design to better understand the aspirations, HE awareness and intentions of NCOP students at key points in their learner journeys. In seeking to do this, the investigation builds on the findings from the 'Bucking the Trend' study (Raven, 2017 and 2018b).

'Bucking the Trend' revealed that a range of influencers - and influences - informed the educational ambitions and intentions (including those related to HE progression) of a key group of WP learners. These included the impact of various outreach initiatives, as well as the influence of parents and other family members, alongside the role of teachers, tutors and peers. However, it was also recognised that the method adopted for 'Bucking the Trend' had certain limitations. In being retrospective in nature, the approach captured the reflections of learners on events that, in many instances, had occurred some years earlier.

This new study has enabled learners to assess the impact of individuals and events - including outreach initiatives - closer to when they occurred. The contemporaneous nature of the approach it takes also permitted the identification and exploration of resulting changes in the attitudes of learners to their education. Moreover, this approach offered the opportunity to look ahead and explore the kinds of support - including outreach activities - focus group participants considered would facilitate the successful transition to the next stage in their learner journeys.

4 METHODS AND APPROACH

4.1 DESK RESEARCH

The project commenced with a scoping phase, which comprised liaising with the Head of Higher Horizons+, the Operations Manager and the Partnership's Data and Research Officer. This was in order to finalise the project brief and determine the number and identify of the schools and colleges to be involved, along with the number of cohorts and the age ranges to be covered. In addition, this initial phase involved preparing guidance on focus group membership for teaching contacts, compiling an information sheet and consent forms for parents and participants, and producing a set of focus group schedules. It also included completing paperwork for securing ethical approval for the research to be conducted, which was granted in November 2017, and carrying out an initial review of the literature (including reports and guidance documents produced by HEFCE and OFFA and, subsequently, the Office for Students).

4.2 THE USE OF FOCUS GROUPS

The study's primary research phase centred on running a series of focus groups with a sample of NCOP learners. This represents a form of qualitative longitudinal research (QLR). QLR involves gathering high quality, in-depth data from the same set of sources over an extended period of time. In this respect, Kitzinger and Barbour (1998, n.p.) note that 'using [a] longitudinal research design, focus groups can tease out shifts in perceptions and invite participants to comment on these as they unfold' (see also Blackburn and Stokes, 2000). Moreover, the suitability of focus groups when seeking the insights of young people, including in terms of the interventions they may have received, is confirmed by Gibbs (1997). Indeed, Gibbs (1997, n.p.) observes that 'focus groups are particularly useful when there are power differences between the participants and decision-makers or professionals, when the everyday use of language and culture of particular groups is of interest', and when seeking to 'evaluate or develop a particular programme of activities'. In addition, as Breen (2006, 466) notes, 'focus-group discussions' are particularly 'appropriate for the generation of new ideas formed within a social context.'

4.3 RECRUITMENT TO THE FOCUS GROUPS

For each of the institutions taking part in the study, a sample of NCOP learners, numbering between 7 and 8 from each school year and, in the case of the two participating schools, starting with those in year 8, were identified to participate in the focus group discussions. In total, some 80 young people were involved in these conversations.

In terms of widening participation indicators, besides that associated with residing in a target ward, early discussions with focus group members confirmed that, with only a few exceptions, all would be the first generation in their families to go university if they were to do so. However, in discussing their intentions, a significant number were either undecided or not planning on pursuing a higher education. Such a mix was considered advantageous to the running of the focus groups since it would enable a range of opinions to be captured and ensure that discussions better reflected the spectrum of views found amongst the wider NCOP cohort.

4.4 FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPATION

In most instances, participants took part in two or more discussions, with a significant number engaging in all three. Perhaps inevitably, given demands on their time and the voluntary nature of participation, some attrition and drop out did occur. However, numbers remained good and were sufficient to run the third round of focus groups conversations.

The focus groups were scheduled at regular intervals over a 10-month period. The initial round of discussions was held between December 2017 and February 2018, with the second round taking place between April and June 2018, and the final set of conversations convened in October 2018. This approach had originally been designed with the aim of capturing of the insights and intentions of these young people as they progressed on their learner journeys. However, the rapport built up with participants over a series of meetings also enabled subjects of particular interest and relevance to be returned to and explored in greater detail than would have been possible with a one-off discussion.

In terms of duration, the project proposal envisaged that each focus group would run for a minimum of 40 minutes and, potentially, up to one hour. In practice, the support provided by teaching contacts in each of the three participating institutions meant that most

discussions were able to run for a full hour, ensuring that the study gathered a significant volume of detailed, high quality data.

4.5 FOCUS GROUP CONTENT

Table 1 identifies the key transition points associated with each cohort of learners. Since the longer-term aim of progressing to HE will be influenced by the success with which learners negotiate the intermediate steps on their journeys, focus group conversations explored of how learners were managing their current educational stage, their perceptions of what their next educational step would be like and their assessment of its significance. Consideration was also given to how well prepared they felt they were for their next step, and the tactics they considered would help them with this move.

TABLE 1: LEARNER JOURNEYS OF THE SURVEYED COHORTS: YEARS 8 TO 13

Winter 2017	Spring 2018	Autumn 2018	Transition point	Detail
Y8	Y8	Y9	GCSE	Selection of GCSEs/equivalents
Y9	Y9	Y10		Start of GCSEs/equivalents
Y10	Y10	Y11		Completion of GCSEs post-16 options explored and determined
Y11	Y11	Y12	Post-16	Post-18 options explored
Y12	Y12	Y13		Post-18 decisions (inc. HE) finalised
Y13	Y13	-	Post-18	Post-18 destinations

In addition, their assessment of the value and effectiveness of any support they had received to help prepare them for this next step was considered, as were their views on how this might be enhanced. Discussions also explored whether additional support was required, in terms of addressing remaining gaps in their understanding and allaying any concerns they still might have, and the nature of such support (column 3 in Table 2 provides an outline of the key areas explored in the focus group discussions).

TABLE 2: SUBJECT AREAS ADDRESSED IN THE STUDY

1. Secondary sources	2. Interview themes	3. Focus group themes (participants)
Summary of the literature on the next step challenge	Outreach practitioners and teaching professionals' perspectives on the next step challenge faced by each group of focus group participants	Perceptions of the challenges to their next step progression and their associated concerns
		Positive perspectives on their next educational step and insights into their motivations
		Learner-developed tactics for managing the next step transition and succeeding at this new level
		The case for and against next step support (beyond self-regulated tactics)
		Review of support received and assessment of its effectiveness
		Ideas for enhancing current types and levels of support
		Rationale for the provision of additional support (including identification of gaps in understanding and continued concerns), and ideas for what this support would involve.

4.6 CONTEXT

To add context to the information provided by the learners and to afford a local perspective on the next step challenges to progression identified in the literature, an outreach officer associated with each of the participating institutions - and familiar with their respective catchment areas - was interviewed, as was a teaching professional (see column 2, Table 2). As key project contacts, the latter were also instrumental in the distribution of information sheets and parental and participant consent forms, as well as in identifying participants, ensuring their attendance and organising rooms suitable for the running of focus groups.

5 REPORT STRUCTURE

The first set of findings this study reports on relate to the transition to GCSEs. The second set concern the move to post-16 study. Here consideration is given to the challenges of moving from level-2 to level 3 study, as well as those concerned with changing educational institution at the age of 14, which was the reality for students in one of the case study schools (and, with their sixth form scheduled to close, would also become the reality for younger learners in the second school). The final section considers post-18 options and decisions, including those associated with higher-level study.

TABLE 3: THE STRUCTURE ADOPTED IN THE REPORT'S THREE MAIN SECTIONS

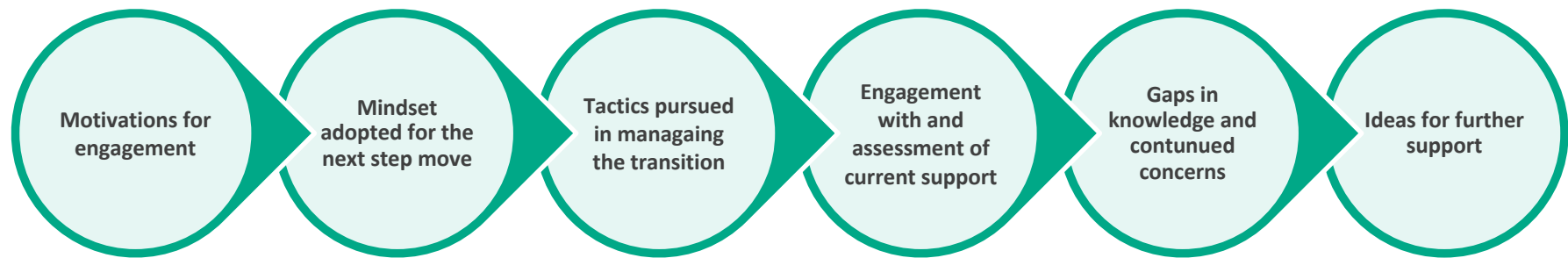
Viewpoint	Themes
Overview - summary of the literature on the next step challenge	
Practitioners and professionals' perspectives on the next step challenge	
Focus group learners' perspective	Challenges to - and concerns with - next steps progression
	Positive perspectives on next steps progression
	Learner-initiated tactics for managing the transition and succeeding at this new level
	The case for and against next steps support – (beyond learner-initiated tactics)
	Review of support received and assessment of its effectiveness
	Suggestions for enhancing current types and levels of support
	Ideas for additional support and the purpose this would serve.

Each section adopts a similar and comparable structure, as summarised in Table 3. The opening component explores the challenges associated with the particular transition point. Here an overview of the literature is followed by a consideration of the insights offered by the outreach practitioners and teaching professionals interviewed for this investigation. The views of the young people who took part in the study's focus groups are then examined. In this respect, attention is first given to feedback that recognises the particular transition point as a challenge to next steps progression, before learner motivations for making a successful transition - and succeeding at this next level - are addressed. The tactics these learners intend to use, or, where older learners are concerned, have deployed, are then explored.

The final component of each section addresses the subject of support. This is defined as originating from beyond the self-regulated tactics developed and deployed by the learners. For each transition point, this section begins with a summary of the arguments presented by the learners for and against such support. The range and nature of the support the learners discussed receiving is then explored, alongside their assessment of its effectiveness. In a number of instances, this assessment is accompanied by suggestions for ways in which current forms of support could be enhanced. Finally, having explored how well-prepared participants feel about taking their next educational steps, consideration is given to their ideas for additional support capable of addressing identified gaps in their knowledge and understanding.

The structure adopted for the report's three main sections is based on a logic chain (summarised in Figure 1 See Midlands and Lancashire Commissioning Support Unit, 2016). This considers that a learner's motivation for engaging in their next educational step will influence the mindset they adopt and the self-regulated and often self-devised tactics they deploy to manage this transition. In turn, their reflections on the success or otherwise of these tactics will shape their views on the current support available (be it from within the school or provided by a third party), and their assessment of this support. It will also inform their perceptions of any remaining gaps in their knowledge and understanding, as well as any continued concerns they may have about their next step move. It is from this vantage point - and in seeking to address these gaps and concerns - that their ideas for any additional support are likely to arise.

FIGURE 1: THE LOGIC CHAIN UNDERPINNING THE STRUCTURE ADOPTED IN THE REPORT'S THREE MAIN SECTIONS



6 TRANSITION TO GCSE-LEVEL STUDY

6.1 OVERVIEW AND THE PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVE

Arguably, one of the key outreach challenges when encouraging learners to consider their educational futures (including HE) and career options is in ensuring they recognise the relevance of education. For the younger year groups involved in this study, this included the role and value of GCSEs (House of Common Education Committee, 2014). Progression to advanced level study depends upon adequate attainment at Key Stage 4 (KS4). Evidence also indicates a link between socio-economic background and GCSE performance, with those from higher social groups tending to gain higher grades (Webber and Butler, 2005; Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2014). Similarly, recent studies on A-level dropout suggest that those more marginally qualified at KS4 are at greatest risk of non-completion (Payne, 2001; Raven, 2018a).

6.1.1 LACK OF BELIEF IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

Some of the challenges associated with KS4 were addressed by the practitioners interviewed ahead of the running of the first round of focus groups. In discussing what were considered to be fairly modest GCSE attainment scores in the locality they were familiar with, one interviewee made reference to families who ‘want the best’ for their children but may not have a ‘belief in the education system’ and may not have an ‘expectation’ that their children will do ‘two hours homework a night’, or ‘the revision’. It was also argued that ‘there isn’t as much belief in the town that jobs are out there [that require these qualifications] and that are available for these young people’.

6.2 THE LEARNER PERSPECTIVE: THE GCSE CHALLENGE

6.2.1 EXPECTATIONS AND THE INITIAL REALITY OF GCSEs

6.2.1.1 HARDER WORK

The feedback from the learners involved in the focus groups confirmed that the transition and adjustment to GCSEs did represent a challenge. During the first two rounds of focus group discussions, year 8s were asked for their views on the GCSEs they were to embark

upon in their next school year. The general response was that GCSEs would be different to what had been experienced before, most notably in being 'harder work!'

6.2.1.2 A NARROWER RANGE OF SUBJECTS AND MORE (CHALLENGING) WORK

The third round of discussions with the same group of young people, who by the autumn of 2018 had started KS4, provided an opportunity to explore the reality of GCSE study. Their assessment was of a cautious nature. Whilst they were enjoying studying certain subjects, they also reflected positively on their previous school year, which had offered a 'wider range of [subjects]'. There was also the view that year 9 was involving 'a lot' more work, including 'work outside school'. In this respect, one participant described having 'already' (by October) 'filled half my (subject) folder'. In addition to 'giv[ing] you more work', it was also claimed that subjects such as maths require 'you to use your own initiative and work it out!' for yourself.

6.2.2 TRANSITION FROM YEAR 9 TO 10, AND 10 TO 11

6.2.2.1 AN EMPHASIS ON EXAMS AND A FURTHER INCREASE IN WORKLOAD

For those in the year above, the move to year 10 was also marked by a change in the pace and intensity of study. Here, one set of year 10s discussed a greater 'focus on exams'. Whilst it was noted that year 9 'introduc[ed] you to the subject' and 'eas[ed] you into' it, and where the priority was 'learning the basics', year 10 was 'all about how you pass your exams'. Accompanying this, the same group discussed an increase in the amount of homework they were required to do compared with that experienced in year 9.

This theme was also addressed in the final round of discussions with year 11s. One group talked about more time being dedicating to 'revision' in year 11, whilst also discussing an increase in the amount of homework they were required to do. A comparable set of observations was made by year 11s from the other case study school. This group also considered that their teachers had become 'more harsh, because', it was added, 'they want [us] to do well'.

Recommendation 1

Recognise the challenges - and accompanying concerns - that progression to GCSE-level study represents for some learners. These include:

- Increased workloads, including the prospect of more homework, and an
- Increasing focus and emphasis on tests and examinations.

Seek to address these challenges and concerns when engaging with those in years 8-11.

6.3 MOTIVATIONS

6.3.1 GETTING WHAT I WANTED

Despite the challenges they considered likely to be encountered, many of the year 8 focus group participants talked positively about year 9 and the start of their GCSEs. One focus group member described how they had 'managed to get what I asked for', in terms of subject options. Consequently, it was observed, 'it will be nice next year to learn about the subjects I'm interested in'.

6.3.2 FINDING THE SUBJECTS INTERESTING

During the last round of meetings, members of the same (former year 8) group reflected on the reality of embarking upon their GCSEs now they had moved into year 9. Whilst it involved more work, participants talked about 'getting to do the lessons I want to now'. As anticipated, they discussed finding their subjects interesting. Instead of art, one focus group member observed that they could now do 'engineering and PE'. Those in year 10 also talked positively about moving onto GCSEs and that this meant selecting 'the subjects you like, and dropping those you don't'. Similarly, amongst some participants from the same school who had moved into year 11, the new academic year was proving enjoyable because, it was added, the 'teachers pay more attention to us'. This, it was added, meant 'getting extra help' and participating in 'after school clubs'.

6.3.3 DOING WELL WILL HELP SECURE A 'GOOD JOB', AND COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY ENTRY

In further exploring their motivations for taking GCSE seriously, one group of year 8 participants argued that doing well in their GCSE would help to secure them 'good jobs'. It would also facilitate their progression to college and university. Comparable judgments were made by members of the other year 8 focus group. 'These qualifications', it was noted, are required for you 'to get the job you want'. Amongst year 9s, GCSEs were also viewed as the means by which you will 'get a good job when you're older'. In turn, this would enhance one's prospects of earning 'more money' and enjoying a 'better lifestyle'. Similarly, for year 10 participants success with their GCSEs would enable them to 'get a better job and get into college'. In addition, one participant observed that gaining higher grades would help them 'get into university' and, in the process, become 'the first one in my family' to do so.

Asked what they would say to their peers who might not be taking GCSE so seriously, one group of year 9s suggested that they should be informed that GCSE results determine 'what you do in the future'. Likewise, year 10s talked about the need to stress that GCSE results will 'go on your CV' and be considered when you 'go for college and university, and a job'.

6.4 MINDSET

Given their motivations for wanting to engage with and do well in their GCSEs, younger focus group participants were asked how they intended to approach KS4. Similarly, those who had recently embarked upon their GCSEs were questioned about the approach they had adopted. Their responses offer insights into the mindset participants considered conducive to success at this level.

6.4.1 PERSEVERANCE

The concept of 'perseverance' featured in both first and second round discussions, including amongst the younger year groups. Here it was observed that there are 'going to be times throughout the course when you think I can't do this [but] you just need to keep going through it.' Similarly, in terms of workload mention was made to ensuring you 'keep on top of everything', including homework, which, it was added, 'should be handed in on time!'

6.4.2 DETERMINATION

In addition, second round discussions with those who were either selecting their GCSE (year 8s), or had embarked upon them (year 9s), identified the need to be 'determined' in the way

GCSEs are approached. Elaborating, one group of year 8s observed that ‘you need to keep pushing yourself’ and ‘not let yourself down’. ‘If you do’, it was added, ‘then you’ve wasted all these years being in high school’. The year 9s also made reference to ‘hard work and determination’, and the ability to ‘stick to it and really commit’. Also highlighted was the ‘ability to believe in yourself’ and not ‘be put off by other people’, or ‘distracted by things that are going on around you’ but, instead, to be able to ‘focus on your target’.

Recommendation 2

Recognise the positive perceptions and motivations learners have for succeeding in their transition to - and studies at - GCSE level. These include:

- The opportunity to select and pursue subjects of interest
- The potential to improve employment prospects and enjoy a ‘better lifestyle’ by succeeding at level-2 study
- The need for good grades to access further and higher education.

Consider ways to use these ‘positive messages’ when seeking to counter the challenges and concerns expressed about GCSE-level study.

6.5 TACTICS DEPLOYED BY PARTICIPANTS

Given the challenges associated with KS4 and the desire to do well, focus group participants were asked to explore the tactics that had helped them to manage the transition to GCSEs and to progress with them once they had commenced their KS4 studies. This subject was initially explored by asking participants what skills they considered necessary to secure success in their GCSEs. Whilst addressed during the first round of discussion, the topic was returned to during the second set of meetings. Revisiting the subject provided participants with a chance to elaborate on their preliminary responses and identify any additional competencies they considered important.

6.5.1 LISTENING, WORKING WITH TEACHERS AND USING FEEDBACK

One year 8 group discussed the importance of listening ‘in lessons to make sure you know what you’re doing’. This was accompanied by the observation that ‘you need to make sure

you're always on task, so if you miss work, go back to your teacher and ask for help'. Similarly, the other group of year 8s emphasised the importance of 'communicating with teachers'. Asked what this meant in practice, it was observed that 'if you're struggling with work, ask them to go over the question with you'.

Consistent with this line of thinking, one of the year 9 groups talked about the ability to 'listen actively to your teacher, because', it was added, you're not going to get there on your own and they are there to guide you.' Meanwhile, asked about strategies for managing their GCSEs, one of the year 10 groups discussed the positive boost in confidence gained from doing well in exams and realising 'I am ok'. However, whilst regular monitoring could be reassuring, it could also make you realise that you had 'to work harder'.

6.5.2 NOTE TAKING AND RECORD KEEPING

Year 9 learners acknowledged the importance of effective note taking, since 'everything you do from year 9 is kept'. Good record keeping, it was observed, means 'that when you are in year 11 and doing your revision, you can go back to the work you have already done'. Linked to this, one of the year 10 participants during the first round of discussions reflected on the need to improve their practice in this respect and to take 'better notes'. In exploring how this could be achieved reference was made to 'listen[ing] to what the teachers are saying' and then taking 'notes with different coloured pens'. Each colour, it was observed, would signify a 'different subject' area. Similarly, amongst year 11 participants reference was made to the importance of 'keeping up with your coursework' and of doing so from when GCSEs start.

6.5.3 TIME MANAGEMENT, AND TAKING REGULAR BREAKS

Whilst time management was alluded to during the first round of discussions, with the need to allocate time to each subject being studied, it featured more prominently during the second set of conversations, perhaps reflecting its increasing relevance with approaching GCSE examinations, mocks and other end of year tests. Explaining the importance of effective time management, a year 10 group described how they were 'getting extra work to do' and were compiling 'schedule[s] to deal with' this.

Similarly, in discussing how they were coping with year 11, one group talked about not trying to do 'it all at once' and of having a plan of work. In addition, reference was made to

taking 'take a break every now and then' in order to avoid 'stressing out'. A comparable set of tactics was described by a year 12 and 13 group. In reflecting on what had help them through their GCSEs, mention was made to 'setting specific times to have a break', and recognising the importance of this practice in order to avoid 'burn[ing] out and not doing as well as you wanted'.

6.5.4 REVISION AND RECALL SKILLS

Year 10 learners highlighted their importance of recall during the initial set of focus group meetings. A good memory, it was noted, is essential, including for maths, 'where you are not provided with the formulas in the exam', and in English, which is 'a closed book' exam. The revision methods mentioned by participants in this year group included mind mapping, along with the use of cards containing key words that help to 'trigger' recall. Meanwhile, during the opening round of conversations, year 11 focus group participants discussed the importance of recognising different learning styles. Here mention was made of revision techniques that involved 'recording yourself saying things and listening to it back', whilst for those who preferred 'visualisation' the options discussed included watching subject-based videos, drawing diagrams, making posters and using coloured pens.

Returning to this topic in the second round of discussions - and at a time when examinations were looming for a number of participants - various additional revision techniques were identified. Members from one year 10 groups advocated the practice of revising in 20 minutes blocks, interspersed with 10-minute breaks, whilst also outlining their intention to go 'through past papers' provided by their teachers and accessed online. Meanwhile year 11s discussed employing 'flash cards', containing 'a question or topic on the front and the answer on the back', and of using different coloured cards to distinguish particular subject areas. 'Knowledge organisers' were also mentioned. These, it was observed, contain 'all the information [you] need to know'. In addition, reference was made to the use of official YouTube videos, along with the recommendation to take advantage of the 'revision days' their school offers, which are held 'on Saturdays' and 'where teachers will deal with any questions you may have'. Elsewhere, the other year 11 groups discussed the importance of on-going revision, observing that in the process of moving onto a new topic it can be easy to forget about the previous subject.

Revision skills also featured prominently in second round discussions with year 12 and 13 focus group participants, when reflecting on the skills they considered to have been essential to their GCSE success. Here reference was made to the use of ‘mind maps’, although this was qualified by the recommendation that students should ‘try different methods’ in order to determine ‘what works for you’.

6.5.5 UNDERSTANDING EXAM QUESTIONS AND PLANNING ANSWERS

During the second round of discussions, year 12 and 13 participants also offered their recommendations for GCSE exam success. Emphasis was placed on ‘understanding the questions’ that appear on examination papers and of recognising ‘command words’ such as ‘explain, describe [and] assess’. ‘You have’, it was observed, ‘got to know what [the examiners] are looking for. Similarly, there was a need to understand the ‘marking scheme’ and, taking the example of English, know ‘how much to focus on language and how much to focus on content’.

In addition, it was recommended that once the exam has started GCSE candidates should ‘take [their] time’ and permit themselves a few moments ‘to calm down’, before ‘reading [the paper] properly’. They should also ‘plan [their] answers before [they begin to] write’. Linked to this, reference was made to an initial practice of ‘flicking through the [exam] paper to try and get a grasp of each question’, and of underlining ‘key words and making mind maps around these’. The latter practice, it was suggested, can help to ‘raise [initial] confidence’ levels.

Time management during examinations also featured in these discussions, with emphasis placed on ensuring that ‘enough time is spent on each question’. In this respect participants talked about the principle of one minute per mark, and of using this as a rough guide in the allocation of time. However, the need to ‘allow yourself planning time’ was also highlighted, as was the importance of keeping aware of the passage of time and ‘knowing where you should be’ at any particular point in the exam, in terms of what you have completed and what still needs to be done.

6.6 TACTICS FURTHER EXPLORED

Successful tactics for managing with the transition to GCSEs - and succeeding at them - were further explored by asking focus group participants what advice they would give to their younger selves, as well as to their peers who might not be taking GCSEs so seriously.

6.6.1 SUBJECT SELECTION AND DEVELOPING A SUBJECT INTEREST

One group of year 9s talked about advising their younger selves to avoid selecting subjects 'you don't like', since, it was added, you 'don't want to be bored'. The second set of focus group conversations were able to expand on this initial guidance. Those from the same year group suggested seeking advice from 'teachers' on 'what [subjects] would be best'. Similarly, emphasis was placed on selecting the right GCSEs, which, it was noted, would fit with one's career plans. In addition, reference was made to the benefits of engaging with the extra-curricular clubs their schools offered.

Meanwhile, participants in one of the year 11 groups talked about the importance of having an interest in the subjects selected. Accompanying this was the advice of seeking to cultivate an interest in subjects that might not, at first, hold much appeal. In this respect it was noted that it is 'much harder to revise for something' you have not developed an interest in.

Recommendation 3

Recognise the (self-regulated) tactics that learners may have developed to help them in their transition to – and success with – GCSE-level study. These include:

- Listening to and working with teachers
- Engaging in after school classes
- Gaining subject knowledge and insight, including through seeking the advice of teachers and by participating in extra-curricular clubs
- Cultivating subject interests
- Deploying time management strategies, including compiling schedules of work
- Adopting note-taking and record keeping practices
- Recognising and working with preferred learning styles
- Using past papers to support revision and scheduling regular breaks into the revision process

- Revising on an on-going basis.

Consider how others from the NCOP cohort can be informed of these tactics and explore ways in which they can be encouraged to adopt them (see some of the initiatives and interventions identified in Recommendation 4).

6.7 THE CASE FOR SUPPORT AND ASSESSMENT OF CURRENT ACTIVITIES

A third-round discussion in one of the year 9 groups helped to underpin the rationale for the provision of support in helping learners with their transition to GCSE-level study. In this, participants talked about how those who had older siblings or other family members who had gone through the education system, including to university, were in an advantaged position. Here reference was made to fact that ‘you can see they have done well’ and the benefits they had derived from educational success. In addition, it was noted that while their school had high expectations of those in the top set, students outside this group were more likely to ‘mess around’ because they were less likely to receive ‘pet talks about raising aspirations and having good potential’. Consequently, it was added, they may fail to ‘see the point’ of working hard in school. A similar discussion occurred in one of the year 11 groups. Here reference was made to the importance of support, especially for those who ‘don’t know what they want to do after GCSEs’, or who lack the drive to do well.

6.7.1 MENTORING AND PROVISION OF GUIDANCE ON GCSE OPTIONS

In terms of current provision, members in one of the year 11 groups discussed the mentoring scheme some were taking part in, and which involved teachers supporting learners. Whilst they were new to the initiative, it was judged in favourable terms as having the potential to ‘help with [the] push’ that some students need. However, there was also a generally held view that whilst some students received this extra support more should be given a mentor to help improve their predicted grades. Elsewhere, one group of year 8 learners talked about receiving some initial information about year 9 and their GCSE options. However, whilst helpful, further advice and guidance was called for.

6.8 WHERE SUPPORT IS REQUIRED

The additional support participants advocated should, it was suggested by one group of year 8s, address 'how you prepare for your GCSEs', and provide insights into what 'subjects will be like', including 'what they will cover' and what the 'course work' will involve. There was also considered to be value in discovering 'what you could do to help improve yourself at that subject' and of finding out 'what teachers are going to expect' from you, and 'how to get good grades'.

Whilst the other contingent of year 8s came up with a similar set of suggestions, they provided a number of additional questions they considered needed to be addressed prior to commencing their GCSEs. These included guidance on 'coping with the homework' you will be expected to do, and of learning how to manage one's time', given the number of GCSE subjects you will be taking. Accompanying this was the desire to find out about organisational skills that will help to support them in managing their workloads. The same group also discussed the value of learning more about revision techniques and how to cope with exams. Elaborating, reference was made to gaining insights into 'how many questions you're going to have to answer and in what time'.

6.9 IDEAS FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

Focus group participants suggested a number of ways in which the questions and concerns they raised could be addressed.

6.9.1 REVISION SESSIONS

Whilst they had been provided with a session on 'how to revise at the start' of their current school year, year 9 students in one of the case study institutions considered that this had not 'really work[ed]' and that what was shown had been 'forgotten about', because, it was added, the session had not been 'very practical'. In exploring ideas for additional support, reference was made to a set of revision workshops that could be offered to year 10 students, and that would run 'throughout [the] year'. Having a series of session would enable them to 'practice and learn' the techniques they had been shown. This way, it was added, 'by the time you get into year 11 you will not need to worry about [how to] revise'.

6.9.2 INSIGHTS FROM THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN SUCCESSFUL WITH THEIR GCSEs

Notable in participants' discussions about additional support was the value of gaining insights from those who had been successful with their GCSEs. In this respect, one year 8 group mentioned the benefits of being given an opportunity to 'talk to people [who] had taken similar subjects' and had gone through their GCSEs and were able provide insights into what had worked for them.

The idea of gathering the views of older learners was also alluded to by year 9 and 10 focus group participants. The latter set of participants made reference to the ideal source being 'somebody who has just finished year 11, done their exams and got their results'.

Underpinning this view was their response to the suggestion that a university student could offer these insights. Here concerns were raised that undergraduates may not 'remember their GCSEs'. The year 9s made a comparable point, arguing that 'a college student would be better because a university student probably wouldn't remember exactly what they did for GCSEs but a college student would'. The same group also discussed the most effective forum for gathering these insights, which, it was suggested, would replicate a classroom situation.

Recommendation 4

Recognise the limitations of the tactics developed by learners in helping them with the transition to – and success at – GCSE-level and, in particular, the questions and uncertainties that are likely to remain, including:

- How to prepare for GCSEs
- What the syllabus in particular subjects at this level will include
- What teacher expectations will be
- What is required to secure good grades
- How to manage the greater workloads (including increased amounts of homework)
- How to revise effectively.

Consider the development of initiatives and interventions capable of addressing these concerns and perceived gaps in understanding, including:

- The provision of a series of practical revision workshops (with the suggestion

that these are aimed at those in year 10)

- Engaging with students who have recently and successfully completed their GCSEs, including in the subject areas younger learners are considering taking or have embarked upon.

7 TRANSITION TO POST-16 STUDY

7.1 OVERVIEW AND THE PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVE

Evidence suggests that one of the reasons why fewer young people from NCOP target wards progress to HE, despite gaining the requisite GCSE grades, relates to their experiences of post-16 study. This includes the challenges associated with the transition to advanced-level courses (Raven, 2018a and 2018c). In addition, some NCOP learners, notably those attending 11-16 secondary schools, face the related challenge of moving institution to pursue their post-16 studies. In this respect, the first-year evaluation of the NCOP scheme identified that HE progression rates from further education colleges tend to be lower than from school sixth forms (Tazzyman et al., 2018, see also Bowl, 2012).

The interviews with outreach practitioners and teaching professionals confirmed the existence of both challenges but especially that associated with an institutional move. In this respect, one of the outreach practitioners remarked on a conversation they had with a careers advisor assigned to one of the case study schools. This advisor was required to 'spend time each September making sure the year 11s that had just left the school were still in college', since there was a tendency for quite a few to gain a place, start their course and then drop out.

In addition, the same practitioner noted the challenge for 11-16 schools in having to prepare learners for two separate transitions: the first to college and the second, potentially, to university. In contrast, it was observed that schools with sixth forms are able to focus on the latter transition point, which can help explain the higher rates of HE progression associated with them. Similarly, reference was made to a contrast between the levels of support likely to be experienced in college and those associated with school. In the former, it was noted, students tend to be treated more independently. There will not be anyone 'at the door if they are late and asking them if they need any help to be on time. If you turn up late and miss a lesson at college there will be no one there to tell you that you need to be on time'.

7.2 THE LEARNER PERSPECTIVE: TRANSITION TO LEVEL 3

Asked during the initial round of discussions about the move from GCSEs to A-levels, a year 12 and 13 group described how ‘a lot of people have left the sixth form’. To illustrate, reference was made to a class that had started the first year with 12 students but that had its numbers depleted to two students by the start of year 13. Exploring this further, it was suggested that many dropped out during March, which coincided with year 12 mocks. Reference was also made to heavy workloads, whilst it was also argued that ‘the quality’ of what students are required to produce at A-level ‘has to be so much better’ than at GCSE. The same discussions also hinted at uncertainties over the different post-16 pathways available.

Recommendation 5

Recognise the challenges – and accompanying concerns – that progression to level 3 study represents for some learners. These include:

- The standards and expectations associated with advanced level study
- What the syllabus in the subjects learner are interest in will cover, and
- The different routes available for post-16 study (including the work-based pathway).

Seek to address these challenges and concerns when engaging with those in years 10-11.

7.3 MOTIVATIONS

7.3.1 PURSUING SUBJECTS OF INTEREST, WORKING WITH TEACHERS, GETTING TO UNIVERSITY

Despite the challenges, focus group participants also talked positively about their A-level experiences, including pursuing subjects of interest and of the good working relations they had formed with their teachers. Moreover, success at A-level was considered likely to determine their 'future'. In this respect, a number of participants talked about 'not' being able to 'get into uni without' a suitable set of 'grades'.

7.3.2 MAKING PARENTS PROUD AND NOT LETTING TEACHERS DOWN

In addition, reference was made to wanting to make their parents 'proud', and of 'not wanting to let [their] teachers down' either. 'Because classes are so small', it was added, 'you get really close to your teachers'. There was also an issue of 'self-pride'. Here one participant observed that 'because I've put in so much hard work, to come out with really terrible grades, because I couldn't be bothered in the last few months, is going to make me feel bad. It would feel good to come out with [good grades] when I've put 45 hours in a week'.

7.4 MINDSET

Given their motivations for wanting to do well in their A-levels, participants were asked about how they approached their studies.

7.4.1 DETERMINATION AND LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

In response, participants talked about the need to be determined and prepared to apply themselves. A member of one of the year 12 and 13 focus groups observed that 'when you get to this stage you have to push yourself to work. If you don't make yourself do the work, no one else is going to do it' for you! Similarly, there was a need to persevere and come to terms with the demands of advanced level study. In this respect, another group member recalled struggling to change the way they wrote and structured their essays. Linked to this was being prepared to 'learn from your mistakes', including, it was observed, to take note of 'mock exam results'.

Recommendation 6

Recognise the positive perceptions and motivations learners have for succeeding in their transition to – and with their studies at – level 3. These include:

- The opportunity to pursue subjects of interest
- That success at level 3 will enhance employment prospects
- That success at level 3 will enable progression to university-level study.

Consider ways to use these ‘positive messages’ when seeking to counter the challenges and concerns expressed about level 3 study.

7.5 TACTICS DEPLOYED BY PARTICIPANTS

Given the challenges associated with the move from GCSE to A-level study, focus group participants were asked to explore the tactics that had helped them manage the transition. This question was accompanied by an exploration of the advice they would give to those in year 11 who might be intending to pursue level 3 study, especially that associated with A-levels.

7.5.1 WORKING WITH TEACHERS

Prominent in their responses was the importance of ‘talking to and work[ing] with your teachers’. (The role of teachers in generating subject interest and awareness of next step options, including HE, will be explored in more detail in the supplementary paper that will follow the submission of this report).

7.5.2 UNDERSTANDING AND RESEARCHING THE SUBJECT

Reference was also made to the need to ensure ‘you know everything’ related to the GCSE versions of the A-level subjects that had been chosen. In doing so, it was observed, ‘you [will] have something to build on’. This was accompanied by the recommendation to ‘read widely on the topics covered in you’re a-levels’, with the aim of securing a broad understanding of the subject. During a second round of discussions with year 12 and 13 students, emphasis was also placed on the expectation at advanced level that you will

'research' topics yourself, rather than having 'everything fed to' you, which had been the case with GCSEs. Consequently, it was added, 'it's a completely different environment - its less sort of *modicodled*. It is really go out and do it by yourself'.

7.5.3 LEARNING HOW TO ANSWER ESSAY AND EXAM QUESTIONS

Second round discussion with the same groups of students also explored writing styles and what constitutes a good essay and exam answer. Here emphasis was placed on the need to be 'specific'. 'If you even drift away from the topic slightly', it was observed, 'you could [drop] marks'. Consequently, 'you need to write concisely but you also need to write very specifically', ensuring you address 'what the question is asking you to write' about.

Related to this, was the importance of recognise and using key terminology, and of providing a clear structure to answers. Regarding the latter, it was noted that 'you [need to] make sure before you start writing that you know what you are going to write'. Elaborating, it was added that it is essential to 'plan and to figure out what you are going to say, and [to] then structure what points you are going to make and [the] order' in which those points are going to appear. Here the contrast was made with GCSEs, where you 'just explain what is going [on]'. However, with A-levels there is a need to be able to 'elaborate on the theories or experiments you are talking about'.

7.5.4 EFFECTIVE USE OF 'FREE TIME'

Participants also emphasised the importance of making good use of one's 'free time' and of 'structur[ing] your own time.' Accordingly, it was argued that 'when you've got space on your timetable, or space when you are not doing extra curricula activities, fill it with something productive like writing essay plans, even if you don't write the essay, or reading over content, because it soon disappears. You soon run out of time'.

7.5.5 ON-GOING REVISION AND REVISION PLANNING

A final tactic discussed by year 12 and 13 participants concerned revising on a regular basis. This was judged beneficial given the amount of material covered by A-levels. Similarly, reference was made to the value of 'planning out your revision', including what parts you [will] revise' and when. Linked to this was the value of learning from 'examples of exam answers', and of being prepared to 'do practice tests and practice papers'

Recommendation 7

Recognise the (self-regulated) tactics that learners may have developed in order to help them in their transition to – and success at – level 3 study. These include:

- Working with teachers
- Developing subject knowledge through reading widely
- Deploying time management strategies (including the scheduling of regular breaks, and in the use of ‘free-periods’)
- Developing approaches to writing (including planning and structuring answers, using subject-specific terminology, and elaborating on theories and concepts)
- Employing a range of approaches to support revision and facilitate recall (including devising revision schedules, learning from example exam answers and completing practice papers).

Consider how others from the NCOP cohort can be informed of these tactics and explore ways in which they can be encouraged to adopt them (see some of the initiatives and interventions identified in Recommendation 8).

7.6 THE CASE FOR SUPPORT AND REVIEW OF SUPPORT RECEIVED

Whilst participants emphasised the role of self-help, the ability to ‘push yourself to work’, and the need to be motivated by knowing this ‘is what you want to do’, the value of support from others was also recognised, including in helping to reduce rates of drop out. Here reference was made to the usefulness of an A-level induction day, and the practice adopted by one teacher of providing students with a booklet covering the GCSE syllabus for one of their chosen A-levels. The intention in doing this was to ensure those about to embark on this particular A-level would be familiar with ‘what had been covered in the GCSE’, and would not be ‘coming fresh [to the subject] having [had] three months (over the summer break) to forget everything’. It also provided essential knowledge ‘to build on’ once the A-level course had started.

7.6.1 WHERE SUPPORT IS REQUIRED AND HOW IT COULD BE DELIVERED

Whilst the support they had received had helped them in preparing for the transition to A-level study, year 12 and 13 focus group participants, along with those from both of the year 11 groups, identified areas where more support with the transition to level 3 study would be beneficial.

7.6.1.1 GUIDANCE ON WHERE GCSEs COULD LEAD, AND INSIGHTS INTO THE A-LEVEL SYLLABUS

Amongst the suggestions offered by one of the year 11 groups was to provide students with guidance about where their GCSE subjects could lead. A similar idea was discussed by members of the other year 11 group, who talked about equipping students with insights into what the A-level syllabus would be like, notably in the subjects they were interested in pursuing. Exploring how this might be achieved, reference was made to the potential for teachers to provide examples of what particular topics would be covered in the A-level equivalent of their GCSE, and how this would differ from what they were currently taught. However, there was also a need for care in offering this information, in order to prevent possible confusion with what was expected at GCSE-level.

7.6.1.2 AN INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH SKILLS

In addition, one of the year 12 and 13 groups advocated some form of support that would introduce those in year 11 to the 'research skills' that A-level study demands. This, it was suggested, might include encouraging students to do more independent work as part of their GCSE. The same group also talked about the provision of 'revision guidance' for those embarking on their A-levels, given the amount of material covered at advanced level and how much information students are required to retain.

Recommendation 8

Recognise the limitations of the self-help tactics developed by learners in helping them with the transition to - and success at - level 3 study and, in particular, the questions and uncertainties that are likely to remain, including in terms of:

- What the level 3 syllabus will cover (and how the syllabus will differ from GCSEs)
- The demands of advanced level study

Consider the development of initiatives and interventions capable of addressing these concerns and gaps in understanding, including:

- Classroom-based activities that inform year 11 students of where their GCSEs can lead
- Insights into the A-level syllabus (and the syllabus related to other level 3 route-ways) in the subject areas that learners have an interest in pursuing
- Activities that familiarise learners with the research and independent learning skills required at level 3
- Provision of revision guides that help identify and develop techniques for retaining the level and detail of information that is associated with A-level study in particular.

7.7 THE LEARNER PERSPECTIVE: TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

7.7.1 THE CHALLENGE

Although concerns were expressed about the challenges associated with level 3 study, for focus group participants the move to a different institution once they had completed their GCSEs represented a rather greater concern and a subject that generated a significant amount of discussion. Although one of the case study schools possessed a sixth form, this is now scheduled to close in the next couple of years. Consequently, for younger learners in both schools the transition to post-16 education will involve moving to a different institution, be it a sixth form or a further education college.

7.7.1.1 MOVING TO AN UNFAMILIAR ENVIRONMENT

Discussions with focus group participants revealed the nature of the perceived challenge associated with leaving their school and moving to college or sixth form. Much of this concerned leaving a familiar environment for an unfamiliar one. In particular, those from the school that was to see its sixth form close talked of the benefits of remaining in the same institution and of being taught by teachers they knew and who knew them and their strengths and weaknesses as learners.

7.7.1.2 LESS SUPPORT

The year 12 and 13 students attending the case study college expressed similar views. Teachers at school, it was argued, 'have so much more in common with students. They know the students and want to know what's wrong'. However, at college things were 'separated', with tutors tending to focus on teaching rather than pastoral care. Indeed, members of this group discussed how a number of fellow students had struggled as a result of the move to college, with some dropping out as a result.

Exploring this further, the same year 12 and 13 group discussed the more 'mature' approach the college adopted in dealing with its students, compared with their pre-16 school experiences. In this respect, one participant observed 'you don't get chased around if you miss a lesson. It is down to you. It is completely your choice. It's your decision'. For at least some, this level of 'independence' proved difficult to 'deal with'.

Recommendation 9

Recognise the challenges - and accompanying concerns - that progression to a different learning institution for post-16 study, especially a further education college, represents for some learners. These include:

- Encountering an unfamiliar environment and culture
- Teachers and tutors they do not know and who, in turn, will not know them
- The levels of support available and the need to be more self-reliant

Seek to address these challenges and concerns when engaging with those in years 8-11.

7.8 MOTIVATIONS

Whilst it represented a significant change, some of those in the school-based focus groups also talked about the opportunities offered at college.

7.8.1 MORE INDEPENDENCE

These included the greater independence associated with college and the chance to study 'what you want to and do things you enjoy, rather than things that you have to do'.

Similarly, independence was linked to 'being able to express yourself in your own way'. In contrast, it was argued that school is 'quite a conforming environment'.

7.8.2 AVAILABILITY OF A WIDE RANGE OF COURSES AND OPPORTUNITY TO MEET NEW PEOPLE

In addition, there was a need to recognise and take advantage of the fact that colleges offer a wide range of courses that were likely to extend beyond A-levels. In contrast, it was argued that 'at sixth form, course [options] can be quite restrictive'. Moreover, since colleges tended to be bigger institutions, and you are likely to be in larger 'classes', there will be opportunities to 'get to know more people, and more people with your interests'.

7.8.3 AN INTERMEDIATE STEP BETWEEN SCHOOL AND WORK OR HIGHER EDUCATION

Two separate groups also viewed the move to college as an intermediate or 'middle' step between school and the world of work, or, in some instances, going onto university. Here reference was made to being exposed to 'new learning techniques' and having to rely on yourself more, which, it was noted, would be something you would have to do at university.

Recommendation 10

Recognise the positive perceptions and motivations learners have for succeeding in their transition to college. These include:

- The greater independence and autonomy associated with college-based study
- The opportunity to express themselves in a 'less conforming' (rule-based) environment
- A wider choice of subjects and pathways
- The chance to meet new people
- The perception that college-based study constitutes an intermediate step between school and work/university (including in terms of new approaches to learning and experiencing greater levels of independence than previously).

Consider ways to use these 'positive messages' when seeking to counter the challenges and concerns expressed about college study.

7.9 MINDSET AND TACTICS

Given their motivations for wanting to do be successful, the year 12 and 13 students from the case study college were asked how they had approached the transition to college-based study. Here reference was made to being prepared to adapt to a new environment and allowing time for this to occur. 'As we progress through the year', it was observed, 'we kind of have to build it up ourselves'. In addition, reference was made to getting to know the support available in college, including the various post-18 events the institution arranges.

Members of the same group also commented on some of the tactics they had adopted to help them in the transition. These included making the most effective use of their free (non-classroom) time, and of developing strategies for engaging with their teachers and tutors. Whilst in their old school the teachers knew them, at college one needed to make the effort and 'to get that sort of bond'. However, supporting such endeavors was the fact that in many cases there was less of an age gap between students and college tutors, which, it was observed, can help in fostering good working relations.

Recommendation 11

Recognise the (self-regulated) tactics that learners may have developed and initiated in order to help them in their transition to college. These comprise:

- Allowing time to become orientated to a new environment and different culture
- Engage with teachers who are likely to be new to them
- Effective use of free-periods.

Consider how others from the NCOP cohort can be informed of these tactics and explore ways in which they can be encouraged to adopt them (see some of the initiatives and interventions identified in Recommendation 12).

7.10 THE CASE FOR SUPPORT

A discussion on the rationale for providing support, notably the provision of more information and guidance about the college option, emerged amongst one group of year 9s and another of year 10s during the initial round of meetings. Whilst they appreciated the university-based trips and activities they had been on, both groups argued that more attention should be paid to informing them about college and their post-16 options. Indeed, one year 9 student observed: 'I think they should also focus on college, because that is going to be the next step for us'. Another year 9 participant added 'they only give us an insight into university. It is difficult for us. We only see two steps ahead. We need to do it step-by-step'. Meanwhile, a member of one of the year 10 groups commented that 'I know quite a bit about how university life works and the options [available] but I have no idea whatever about colleges and sixth-forms'.

Comparable points were made during the second round of meetings. One group of year 8s argued that 'we just haven't been told enough about college'. Likewise, a year 9 group member observed that, although 'we go on trips to universities' we have not been on 'trips to any college'. Whilst year 11s from the other case study school acknowledged that they had recently visited a local college, they were rather critical of the experience and suggested the need for further information and insight.

Looking back on their own experiences, the year 12 and 13 college students also advocated additional support to help with the transition to a new institution. In this respect, they argued that the 'two-day college taster' they had attended in year 11 had proved rather 'simplistic', compared with the realities of the college life.

7.11 REVIEW OF SUPPORT RECEIVED

Whilst they emphasised the need for more support in preparing for the institutional move associated with post-16 study, one group of year 11s during the final round of meetings discussed in positive terms the support they had received since the previous focus group. During the intervening period they had met with the school's careers tutor. These meetings had provided an opportunity to 'talk about college' and the 'different courses you can take'. Moreover, the tutor was helping them apply for places at college, including by checking early drafts of their application forms. As a consequence of this intervention, there was a

general acknowledgement amongst group members that they were more certain of their post-16 plans.

However, whilst the work of this careers tutor was praised, there remained a general desire amongst this group of year 11s - and their year 10 counterparts in the same school - to be provided with next steps information, advice and guidance earlier in their schooling. In this respect, it was suggested that 'you should start learning about college when you pick your [GCSE] options, because it does lead you a lot into college'. Moreover, it was claimed that by year 11 'you [need to] focus on your GCSEs'. Consequently, 'if you leave it too late' to find out about post-16 options, 'you may be rushed into a decision', or 'you might not get the college you want, or the course you want.' The need to be informed about college prior to year 11 was also expressed by one of the year 8 groups, who discussed wanting to 'know what [happens] after GCSEs'.

In addition, further discussion with a number of the focus groups, including those from year 11, revealed a general level of uncertainty over apprenticeships as a post-16 option. Participants were unclear about the different levels available and that a work-based route existed that could culminate in higher-level training.

7.12 WHERE SUPPORT IS REQUIRED

During the second and third round of discussions, participants explored what they wished to discover about college. One group of year 10 learners suggested the need to know which colleges 'do which courses', 'what they specialise in', what their entry requirements are, whether delivery will be 'classroom-based', and 'what the facilities [will be] like'. A similar set of questions were identified by year 9 participants, including 'how [do we] to apply' for college, 'what can you take when you are there', what will 'the lessons [will be] like', and how will they compare with those 'in school'. In addition, there was a desire to know 'what the teachers [will be] like' and what 'teaching methods' they will use, as well as 'what subjects are available at A-level', 'how', in terms of travel, will 'you get' there, and whether you will be given 'text books or have to pay for them yourself?'

More broadly, year 10 participants talked about finding out what college would 'be like'. Because, it was observed, 'some people get on better with sixth-forms'. Elaborating, it was added that in choosing between sixth form and college, 'we need to know which is more independent [and] how do you work in each one'.

7.13 IDEAS FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

The same sets of discussions then explored the types of initiative that could help to deliver this information and advice, along with those participants would like to hear from and when these interventions should be offered.

7.13.1 ASSEMBLIES AND CAREERS FAIRS

Amongst the suggestions made by pre-16 focus group participants were to ‘have colleges’ present in assemblies. This would provide an opportunity for them to ‘tell us about it’, including ‘the application process’ and ‘how to get into college’, since, it was observed, ‘we don’t know what they are looking for’. It was also suggested that local colleges could attend school careers fairs, where they could ‘show you what courses they offer’ and ‘what their specialties are’.

7.13.2 GAINING FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE OF COLLEGE LIFE

Prominent amongst activities advocated by younger (pre-16) focus group members was for learners to visit colleges, where they could be offered a ‘taste [of college] life’ and an insight into what studying at college would entail. Reference was also made to being able to ‘experience it for [ourselves]’. In particular, participants discussed having an opportunity to spend a day ‘do[ing] what the college students do’. This included insights into ‘the way college works’ and the associated ‘social life’. Indeed, one group of year 11s spoke of a desire to have a ‘more authentic experience’, and of gaining a sense of what a day at college would be like, including what the ‘timetable would be like’, given a recognition that ‘college is going to be different’ and that as a student you will be faced with ‘a lot of independence’. Similarly, there was value in acquiring an understanding ‘the [kinds of] challenges students there would’ encounter. In addition, whilst they had visited a local college, one group of year 11s expressed a desire to experience other colleges, with the observation that ‘there are several colleges only about an hour from here’.

7.13.3 THE ROLE OF CURRENT AND FORMER COLLEGE STUDENTS

There was also a consensus amongst focus groups participants about wanting to hear from students. They, it was argued, ‘would give more of an honest opinion’. Whilst reference was made to current students, those ‘who have been through’ college were also mentioned. In

this respect it was noted that ‘students who are there can tell you what they are going through’. However, ‘people who have already experienced college and may now be in university can tell you what it was like’ and what it took to succeed. Generally, students were preferred to members of staff ‘because they are more likely to have the full experience’ and ‘will give you the true outlook on what college is like’. In contrast, it was argued that ‘a teacher does not know how the student will feel’.

Moreover, reference was made to the value of gaining ‘several [student] viewpoints’, to ensure a more varied impression was offered. During the final round of discussions, one year 11 group identified some of the questions they would like to pose to current college students and those who had recently graduated from college. These included ‘how college’ had ‘influenced their lives, what had influenced the choices they had made, what discipline was like, and how the marking and assessment schemes work’.

7.13.4 A TWO-DAY EVENT

Members of the year 12 and 13 college-based focus group made a very similar set of suggestions. These included a two-day event, comprising one day that ‘promotes the college’ and another that involves ‘studying the content of the course’ and providing an insight into ‘the real things you would be learning if you took the course’, including a sense of the ‘difficulty of what would be stud[ied]’. Such an event, it was added, should also enable participants to ‘speak to people doing the course’. Again the rationale behind this was that ‘students are going to be honest. They will not sugar coat it for you because they have [experienced it]. They’ll tell you how it is!’

Recommendation 12

Recognise the limitations of the self-help tactics developed by learners in helping them with the transition to and success at college and, in particular, the questions and uncertainties that are likely to remain, including those associated with:

- Variations in the provision offered by different local colleges
- College entry requirements
- The differences between sixth form and college-based study

- The practicalities and costs of travelling to a new institution.

Consider the development of initiatives and interventions capable of addressing these concerns and gaps in understanding, including:

- School assemblies facilitated by colleges
- Colleges attendance at school-hosted careers fairs
- Visits to the local colleges that learners are considering attending
- College taster events that provide an opportunity to experience what college life and study would be like (including insights into the potential challenges faced by those who have made the move, and how these challenges can be overcome)
- School and college-based post-16 events supported by current and former college students who are able to draw on their insights into what college will be like, and can provide guidance on how to succeed at college and in post-16 study.

8 TRANSITION TO HE

8.1 OVERVIEW AND PRACTITIONER PERSPECTIVE

Whilst there is evidence that more young people from educationally deprived neighbourhoods are participating in HE, they continue to remain significantly less likely to do so than their peers from more advantaged areas. Analysis of the most recent data sets suggests that progress in widening access continues to be of a steady ‘incremental’ nature (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2018; Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2019; OfS, 2019b). Indeed, one assessment claims that the pace at which the participation gap is closing has slowed. Moreover, it is argued that this has occurred at a time when the population of those aged 17 and 18 has fallen and the number of university places is at its highest (Corver, 2018).

The challenge of encouraging more young people from the NCOP wards supported by the case study schools to consider HE as an option was discussed by interviewees. One outreach practitioner talked about local labour markets that do not recognise the value of higher-level skills. ‘Historically’, it was noted, ‘parents and grandparents got apprenticeships from 16 and progressed within the industry. Now those [opportunities] are not there’.

Returning to this theme in a follow-up interview, the same practitioner made reference to the case study school they were familiar with drawing on a ‘low income’ catchment area that included ‘second and third generation unemployed’. Consequently, it was argued, ‘a lot of the parents of these young people will not be in high skilled roles’, and not able to offer examples of the benefits of higher-level study. Nor will such parents necessarily have the ‘range of contacts’ or ‘networks’ that could inform their children about HE. In addition, it was argued that the operation of strong family and neighbourhood ties mean that many young people are likely to remain in the locality rather than go further afield, including to university. In this respect, another practitioner recalled conversations with a number of young people from the same area who believed that going to university meant ‘mov[ing] away’ from home. They ‘don’t understand’, it was added, ‘that it might just be a case of [going] down the road, or [that they] could commute to university’. This practitioner also talked about the influence of parents whose views of the value of a HE were likely to be influenced by concerns about the cost ‘going to university’.

A comparable assessment was made by one of the teaching professionals in discussing the catchment area associated with the other case study school. 'Some of our children', it was noted, 'will be second or third generation unemployed. They come from a culture where these hasn't been any aspiration' to pursue HE-level study. It was also observed that 'quite a lot of our sixth formers [would] be the first generation to go to university' and, should they do so, 'makes it all more challenging in a way', including for the school who will need to make up for the lack of family experience in higher education.

On a related theme, one of the practitioners discussed the findings from some recent research that had been based on the area they were familiar with. This suggested that while many year 13s from disadvantaged backgrounds might apply to university and get offered places, they then decide not to go. Exploring this subject further, a college-based practitioner argued that one of the underlying reasons for this behaviour concerned a 'lack of confidence' amongst many young people from such backgrounds 'in their academic abilities'. Whilst they may not lack aspirations, with a good number 'wanting to become doctors, paramedic and nurses, they just don't know how to get there'. Locally, it was added, progressing to university is not the 'norm' and HE is 'not in their vocabulary. University is not talked about!'

8.2 THE LEARNER PERSPECTIVE

The opening round of discussions explored participants' views on what university would be like. As indicated in the interviews with practitioners and teaching professionals, their perceptions were often rather *dour*.

8.2.1 LIKE SCHOOL

For one of the year 8 groups, the term 'university' conjured up images of classroom study, with 'someone at the front teaching you and giving you information on a board, and you then hav[ing] to write it down in notes', and of 'being in a study room that's really quiet with lap tops'. Providing further detail, one year-9 participant suggested that university would involve 'lot[s] of students with back packs full of papers [and] three to four hour long lectures', although mention was also made to the prospect of 'graduating and the hard work pay[ing] off'. Likewise, for various members in one of the 11 focus groups, university was

viewed as a place that would be 'just like school' and, consequently, somewhere they were 'not really looking to go' to.

8.2.2 HARD WORK AND A DAUNTING PROSPECT

Some of the year 9 participants talked about university study requiring 'dedication', whilst a member from one of the older year groups described the prospect of university as being 'daunting', since it raised questions about whether 'you are going to be good enough'. In addition - and from across the different age groups surveyed - came the view that those who go to university are 'determined', 'smart', 'intelligent' and 'very hard working'.

8.2.3 FURTHER INSIGHTS

Participant's perceptions of HE were returned to during the second and third rounds of focus group discussions. In part, this was to enable the subject to be explored in more detail. However, it was also recognising that during the intervening period participants' views may have evolved, including as a consequence of engaging in outreach interventions.

8.2.4 AN EXPENSIVE OPTION

As with some of the discussions during the opening round, the perceived high financial costs of HE featured prominently in descriptions. One year-9 participant observed that 'it's £9,000 a year, isn't it', although members of the same group also alluded to the availability of 'student loans'. Similarly, the first description offered by one of the year 10 groups was to university being 'expensive'. Accordingly, amongst individuals considered likely to go to university were 'rich kids' and those who are 'financially wealthy'. Similarly, the prospect of getting into debt - since university would be 'very expensive' - was discussed by year 10 participants, alongside the accompanying demands, and associated 'stress[es]', of 'relying on yourself'.

8.2.5 NOT RELEVANT

Various members of one of the year 11 groups discussed their intention not to go onto university because, it was argued, a higher education was not necessary for the careers they wished to pursue. In this respect, one observed that 'I don't think I need it with the job I want', adding 'I want to go into childcare and go to college and do an apprenticeship'.

Similarly, another observed that ‘I am not going. I don’t need to go because I am doing hairdressing’.

8.2.6 NOT FITTING IN

During the second and third rounds, participants were also asked if they thought they would fit in if they were to go to university. A number of the responses suggested that they would not. One year-10 participant replied in the negative because, it was observed, ‘I’m not a very social person. I [would not] fit in personality-wise’. Another expressed comparable sentiments, observing that ‘I am [very] shy’. Similarly, one group of year 9s talked about the prospect of university being ‘frightening’. Asked if they felt they would fit in, the reply from one of the members of this group was unequivocal. ‘Definitely not! Especially’, it was added, ‘as a year one’. Asked why, the response was that there will be ‘people there with more experience. They [will] know more about university.’ Reference was also made to fact that the work will be ‘harder’ and ‘different to what [we are] used to, including in the ‘way teachers teach things’.

Recommendation 13

Recognise the challenges - and accompanying concerns - that progression to higher-level study represents for some learners. These include:

- The perception that HE will involve passive, classroom-based study
- That it will require a high degree of self-reliance
- The fear that they will not fit in
- That they will not be ‘good enough’ to succeed at HE-level
- The perceived (prohibitive) costs of HE-study (including living costs as well as those associated with tuition).

Seek to address these challenges and concerns when engaging with those in years 8-13.

8.3 MOTIVATIONS

Whilst concerns and reservations were expressed, a significant number of focus group participants were motivated by the prospect of progressing to university.

8.3.1 AN ASPIRATIONAL PLACE AND ONE THAT OFFERS OPPORTUNITIES

For some amongst of these students, university was viewed as an 'aspirational' place. A higher education, one year-12/13 focus group member argued, 'gives you more insight into what you want to do, and more confidence to do what you want to'. For another participant, university was not merely for clever people but also for 'creative' individuals, since some courses - and here art degrees were highlighted - want to see your 'creative side and your personality', rather than whether you are just 'intellectual'.

Similarly, participants in one of the year 9 groups talked about those who go to university being 'smart', 'focused' individuals, and 'people who want to do well in life' and will be 'happy in life because they've got the qualifications to get a better job'. Similarly, for year 10 participants those progressing to university included 'hard-working people who want a good life'.

8.3.2 MEETING NEW PEOPLE AND MAKING FRIENDS

Elsewhere, year 12 and 13 focus group members made reference to universities attracting 'people of all ages' and from 'all over the country', where it would be possible to meet 'new people' and make 'new friends.' It was also added that at university 'you will be surrounded by a multitude of different cultures and experiences that you couldn't even dream of!' Similarly, for some of the year 10s, university offered 'more freedom and independence than high school'. It also provided the chance for 'a clean slate', with one student observing that 'if I go to university [I will be] with people who have never met me, so I can start over'.

8.3.3 THE CHANCE TO PURSUE SUBJECT INTERESTS

For a number of year 9 participants, university provided the opportunity to ‘take a degree’, and was judged likely to be ‘better than school, because you pick what you want to do, and you’re going to pick something you’re interested in and enthusiastic about’. Amongst one group of year 11s, university was associated with ‘success’ and ‘learning more stuff’, as well as equipping those who progress with ‘more options.’ It would also provide them with the chance to explore ideas about the careers they were interested in pursuing.

8.3.4 FITTING IN AND HAVING SOMETHING IN COMMON

Whilst reservations about ‘fitting in’ at university were expressed by some focus group members, others were rather more positive about their prospects of embracing HE-level study and university life more generally. A number of year-10s considered that, should they go to university, they would fit in, notably ‘with people that are doing the same [subjects] as [us]’. In this respect, it was added ‘you are going to be taking classes with people who share the same interests as you. You [will] have something in common’. Similarly, another year 10 participant suggested that whilst it may take time, they would fit in as they began to ‘meet new people’.

8.3.5 IMPROVED JOB PROSPECTS

For many of the focus group participants who were considering university as an option, one of the key drivers was that a higher education would help secure them a ‘better job’ or, in some instances, a particular job they had in mind. Accordingly, one year-8 student described having a ‘very hard to achieve job I want to get’, adding that they wanted to become an ‘engineer or lawyer’, either of which will ‘take a lot of practice, so I will definitely need to go to university’. Another observed that ‘if you’ve got a higher level job you want, then you need higher grades for that’, whilst from amongst those in the other year 8 focus group came the comment that ‘I want to get the best job possible’, which, it was added, means ‘going to college and university’. A further member of this group observed that ‘you have more chance of getting [a] job’ if you go to university. The year 9 and 10 groups at both schools expressed similar views, whilst also observing that ‘if you have been to university it looks better on your CV’.

Recommendation 14

Recognise the positive perceptions and motivations learners have for progressing to HE-level study and succeeding in this transition. These include:

- Improved job prospects and enhanced CVs
- The chance to pursue subject interests
- The opportunity to broaden one's knowledge and explore career options
- The chance to meet those who share comparable subject interests
- The opportunity to experience new cultures
- An experience that will boost levels of (academic and social) confidence.

Consider ways to use these 'positive messages' when seeking to counter the challenges and concerns expressed about higher-level study.

8.4 MINDSET AND TACTICS

Given their motivations for wanting to go to university, participants were asked how they intended to approach the *challenge*. Here emphasis was placed on the need to be prepared to do your 'own research'. Although one group of year 11 observed that the careers advisor at their school had provided details of useful websites, it was left to them to 'go off and do' the research. Similarly, members in one of the year-12/13 groups emphasised the need for individual efforts when exploring the HE option. These included online searches to 'see what people say about universities' and 'reviews of how life is' at university.

In addition, one member from the same year 12-13 group talked about the insights they had gained from talking with those they worked with in their 'Saturday job'. 'Most people there go to uni', it was observed, 'and I just ask them what it's like'. Their reliability as sources of information was also referenced. 'They are not going to say I am not going to tell you. They are just normal people. This is good, this is terrible and I hate this about it. They can tell you about their whole university experience'.

Elsewhere, a number of focus group participants talked about drawing on the influence and encouragement of parents and other family members. One year-9 student highlighted the role of their aunt in nurturing their interest in university. This aunt had gone to university and was now involved in football coaching.

Similarly, a 10 participant at the other case study school emphasised the impact that their family had on their HE ambitions. Whilst 'no one [in their family] has been to university', the advice from their parents was that 'you are the one going to do well'. 'It is a case', it was added, of their parents saying 'do this [go to university] and then you get a choice' about what you can do. In addition, this participant observed 'I want to know that I have done mum and dad proud'. In response to this comment, another member of the same group noted 'I am the same. I am trying to impress my dad and make him proud.' A third participant who was also interested in HE talked about their parents providing support but not pressure, by emphasising 'it is your choice'. Similarly, a 12 and 13 focus group member described their parents' hope that they would be the first in their family to go to university.

Recommendation 15

Recognise the (self-regulated) tactics that learners may have developed and initiated in order to help them prepare for their transition to higher-level study. These include:

- Conducting their own research (internet-based and through discussions with current university students encountered)
- Drawing on the support and encouragement of parents and others in their networks (and recognising in this context the sense of pride in potentially being the first in their families to go to university).

Consider how others from the NCOP cohort can be informed of these tactics and explore ways in which they can be encouraged to adopt them (see some of the initiatives and interventions identified in Recommendation 16).

8.5 THE CASE FOR SUPPORT

A discussion on the rationale for providing support on HE as a potential post-18 destination emerged during a discussion in one of year 11 groups. Some in this group made the case for being left to decide their post-school and college options, with one participant claiming that ‘they would be telling you what to do with your own life’ if they were to provide guidance. However, others expressed disagreement, with one member observing that ‘the majority of knowledge I have on what I want to do and how to get there, has come from my parents. I am very fortunate that my parents are very clued up. I know that those with parents that are not as clued up are going to have a problem’.

Similarly, another member of the group noted that ‘my mum has told me all about college and university’ but added that ‘one of my friends - her parents haven’t gone. She doesn’t know. She comes to my mum for advice.’ In exploring the implications of this, the same participant observed ‘I think there are going to be children [whose parents] are not as academic and they are going to need some support’, especially, it was added, ‘if they haven’t got this drive’ to research options themselves. Another participant agreed, noting that ‘no one in my family has been to university. My mum went to college. I don’t think my dad did, and after college my mum didn’t do anything with it. It just feels like a backlash. [There are] some people who know things [but] I had no idea. It is just those little barriers.’ Accordingly, it was argued that students needed to be supported and prepared for their educational futures.

During the same discussion the argument was also made that support should not stop at a particular point in one’s education. In this respect it was observed that ‘people [can] change their minds further on’ and ‘suddenly’ acquire a ‘drive’ they ‘haven’t had before’. Illustrating this, one participant discussed their father who ‘messed around in years 9, 10 and 11, then got into college and got the top grades but’, it was added, ‘that was only because he changed his mind and outlook’.

8.6 REVIEW OF SUPPORT RECEIVED

The second and third rounds of focus group discussions provided an opportunity to ask participants about the outreach initiatives they had experienced and their assessment of these.

8.6.1 A YEAR 7 EVENT

One group of year 9s talked about having been on many ('multiple') visits to universities. These included 'Debate Mate' at Oxford during year 7. Described as a day-long event, this involved a 'variety of activities' including 'note writing', a debating competition with students from other schools, a ceremony in which certificates were awarded and a campus tour.

Although generally viewed in positive terms - as 'fun' and 'enjoyable' - for some it was also to have an enduring impact. One participant spoke about their certificate still being on display at home, another talked about continuing to use the 'opposing and proposing skills' they had acquired, whilst there was a shared view that the experience had helped build levels of confidence. However, for these young people the event had 'not really' provided them with an insight into what university would be like, besides being left with the impression that it comprised 'lots of rooms!'

8.6.2 A COMPASS VISIT IN YEAR 8

Whilst they had also been on 'quite a few trips to universities', one group of year 8s recounted a particular visit they had made to a local university. This involved a game 'where we had our own money and we had to spend [it] wisely'. In addition, the trip provided information on 'how much it would be to stay there', with one participant adding that 'you don't have to fully pay - you can pay bits off, [each] week or year'. The visit, it was added, also involved looking 'around different classrooms' and being 'told what we could study there'. In sum, the experience was judged to have been 'really good'. Asked why, reference was made to being 'told what it would be like' and hearing from undergraduates about their experiences of university: 'it was nice to [hear] it from other people instead of from people who work there'. Questioned why they preferred being informed by students rather than staff, the response was that the former 'know what it's like' and are able to tell you how they came to 'fit in really well' and how they were 'learning new things'.

8.6.3 THE BRILLIANT CLUB

Another outreach programme discussed by one of the year 9 focus groups was the Brilliant Club. Whilst this included visiting a university and attending various lecturers, reference was also made to being tasked with writing an essay, which, it was added, required the inclusion

of footnotes. Whilst judged to have been 'hard work, some also considered it to have been enjoyable and to have helped improve their essay writing skills.

8.6.4 PRESENTATIONS IN SCHOOLS

The year 10 group from the same school also discussed the interventions they had received. These included university staff visiting the school and giving talks, although these were judged not to have been 'extremely memorable', since, it was suggested, they mainly involved 'this is the university [and] we offer these courses'. However, for this group the university visits they had experienced were viewed in more positive terms, providing an opportunity to see the university and to be informed about 'this is what we do'.

8.6.5 SUMMER SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITY 'RESIDENTIALS'

Discussions with one group of the year 12-13 students revealed some detailed understanding of what living and studying at university would be like. Asked how they had acquired these insights, reference was made to the year 11 'residential' they had been on. These included a 'Unifier' event and various summer schools, including one at Oxford, another at Liverpool and a Sutton Trust summer school at Durham. Whilst judged to have been enjoyable, these interventions were also considered to have 'taught us a lot'. Here reference was made to 'work[ing] on subjects we hadn't done [before]. This proved beneficial because it helped inform them about what 'to do at A-level'.

In addition, these events provided an opportunity to 'stay in a uni'. Before attending a residential, one participant observed, I had never been anywhere. So, you kind of build it up in your head that it's a massive place - scary. I think once you have spent some time there, in the dorms and stuff, you can imagine yourself being there.' Confirming this, another focus group member added, 'I think because you are staying at the university - in their accommodation - it makes you think *is that what you would want*. Would you want to stay there, or live at home? It helps you make those kinds of decisions.' Asked whether their summer school experiences had also influenced the 'bigger decision' about going to university or not, the response from this participant was 'yes - both!'

The same assessment was also made by various members in a number of the other focus group, with one concluding that 'I think they did help. We did do a bit of work but it wasn't like work. It was about people and their attitudes, and it's seeing yourself there. Getting up

in a different environment. Knowing that mum and dad are not going to be there to cook your food and clean your clothes. You have to do your own dishes. All the stuff that you just don't think about until you are actually there.' This viewpoint was confirmed by another participant who observed that 'you can't know [what it will be like] until you have experienced it'.

8.7 SUGGESTED DEVELOPMENTS TO EXISTING INITIATIVES

8.7.1 MORE ACTIVITIES

During the second and third rounds, focus group participants discussed how the outreach initiatives they had experienced could be developed. In reflecting on a visit to a university located outside the region, some of the year 10s argued that the experience could have been enhanced with 'more hands-on activities.' The need for more interactivity also appears to have influenced the views expressed by members of the other year 10 group, who suggested that the general campus tours they had experienced on various HE visits had not proved that useful, with one participant observing that 'you can go on Google maps and look at the buildings'.

8.7.2 MORE SUBJECT-BASED PROVISION

In advocating the inclusion of 'more activities' during the kinds of university visits participants had experienced, one group of year 9s talked about the value of aligning these activities with the subject areas they were interested in. Linked to this was the request to be given a choice about 'which subjects you go to', and that would provide a taste of what taking a particular subject at HE level would be like. Exploring this further, the same group discussed the value of universities finding out their interest in advance of any visits and tailoring interventions accordingly. One suggestion for how this might be done included sending a list of options to the school so that 'we could tick the subject we are interested in and send it back'. In terms of who should take these subject taster sessions, there was general agreement that current university students should lead activities. In doing so, it was added, it would be possible to discover 'what their experiences have been' and 'what they gained from' going to university. Asked if they thought they might be a little young to be engaging in subject specific interventions, the general view was that they were not, with one

participant observing 'we had to choose the options for our future last year, so now in year 9 [why] can't we carry on talking about the future?'

A similar suggestion emerged from the year-10 focus group at the same school, with the idea of including subject-based talks. These, it was added, would be of value if they reflected what participants themselves were interested in. However, it was also considered important to include activities during these talks in order 'to engage people'. Asked who should lead these, the general consensus was that it should be 'one of the students that takes the course', since, it was added, 'if you talk to a student you can relate a little more'.

The same group was also asked what they would like to hear from such students. Responses included 'what it is like, how long will it take to learn it, how much revision do you do [and] what jobs can you get'. Regarding the latter suggestion, one participant added 'that is something that is very interesting because I like law but I want to know what I can get in terms of jobs from doing a degree in that'. There was also a general consensus amongst participants in this group that an event of this nature would also motivate them in their GCSEs. 'At the moment', one group member observed, 'I don't know what job I am going to get. I know what I like but I don't know what that will mean if I get a job but, if I knew, that would definitely motivate me more'.

8.8 WHERE SUPPORT IS REQUIRED

Focus group participants identified various gaps in the outreach interventions they had experienced. One group of year 10s expressed a desire to gain a more complete impression of what life at university would be like. Universities, it was suggested, 'show you everything that's amazing but they don't show you the other side - the more boring bits.' Elaborating, it was argued that 'they'll show you the best rooms and the best labs.' Linked to this, were concerns amongst participants across a number of groups about being able to fit in at university, alongside anxieties about the costs of pursuing a higher education.

Elsewhere, participants in one of the year-12/13 groups talked about not 'really understanding the university system'. In particular, reference was made to not knowing how to prepare a personal statement: 'I don't know how many words to write [and] what to include. I don't have an example'. In addition, one member from the same groups raised doubts about 'how to get on to' the university 'courses' that interested them. Echoing this, another participant observed, 'it's like you are missing a stepping stone between them'.

In addition, whilst a number of participants in different focus groups expressed an interest in pursuing an apprenticeship - and the prospect of being 'paid while you learn' - there was a considerable amount of uncertainty concerning the process of securing an apprenticeship, the different levels offered and the potential link with a higher education and higher-level training. However, a number of focus group members expressed an interest in knowing more about this route way.

8.9 IDEAS FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

8.9.1 SCHOOL VISITS BY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND GRADUATES

One group of year 8s argued that more universities should visit their school, and that these visitors should include students who had come from 'a similar area' to them, and who could tell them about the routes they had taken into university. Building on this line of thinking, the same groups argued that professionals - especially those in fields participants were interested in - should also be encouraged to visit the school. These guests, it was argued, should not just be from the immediate locality but further afield. In terms of what they would like to find out from these individuals, participants talked about the 'equipment they use', of gaining insights into their working lives, and of learning 'what classes they had [taken in] college and [at] university'.

A similar set of ideas was advanced by one of the year 9 groups. Here reference was made to bringing into school 'people who have recently graduated or are about to graduate', and who can 'talk about' their university experience, since, it was noted, 'they have more in-depth knowledge because they are going through it themselves'. The idea of being able to hear from - and talk to - someone who had gone through university and got into a career based on their degree was also advanced by a year 10 group. Asked what such individuals would be able to tell them that a current university student could not, reference was made to 'the experience of having a job'. In contrast, it was noted, 'the student is still studying so they would not know what the job would involve'.

8.9.2 WORKSHOPS ON WHAT UNIVERSITY STUDY WOULD BE LIKE

Although talks and presentations were referenced, workshops were also suggested by one group of year 9s as a method for delivering insights into what university would be like, including sessions that address the level of difficulty associated with HE-study, 'how much

work [will be involved] and how you do it'. Whilst current students and those who had recently graduated were highlighted as key sources of information, reference was also made to university teachers who could provide insight into what university study would require.

8.9.3 OPPORTUNITIES TO SHADOW A STUDENT

In discussing activities that could provide a more realistic insights into university life, one group of year 10s expressed an interest in university visits that enabled them to encounter current students, including providing an opportunity to 'go into a lab, ask questions' and be shown 'students working'. Exploring this idea further, there was considerable support for being able to shadow a student for a day, especially, it was noted, where the student is studying a subject that you are interested in. In doing so, it was observed, 'you would know what you're up against and what you need for that subject'.

8.9.4 HEARING FROM GROUPS OF UNDERGRADUATES ABOUT THE SUPPORT AVAILABLE AT UNIVERSITY

Year 10s also discussed the kinds of intervention that would help overcome their concerns about fitting in at university. These included events that would enable them to hear from small 'groups of people who are either second or third year' undergraduates, and 'who [could] tell [us] how it is, [and] how they felt when they first started' at university. They could also offer insights into the range of support services available, including help 'if you're having problems at home', along with support for those with 'disabilities [and] mental health issues'. Explaining the need for such insights, reference was made to the fact that 'whilst at school you have your parents and friends', you would 'probably not have' their support 'as much' should you go to university. Therefore, there was a need to know whether there would be 'someone to speak to' should support be needed.

8.9.5 SEEING THE ACCOMMODATION AVAILABLE AND ADDRESSING THE OVERALL COSTS OF STUDY

In reflecting on a previous university visit, one group of year 10 participants noted that they had not seen the accommodation but would like the opportunity to do so. Here one focus group member observed that 'if you are going to go to a university that is quite a far way from where you live,' there will be a need to know 'where you are going to live and how

much will that cost'. In this respect, it was added that it would also be helpful to hear from a student who is living there.

In addition, members of the same group expressed a desire to know more about the costs of study. One participant commented that 'I have friends who want to go to university but are worried about the money side of it, so if you cleared that up people would be able to make their minds up'. Asked what they would like to know in this respect, reference was made to the 'pay back arrangement and clarification on the amount you would need to earn 'before you [start to] pay it back'. In addition, and in terms of the opportunity costs of HE-study, there was a need for support in determining whether 'university is definitely what you want to do', and whether it will enable you to 'get a better job that offers more money'. This was important to ascertain since, it was argued, it will require full 'commitment' and sacrificing the chance of getting a 'full-time job'.

8.9.6 GUIDES ON THE APPLICATION PROCESS

In terms of the application process, members in one of the year-12/13 groups talked about the value of being provided with a 'step-by-step guide'. Underpinning this point, one participant added: 'I feel that they expect you to know the basic stuff and they assume it's common knowledge but it is not to people who have never done it before'.

8.9.7 INCREASING THE BREADTH AND DEPTH OF OUTREACH SUPPORT

More generally, one group of year 10 students argued for the need to broadening the range of young people offered outreach support. In particular, reference was made to including those who 'aren't so well behaved. If they could see what it's like, and if they enjoyed the university scene more and felt comfortable there, it would inspire them to improve their grades and try and push themselves'. Similar views were expressed by a group of year 11s, who argued that outreach activities should also engage with those from the 'lower sets.' We, it was agreed, are 'the ones most likely to go on university visits. Most of us did the Brilliant Club [but] the bottom sets got none of this'.

Whilst they had been on 'loads of trips' during years 7 and 8, year 10s at the other case study school, observed that they had been on relatively few since. This was viewed as a disappointment, with one participant noting that 'I like going on university trips and seeing the universities because I want to go to university'. The opportunity to visit universities in

their later school years was also viewed as valuable since ‘we are now closer to the time when you will be leaving school so it is more important to show me now because I will take it more seriously.’ Another participant added that ‘year 10 and 11 are the most important years and you are going to need to know what university is like if you want to go there after college!’

Recommendation 16

Recognise the limitations of the tactics developed by learners in helping them prepare for the transition to higher-level study and, in particular, the questions and uncertainties that are likely to remain, including in terms of:

- The reality of HE-level study and what life at university will be like
- The application process (including preparation of personal statements)
- The different route ways into HE-level study (including the work-based pathway).

Consider the development of initiatives and interventions capable of addressing these concerns and gaps in understanding, including:

- A step-by-step guide to the university application process
- School visits by current undergraduates (including those from similar backgrounds to the school students) in order to provide insights into the routes taken and the different pathways available
- School visits by recent graduates who can discuss the benefits of HE-level study
- Workshops taken by HE tutors that provide an overview of what HE study will involve in subjects of interest to learners
- Panel discussions with new undergraduates that focus on the university transition experience, and that highlight the academic, pastoral and other support available
- The opportunity to shadow a university student taking a subject of interest and that will afford an insight into a *typical* undergraduate day
- Visits to university halls of residence and guidance on the costs of travelling to and living at university

Also explore the opportunity to offer outreach interventions - including those judged to have been particularly effective (such as summer schools and other residential events) - to a

wider cohort of learners, including (GCSE) boarder-line students and older learners who have yet to decide on their post-18 destinations.

9 PARTICIPANTS' REFLECTIONS ON THE FOCUS GROUP EXPERIENCE

During the closing stages of the final round of discussions participants were provide with an opportunity to review their focus group experiences. In developing the methodology for this study, the emphasis had been on identifying a longitudinal approach that would facilitate the gathering of in-depth insights into young people's HE awareness and their post-16 as well as post-18 motivations and intentions. Consequently, little initial consideration had been given to the benefits that might arise for participants in engaging in three rounds of facilitated discussion with a group of their peers. However, the feedback received during the third round suggested that the experience had been a positive and beneficial one for many. These findings accord with Kitzinger and Barbour (1998) assessment that focus groups have the capacity to influence participants' thinking and understanding through interacting with others. Similarly, quoting Kitzinger (1995), Gibbs (1997, n.p.) argues that 'interaction enables participants to ask questions of each other and to re-evaluate and reconsider their own understandings of their specific experiences.'

9.1 ENJOYABLE AND INTERESTING

First in this respect participants commented on having enjoyed the discussions. Those from one of the year 11 groups talked about finding the conversations interesting; with one participant adding 'I like debating things so it's been quite good'. Similarly, members from one of the year-12/13 groups spoke about having 'definitely enjoyed' the process, noting that discussions had addressed 'interesting topics that we don't usually talk about'. Asked how they would describe the experience, one group of year 10s talked about the discussions being 'very open', and commented on feeling that 'we could just talk. It is not like a test. There is no pressure, [its] just relaxed'. Asked what they would say about the experience to others, members from one of the year 9 groups offered the advice of 'just be yourselves and be open'.

9.2 USEFUL AND THOUGHT PROVOKING

Participants also confirmed the usefulness of the discussions. One year-9 focus group member observed that 'in class I keep quiet' but the sessions 'make me speak more'. Likewise, one year-10 participant commented that 'I have enjoyed it because it has helped me talk about the future', whilst another observed that: 'I have thought about things I

probably would not have thought about'. Also, from the same group came the comment that 'you have asked questions about university that probably would not have crossed my mind and it has made me question what I want to do, and what questions I should be asking'.

Those from the other year 10 group also commented on the value of the discussions. The conversations, it was observed, have 'allow[ed] us to express what [we] think about university and different things because not many teachers ask you what you think or what you want to do in the future'. Similarly, those in one of the year 11 groups described how it was 'good to know other peoples' opinions on stuff'. Likewise, members of a year 12 and 13 group noted that 'it is more that we are asked our opinions instead of teachers saying oh write down what you don't like about us and we will try and fix it, and you don't hear - it is not a two-way discussion. Whereas (here) we give our opinions and they are heard and you reply back.'

9.3 INFLUENCING VIEWS

In terms of the possible impact of the discussions, one year-10 participant observed that 'before' attending the focus groups 'I was, like, I don't know what to do - I don't know if I want to go to university. After this, it has given me an option. If I want to go, this is what it would be.' Various participants also commented upon the longer-term value of the discussions. Having three sessions, one year 10 noted, provided an opportunity to 'say how [our] opinion[s] about university [have] changed'. This participant then confirmed that over the course of the three conversations their views 'may have changed a bit', whilst another observed that 'mine have got stronger'. Similarly, a member of one of the year 11 groups noted that the discussions have 'opened my eyes to what I need to do myself', adding that 'how other people see things broadens my horizons'.

Recommendation 17

Consider the establishment of regular peer-based discussion groups comprising NCOP students, that:

- Provide an opportunity to identify and share tactics that can support progression

- Have the potential to explore underlying motivations and mindsets
- Offer insights into the effectiveness of current support practices and interventions
- Inform the development of new support initiatives.

10 DISCUSSION

This chapter seeks to place the findings from this study into wider context. It also considers how these findings could be used to facilitate the work of outreach practitioners and others involved in supporting the progression of learners from educationally disadvantaged areas.

10.1 INTERMEDIATE STEPS ON THE LEARNER JOURNEY AND THE CHALLENGES THESE CAN PRESENT

Arguably, the evidence considered in the previous chapters lends support to the claim made in a number of recent studies that young people need to negotiate various intermediate steps if they are to progress to university, or at least have the option of doing so. Moreover, the findings confirm suggestions that these steps can constitute challenges - even barriers - to participation, especially for those from families and localities where progression to higher-level study is a less familiar route to take. However, what those interviewed for this study describe and, more pertinently, what the learners who participated in the discussion groups voiced, adds to our understanding of the nature of these challenges.

Given the study's focus on students in school years 8 to 13, the first of set of challenges are associated with the transition to - and success with - GCSEs. In this respect, existing studies have shown a link between social class and level-2 attainment. Consistent with these findings, the practitioners interviewed talked about young people from the areas they were familiar with coming from families that want the best for them but may lack a belief in the education system and what it is capable of delivering. In a number of instances - and in accordance with the practitioner perspective - some of the learners surveyed also questioned the relevance of education. However, this tended to relate to the role of post-compulsory education, given the careers they had in mind. More widely, for those approaching the start of their GCSEs the challenge was of a more immediate and practical nature. In particular, concerns were raised about an anticipated increase in workloads, including the prospect of more homework. Those who had embarked upon their GCSEs confirmed this assessment, whilst reference was also made to a growing focus on revision, tests and examinations.

The next step of the learner journey covered in this investigation concerned the transition to level 3 study. Whilst GCSE outcomes are likely to impact on level 3 success, evidence also indicates that those from under-represented backgrounds are less likely to complete their advanced level studies and gain high grades. In confirming that this next step could also represent a challenge, the practitioners interviewed discussed families where uncertainties over the value and need for advanced level education exist. They also talked about the less well-documented challenge - and one facing the learners surveyed for this study - of moving institutions to pursue their post-16 options. Accordingly, whilst anxieties were expressed over what level 3 study would demand, a greater concern for the study's focus group participants related to the transition to college. Here discussion revolved around encountering and attempting to adjust to an unfamiliar environment and culture, including tutors who they would not know and who, in turn, would not know them. Coupled with this were concerns about the level of support that might be available and of coping with a degree of autonomy they were unused to.

For those who had managed the transition to level 3 study and college, the next potential step related to post-18 options and the possibility of progressing to university. Whilst numerous studies have confirmed that young people from the types of areas featured in this study are less likely to opt for HE, the practitioners interviewed added further detail. Prominent in their accounts was the influence of parents who do not possess high-level skills and who, consequently, would be unable to offer examples of the benefits of HE and whose networks may not include those with university experience. In addition, reference was made to local research highlighting a lack of confidence amongst year 13 students in their academic abilities to pursue higher-level study.

The insights offered by focus group participants confirmed a number of these perceptions, including the implications of a lack of parental experience and familial insight into post-16 and post-18 education. Perhaps reflecting this background, various negative perceptions of what higher-level study would entail were voiced, especially amongst younger focus group members. These included the view that it would resemble school, involve passive and uninteresting study ('long boring lectures'), and require a considerable amount of dedication. In addition, participants talked about having to rely on oneself and expressed reservations about their capacity to fit in socially. For older participants concerns were also expressed about being good enough to study at higher level, whilst across all year groups the issue of the cost and expense (beyond fees) of the HE option were also raised.

10.2 MOTIVATIONS

However, off-setting the challenges and concerns associated with each of these steps, focus group participants described a set of rather more positive perceptions about their next steps, and their motivations for making a success of the transition. Prominent amongst those related to the move to GCSEs was the opportunity to select the subjects to be studied. In addition, across a number of different year groups reference was made to the enhanced employment prospects that would arise from doing well in their GCSEs, with older year groups also commenting on the possibilities for a 'better lifestyle', and that good grades would help them in accessing college and university.

Turning to motivations for succeeding in the transition to post-16 study, the theme of pursuing subjects of interest was also identified. In addition, reference was made to success at advanced level helping to shape future opportunities, including going on to university. For those representing the first in their family to pursue post-16 study, there was also a sense of making their parents proud and justifying the time and work their teachers had committed to their success.

In terms of the transition to college, participants spoke about the greater freedom associated with this option, and of being able to express themselves in what was judged to be a less rule-bound setting. In contrast, with their uniforms and 9-3 timetables, school were seen as more 'conforming' institutions. In addition, colleges were considered to offer a wider range of courses and present an opportunity to meet new people. College was also perceived as representing a 'middle step' between school and work/university, by introducing students to new learning techniques and requiring them to be more self-reliant.

Finally, a range of motivators in pursuing higher-level study emerged during focus group discussions. Although there were a number of common themes to these conversations across the different year groups, what was emphasised did alter by age. Whilst younger year groups concentrated on the improved job prospects (years 8, 9 and 10) and enhanced CVs (9 and 10) associated with gaining a higher-level qualification, their older counterparts (year 11s) discussed the opportunity to broaden their learning and explore career options. Moreover, older year groups emphasised the chance to meet those who shared the same subject interests as them, to encounter different cultures and be provided with an experience that would build levels of confidence (12 and 13s).

10.3 MINDSET AND TACTICS

Although they came from different year groups and two separate institutions, there was a considerable level of consistency amongst focus group participants in the mindsets they judged necessary for negotiating their next educational steps and in succeeding at these new levels. Moreover, what they describe chimes with the work of Gulati and King (2009), who suggest that those who cope with educational transitions have a strong sense of wellbeing and confidence to deal with change. Similarly, Harrison et al. (2018) discuss the potential role of self-confidence and self-efficacy (a belief in one's ability to achieve something). For those about to embark on their GCSEs, or who had recently commenced them, reference was made to a capacity to preserve ('to keep on top of everything', including homework), along with determination ('to keep pushing yourself and stick to it') and resilience (a 'believe in yourself' and an ability to 'not be put off or distracted by others').

Those reflecting on the transition to advanced-level study described a comparable mindset. Here reference was made to determination and the capacity to learn from one's mistakes. Similarly, the move to college required the ability to adapt and exercise patience, given the time that might be required to familiarise oneself with the new environment. Finally, those intending to progress to HE talked about the need to apply themselves, including in conducting their own research into what HE could offer.

However, arguably the focus group findings go further than some other studies have done, by exploring how this mindset manifested itself in a range of self-regulated and often independently devised tactics and behaviours for managing these transitions and improving participants' prospects of success at the next level. In this respect, the findings align with the NERUPI framework, notably as it relates to skills capital (Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2015). Although it can be noted that this framework focuses on the acquisition of HE-related skills, rather than those that can help learners negotiate their more immediate educational steps.

For each transition point, similar themes emerged, although there was also evidence of growing levels of sophistication related to age and the stage on the learner journey participants had reached. First in this respect was the value of engaging with teachers. For year 8s contemplating their next school year and the start of GCSEs, this included listening to and working with teachers. Similarly year 9s talked about the importance of 'actively

listening’ to their teacher, who, it was observed, were there to guide you, whilst by year 11 participants were discussing the value of engaging in after-school classes and taking advantage of the extra help teachers offered. In making a successful transition to post-16 study, older participants discussed the value of ‘talking to teachers’ and of ‘working with’ them, whilst it was observed that the move to college could be supported by making ‘the effort to engage with teachers’ who would be new to them.

Another tactic identified across the different year groups concerned the importance of gaining subject knowledge and insight. Here younger learners (in year 9) talked about seeking their ‘teachers’ advice’, and of engaging in extra-curricular clubs (something also advocated by Cummings et al. 2012, in helping to ‘close the attainment gap’). Similarly, older (year 11) learners discussed possessing as well as cultivating subject interests, whilst those who had moved onto level 3 study emphasised the value of developing subject knowledge though being prepared to read widely.

TABLE 4: REVISION TACTICS DISCUSSED BY DIFFERENT COHORTS OF FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS

Year 10s	Y11s (first round)	Y11s (later rounds)	Y12s and 13s
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use past papers • Incorporate regular breaks into revision 			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognising learning styles 		
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-going revision 	
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify methods that best suit the individual
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning revision • Recognising/work with marking schemes

Effective time management was also considered across the different year groups as a valuable skill and tactic to adopt. For year 10s, this involved compiling schedules of work, whilst for year 12s and 13s it was about setting time aside to have breaks and recognising the risks of 'burn out. Similarly, reference was made to the effective use of free time. Finally, a range of tactics was described to support classroom study. These included 'note taking' (year 9s and 10)' and the importance of keeping records up to date (Y11s), whilst older learners discussed the value of developing effective approaches to writing, including the need plan and structure answers, use subject-specific terminology and elaborate on theories. Similarly, revision and recall techniques were discussed across the various year groups and, as illustrated in Table 4, there was evidence of an increasing level of sophistication in how these were deployed.

10.4 ASSESSMENT OF SUPPORT RECEIVED, IDEAS FOR DEVELOPMENT OF EXISTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR ADDITIONAL SUPPORT

In addition, the same conversations provided insights into the support learners had engaged with to assist them in taking their next educational steps and succeeding at these new levels. Their ideas on how this support could be enhanced and complemented by additional interventions were also explored. It can be noted in this regard that in many cases learners were calling for additional support that would help to develop and enhance the effectiveness of their own tactics.

10.4.1 TRANSITION TO AND SUCCESS AT GCSEs

Year 8s described how support comprised information sessions about their approaching GCSEs. Whilst helpful, more was judged to be needed in terms of informing them about how to prepare for GCSEs, what the subjects would cover, what teachers would expect from them, and what they would need to do to secure good grades. Further questions included how to cope with homework and manage one's time and workload, and how to revise effectively. The initiatives advocated for addressing these knowledge gaps and concerns included interactive revision workshops for year 10s, as well as opportunities to talk with those who had been successful at their GCSEs. This latter suggestion, it can be noted, chimes with the recommendations reported in various other studies about the value of 'transition

activities involving older pupils' as 'coaches, guides' and mentors (Mentoring and Befriending Foundation, 2010; Cummings et al. 2012). Given the feedback received by participants on their focus group experience, it can also be suggested that regular peer-based discussion groups may also have a role to play in helping to identify, share and develop tactics that can support progression. The value of 'skills developed within peer education' is also recognised by Cummings et al. (2012).

10.4.2 TRANSITION TO AND SUCCESS AT LEVEL 3

Older learners described the types of support they had received in helping them with the transition to level 3 study. These included A-level induction days and the provision of refresher booklets (summarising what had been covered in the GCSE syllabus). However, discussion also identified various gaps in their knowledge and continued concerns, especially regarding what A-level study would demand. Accordingly, participants talked about the benefits of providing guidance to year 11s on where their GCSEs could lead, along with insight into the A-level syllabus in those subjects they had an interest in pursuing at level 3. In addition, reference was made to activities that would familiarise them with the research skills required for the more independent approach that advanced levels courses demanded, along with the provision of revision guides that would help them develop techniques for retaining the detailed information associated with this level of study.

Whilst the role of careers tutors was praised as an important intervention in preparing learners for the post-16 transition associated with a change of educational institution, there was a general consensus in favour of earlier guidance. This was called for in order to inform learners about the courses local colleges offered and their entry requirements, as well as equipping them with an understanding of the differences between sixth form and college-based study, and practical insights on travelling to these institutions. In terms of how this information might be delivered, reference was made to assemblies taken by colleges and of colleges attending school-hosted careers fairs. Participants also discussed the value of visiting the local colleges they were interested in attending, and of being given an opportunity to experience college life. Moreover, there was general agreement that a key source of information should be current students, since they would be able to provide insights into what it would be like to go to college. Amongst these students, it was argued, should be those who had recently completed their college courses and could talk about what it had taken to succeed.

Turning finally to the transition to HE-level study, participants talked about a range of interventions they had received. These included campus visits, presentations in school and skill-based interventions, as well as summer schools and other residential events. Generally, participants' assessment of these interventions was very favourable. Arguably, the fact that they were able to recall a number of these in some detail, and after the passage of some months if not years, adds to the validity of their assessments. Moreover, in a number of instances reference was made to these events having an enduring impact, in terms of the academic skills they had acquired, and the knowledge and insight into university life and study they had gained. Regarding the latter, summer schools received particular praise given the immersive experience they offer and their capacity for helping students imagine themselves in a university environment. However, participants still identified gaps in their knowledge and talked about continued concerns, notably in terms of the reality of HE study and living at university, and how to apply for a university place and prepare a personal statement. In addition, there was a limited appreciation of 'alternative' routes into higher-level training, including the work-based pathway.

In response, a number of suggestions were made for activities that could complement existing interventions. These included a step-by-step guide to the university application process and school visits by current university students - preferably those who had come from comparable backgrounds - and who could inform learners about the routes they have taken. The value of hearing from recent graduates was also highlighted, since they could discuss the benefits of HE. In addition, reference was made to the provision of workshops facilitated by HE tutors that could provide an overview of what HE study would involve, and panel discussions with first and second year undergraduates that would focus on their experience of moving to university and afford insights into the support services provided to new students.

Participants also talked about the chance to shadow a university student, in order to gain an insight into the typical day of an undergraduate studying a subject they were interested in. They also expressed a desire to see what university accommodation would be like and to be provided with insights into the costs of travelling to and living at university. Finally, some of the groups alluded to the value of offering outreach interventions to a greater number of

their peers, including those outside the ‘top sets’, and to older students who had yet to decide on their post-18 destinations.

Whilst these findings help to provide practitioners with a greater insight into the motives and behaviours of those they seek to support, it can be argued that they have the potential to also be of a more practical value, in terms of informing existing outreach practices and in guiding the development of new initiatives. Table 5 summarises how these findings could be harnessed, whilst Chapter 5 translates these broad suggestions into a set of more detailed recommendations.

TABLE 5: APPLICATION OF THE STUDY’S KEY FINDINGS

Themes	Outreach possibilities
Challenges to and concerns with next steps progression	Viewpoints that should be acknowledged and addressed
Positive perspectives on next steps progression	Drivers to be recognised and messages that can be utilised
Learner-developed tactics for managing transition and succeeding at the next level	Initiatives that communicate these tactics and help to foster them in others
The case for next steps support - beyond self-regulated tactics	Arguments to acknowledge when promoting initiatives
Review of support received and assessment of its effectiveness	Insights to be considered when evaluating and seeking to enhance current provision
Ideas for additional support and the purpose this would serve	Ideas to recognise in the development of new initiatives.

10.5 APPLICATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Chapter 4 discusses how the structure adopted in each of the three main sections of this report (and associated with each of the identified steps in the learner journey), conforms to a logic model. Accordingly, learner's perceptions about their next steps will, it is argued, shape and inform their motivations, which, in turn, will determine - or at least influence - the self-regulated tactics they adopt. Their experience of these tactics will then guide their engagement with and views on the support available to them. It will also shape their ideas for additional support aimed at addressing remaining gaps in their understanding and any enduring concerns they may have.

Whilst helping to highlight the different themes explored by this study, this model also draws attention to how these separate components are interlinked. In this respect, such models tend to be based on the 'if/then' principle. The application of this concept to the subject of this report is outlined in Table 6.

TABLE 6: ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND THE LOGIC FRAMEWORK USED IN THE STUDY

- If we address **perceptions** of next steps, **then** we can inform and influence (educational) **motivations**
- If we address perceptions and inform **motivations**, **then** we can influence the take up and deployment of (self-regulated) **tactics**
- If we address perceptions, inform motivations, and facilitate the take up of **tactics**, **then** we can influence engagement in the types of (school-based and outreach associated) **support** available
- If we address perceptions, inform motivations, facilitate take up of tactics, and engagement in support, **then** we can influence next step progression
- If next step progression can be influenced, **then** the potential to access HE can be enhanced.

Arguably, Table 6 highlights the importance of developing practices and interventions that address each of these components, rather than focusing on those that are just concerned with one aspect, such as modifying perceptions or enhancing existing forms of support. The inter-dependent nature of these components can also be highlighted by presenting them as a *progression ladder* (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2: PROGRESSION LADDER



The ladder analogy also helps in communicating the idea that these phases should be viewed as a set of consecutive steps, each of which should be supported. In other words, there is a need to address perceptions in order to influence motivations. Similarly, without suitable levels of motivation, young people are less likely to adopt and develop the kinds of self-regulated tactics that can help with the transition to - and success at - their next educational level. In turn, an awareness of these tactics and their imitations can help to encourage learners to engage with and benefit from current support schemes, as well as new initiatives designed to address remaining gaps and concerns.

11 REFLECTIONS

Whilst comparatively new and untested in the field of WP research, the approach adopted in this study proved capable of generating a wealth of insights into the triggers and timings of the educational decision-making process experienced by a group of young people whose backgrounds mean that progression to university is not necessarily an anticipated or expected outcome. In particular, the approach provided an opportunity to return to key topics and explore them in greater detail. The lapse of time between focus group meetings also enabled questions and lines of enquiry to be informed by earlier discussions. Less expectedly, feedback from participants confirmed the impression I was gathering as the researcher, that the learners involved were not only engaging with the process but that they found the opportunity to explore their ideas and thinking an enjoyable and beneficial experience.

However - and almost inevitably - there are limitations with such research. As originally devised, there was a noticeable gap in the range of learner perspectives being gathered, which became apparent as the research progressed. This concerned the viewpoints of those who at the start of the investigation were in their second year of level 3 study. By the final round of focus group discussions, many of these participants had left their sixth form or college. Amongst them were those whose stated intention was to embark on undergraduate programmes in the autumn of 2018. In response, a supplementary study is now underway to gather the insights and experiences of some of these individuals, as well as their reflections on the key influences that determined their progression to HE. From a research perspective, this represents a challenging investigation to conduct, given that these young people are likely to have gone onto study at range of institutions, potentially across the UK. However, the intended methodology should, it is hoped, overcome these difficulties.

In addition, as discussions with participants progressed, the influence and potential impact of one particular group of individuals became increasingly apparent: that of the teachers and tutors they engaged with on an almost daily basis. Their role, in terms of next steps progression in general and HE participation in particular, has not been widely explored in WP research. Yet, focus group discussions hinted at its possible significance. As a consequence, a second study is now underway that will draw on the feedback gathered

from learners during the third set of discussions, as well as the evidence collected during interviews with key teaching contacts in each of the case study institutions.

Finally, in preparing this report a further limitation with the approach adopted has become apparent, as has a potential line of enquiry capable of addressing it and helping to further validate, underpin and, potentially, enhance this study's findings. The 10-month time frame dealt with in this investigation (the initial set of focus group discussions were held between December 2017 and early February 2018, with the third round taking place in October 2018) represents a fairly short period in which to capture any notable change in participants' views and intentions. Accordingly, where they did recognise a change in their perspectives, participants talked in terms of their views having 'changed a bit', or their intentions having become more definite.

Consequently, there would be value in running a fourth round of focus group conversations with the same sets of participants. This final round could be conducted in the autumn of 2019. If it were to be instituted, it would provide an opportunity to capture the views and intentions of the same group of NCOP students after two years of schooling and, potentially, having experienced two full cycles of outreach provision. A discussion that involves recalling the nature of their original conversations would help promote reflection on how and why their views have changed. It would also afford a chance to explore some additional questions associated with the self-regulated tactics described by these young people, including where these originated from, how they have developed over the period that the focus groups have run, and what they consider to be the most effective methods of sharing and implementing them.

Moreover, this approach has the capability of further engaging the 'learner voice' by providing participants with an opportunity to assess the potential value of the recommendations detailed in this report. Along comparable lines, returning to the teaching professionals and outreach practitioners who were interviewed at the study's inception would afford a chance to explore how the same recommendations might be translated into practical measures.

Recommendation 18

The 10-month time frame adopted in this study places limits on its ability to capture significant changes in the views and intentions of participants. Consequently, consider the option of running a fourth round of discussions with the same groups of young people who took part in the first three sets of conversations. These could be held in the autumn of 2019 and would have the potential to:

- Capture the views and ambitions of these NCOP students after two years of schooling and having experienced two full cycles of outreach activity
- Harness the 'learner voice', by providing participants with an opportunity to assess the value - and relevance - of the recommendations detailed in this report
- Further explore the self-help tactics described by these young people (including where these tactics originated from, how they were developed, and what they consider to be the most effective methods for sharing them).
- Consider returning to the teaching professionals and outreach practitioners interviewed at the start of this project, with the aim of exploring how the recommendations made in this report might be translated into practical measures.

12 CONCLUSIONS

Whilst more young people from under-represented backgrounds are now progressing to university, they continue to be less likely to do so than their more privileged counterparts. Various measures of disadvantage can be used to attest to these patterns of progression, including the area-based measures that underpin much of the NCOP programme. For outreach practitioners, the challenge continues to be in seeking to address these differentials in HE participation. A greater understanding of the educational experiences and the challenges to progression faced by these young people can, potentially, boost the effectiveness of the access interventions overseen by these practitioners.

At its core, this study attempts to contribute to this understanding by adopting a comparatively under-utilised longitudinal perspective. This involved surveying over a 10 month period a sample of NCOP students from school years 8 through to 13 at three case study institutions. In doing so, the approach acknowledges the sector's increasing focus on *long-range outreach*, as well as the concept of the learner journey and, crucially, the idea that learners face a series of key transition points that need to be negotiated if progression to HE is to be an option. It can also be noted that this perspective aligns with the NERUPI framework for outreach engagement (which distinguishes between the skills and attributes needed in years 8 and 9, from those required in years 10 and 11, and those that will help secure success in years 12 and 13. See Society for Research into Higher Education, 2019), as well as the older Aimhigher framework (Action on Access, 2008).

Consistent with these models, this study focuses on three key transition points for the learners it surveys: the move to GCSEs, the step up to level 3 study, and the transition associated with HE progression (see Raven, 2018c). In its formulation, this study also owes much to the findings of the *Bucking the Trend* project, in which participants talked about key turning points in their educational journeys to HE-level study, and in which reference was often made to influential experiences and events dating back to the early years of their secondary schooling, as well as the impact - sometimes of a reinforcing nature - of subsequent events (Raven 2017).

A basic framework was used to order the wealth of qualitative evidence gathered during the investigation for this report. This evidence principally derived from the series of focus group

discussions conducted with NCOP learners. It was also supported by semi-structured interviews with local outreach practitioners and teaching professionals. For each of the three transition points, consideration was first given to the nature of the challenge, as outlined in the literature and commented upon by the interviewees who were able to describe the local nature and complexity of the challenge. The concerns of the learners surveyed were then considered, as were their more positive perspectives on transition. Attention then turned to the mindsets guiding these viewpoints and informing the self-regulated tactics many of these students had developed to facilitate their transition and help secure their success at this new level. The penultimate component in each of the main sections explored participants' views on the case for support and their assessment of the support currently available, including their suggestions for how this could be enhanced. Finally, their ideas were gathered for additional support that would be capable of addressing the remaining gaps in their knowledge and any continued concerns they might have about their next educational steps.

The fact that, in many instances, a high degree of consistency was found in the views expressed and the insights offered by learners across the three case study institutions, and between different year groups, adds to the robustness and validity in which these findings can be held. From an outreach perspective (and as summarised in Table 12.2), these findings have the potential to be utilised in a number of ways. The concerns associated with each of the transitions should be acknowledged when engaging with different year groups and in considering the objectives of particular interventions, whilst the more positive viewpoints - and the motivations that underpin them - represent messages that can help to counter the concerns raised. Similarly, focus group participants' assessment of current provision and suggestions for its improvement are worth acknowledging when reviewing existing initiatives, whilst their ideas for new ways to facilitate their progression - and that of their peers - should help to inform new interventions.

Meanwhile, the case made by these young people for support underpins the central role and importance of outreach, and the value of practitioners working in tandem with teaching professionals. However, perhaps most intriguingly from a practitioner as well as researcher perspective are the self-regulated tactics focus group participants discussed, and of exploring how these insights could be harnessed. In one respect, these might be considered of limited consequence in terms of interventions, since they are learner-initiated responses. However, countering this is the view that interventions could be developed to help support

the nurturing of these tactics. The case for this latter viewpoint is, arguably, strengthened by the knowledge that whilst focus group participants came from the wider body of NCOP students found in their respective schools, by volunteering to participate in the discussions they could be considered amongst the most engaged and - given the longitudinal nature of the study - the most committed of their cohort. Consequently, it seems reasonable to assume that not all of their peers will have developed the same sets of tactics, or considered such responses worthwhile; certainly, that is, if they harbour concerns over the value of education in general and higher education in particular.

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