

Reassurance and Revelation

A case study into the impact of sustained engagement

Introduction

On 14 March 2023 the Higher Horizons Evaluation and Evidence Manager, James Elliott, and the Higher Horizons Schools Project Officer based at the Chester University hub, Lucy Nash, ran a focus group at a target school to gain insight into what Higher Horizons had achieved working with learners over the past year, what we could learn from them, and what they needed going forward.

All the learners in the group were in Year 10, in the first year of their GCSE's, and came from areas identified by the Office for Students as having low progression rates to university education. The eight learners who participated are tracked on the EMWPREP database. All are from Uni Connect wards, are from TUNDRA LSOA quintile 1, and POLAR 4 quintiles 1 and 2.

The school itself is an 11-16 mixed secondary school with academy status. It is situated in Cheshire, a county characterised by extremes in wealth with towns such as Knutsford, Prestbury, and Alderley Edge, popular with wealthy footballers and Manchester commuters, sitting alongside towns such as Crewe, Winsford and Warrington, where industrial decline and unemployment are more pronounced. According to the Office of National Statistics the school is in a town where six wards are ranked in the top 20% most deprived in England, four of which are Decile 1, placing them in the top 10%.¹

What we did

As part of the Government-funded Uni Connect programme, Higher Horizons provides impartial HE outreach. It does so with the aim of reducing the gap in HE enrolment between learners who come from the most advantaged and least advantaged quintiles of the population. However, in effecting change it does so in the knowledge that such engagement needs to be sustained and needs to address the root problems of the gap. In the Partnership's progression framework it identifies three key barriers, restrictions or contributory problems that need addressing to narrow the gap;

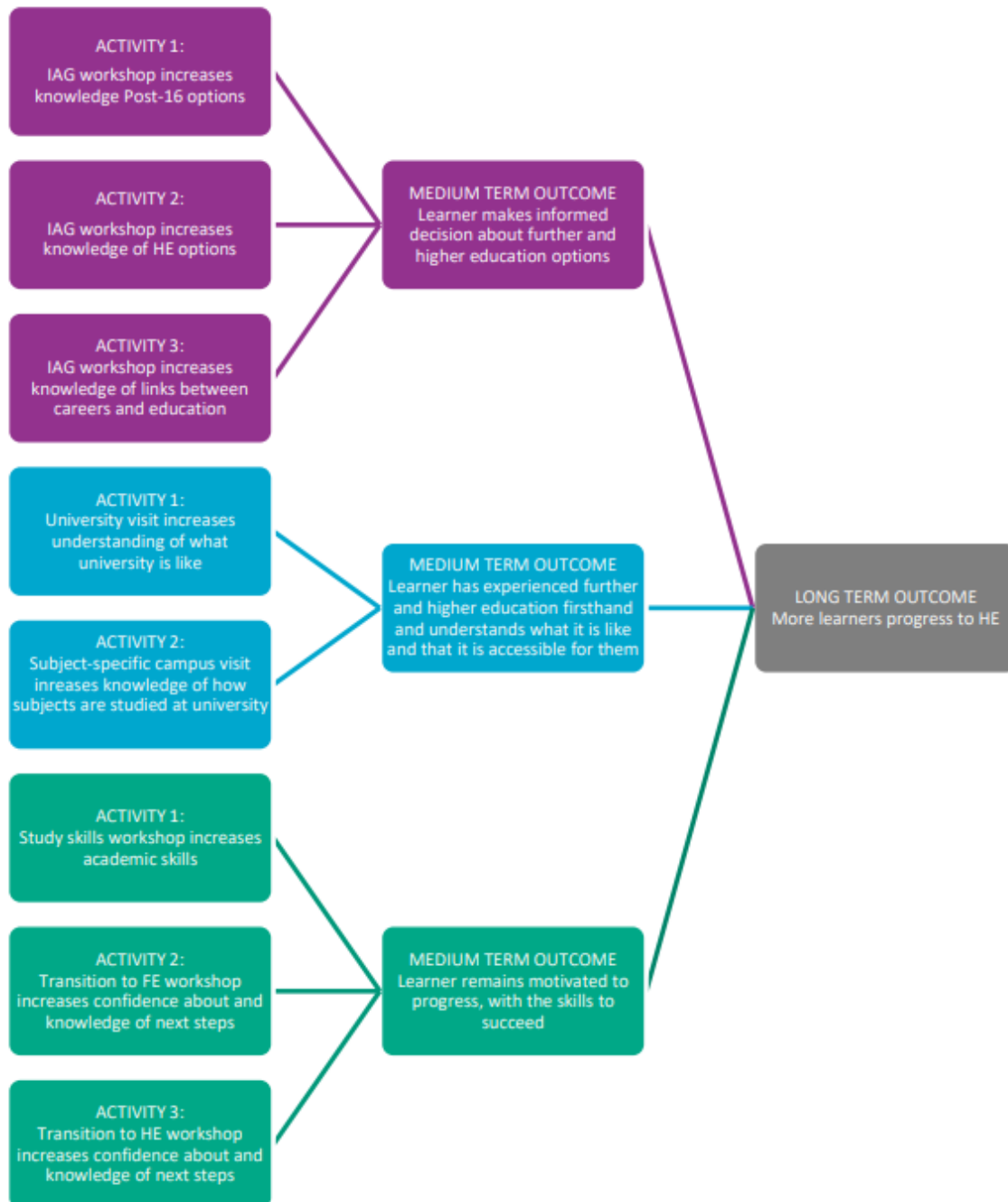
- i) Restricted access to impartial, accurate and up-to-date information on higher education
- ii) Restricted access to experience and exposure to higher education (e.g. campuses, accommodation, lecture theatres, societies, sports, etc.)
- iii) Restricted access to the necessary skills to navigate the transition between secondary school and higher education

The Partnership designs and delivers activities that are categorised according to these root problems, short-hand labelled as INFORM activities (e.g. IAG), EXPERIENCE activities (e.g. campus visits), and ENABLE activities (e.g. master classes, subject days, revision sessions, etc.).

¹ *Inequality & Deprivation, The State of the Borough*, Cheshire West & Chester Council, <https://www.cheshirewestandchester.gov.uk/your-council/key-statistics-and-data/state-of-the-borough/inequality-and-deprivation> [Accessed 21 March 2023]

The provision is built on the premise that if learners are engaged with these different types of activities over a long period then they will have the information, the experience and the skills needed to make effective decisions and effective transitions to HE.

Fig. 1 captures what the Progression Framework of activities is meant to achieve. The purple boxes are INFORM, the blue EXPERIENCE, and the green are ENABLE, presenting a visual explanation of how these themes and their activities come together to make a learner who is statistically unlikely to apply to HE, more 'HE-ready'.



The following activities, stretching across the three themes, were provided by Higher Horizons for these learners between March 2022 and March 2023:

EMWPEP code	Name of activity	Date	Description	Theme
81953	History and Archaeology Day	Mar-22	A subject themed day on a university campus	EXPERIENCE
84322	University of Chester campus visit	Apr-22	A general introduction to and tour of a university campus	EXPERIENCE
85038	Creative Campus Day	Jun-22	Studying certain type of subject in a university setting	INFORM
85286	Policing and Forensics Day	Jun-22	A subject themed day on a university campus	EXPERIENCE
85955	Business Mentors Day	Jul-22	A careers orientated workshop focused on the development of employability skills	ENABLE
88229	Student Finance Talk	Dec-22	Information, advice and guidance on financing and budgeting for university	INFORM
88729	Campus visit - Subject specific taster day	Jan-23	Studying certain subjects in a university setting	ENABLE
87339, 87340, 87341, 87768, 87769, 87770, 87774,	Academic Programme	Jan-Mar 2023	Skills building on researching, structuring and writing essays and securing feedback from an academic	ENABLE

The eight participants of this focus group attended at least three of these programmes with contact hours ranging from 12 hours to 40.

In March it was agreed with the school's aspiration lead to arrange a focus group that would help assess the impact of Higher Horizons outreach, securing qualitative 'student voice' insight. The focus group took place on Tuesday, 14 March, and lasted 45 minutes. A series of questions were asked following a schedule outlined in Annex A of this report. The questions posed were informed by the themes of the Progression Framework and were asked with reference to the activities undertaken during the previous year (March 2022-March 2023).

The impact

Six of the eight learners completed pre-activity evaluation forms for an activity between March and June 2022. These forms asked a series of questions about HE. When rating aspects of HE, none gave a positivity score of 4 or 5 out of 5 for Finance despite such a rating featuring at some point on all other aspects; it was a standout non-positive. Two of the six agreed that they understood the difference between school and university and the same number felt they knew what life was like for a university student. Only two of the six identified university as their likely destination after school/college, and one was at the same time 'not sure'. All this said, 5 of the six agreed that HE could help them secure the job or career they wanted and the same number were 'considering' HE. It would suggest that a year before the focus group these young learners were open to the idea of university and appreciated the material career benefits of going, even if they did not envisage themselves being there, did not really grasp what it was actually like, and were sceptical from a financial perspective. While there was some conversion potential, the task for Higher Horizons outreach practitioners, was to take this openness and appreciation of university and consolidate it into something more robust, adding intention to the interest.

After these activities teachers were also surveyed for an extra perspective and while anecdotal and observational, sometimes they could see shifts happening. After the History and Archaeology Day, for example, one teacher noted that 'motivation is higher now than at the beginning of the event' and learners came out with a 'deeper interest'. After the Policing and Forensics Day one teacher said that they 'spoke to a few pupils who now say they will think about going to uni' and that it had 'opened eyes'.

The focus group provides an opportunity to see if these learners feel different now about university than they did before they participated in these activities and whether the observations made by teachers who have followed their learners' journey comes through in the words of the young people themselves.

INFORM activities and developing an understanding of HE

"I can do that"

The inform theme is the pure IAG strand of the Partnership's outreach and in December most of the participants attended a finance talk, but finance is a recurring topic in other events that fall under a different category; most campus events, for example, typically include some relaying of student financing.

This was an area where some of the biggest impact was seen. The learners spoke of finance as being an insurmountable obstacle; it was a 'lot of money' and 'way too much'. This aligns with the non-positive scoring the learners gave their confidence around finance in activity surveys they completed in the previous year. What before was a big stopper, indeed for one it was the 'one thing' holding her back, was now something that could be broken down and was manageable and therefore doable. It was 'not an impossible amount to pay' and one noted that they 'didn't realise [they] didn't have to pay all at once' – there was a sense of empowerment now that contrasted with powerlessness before; transformed from 'never going to pay it back' and 'never going to be enough' money, the word 'never' recurring, to it being 'achievable', with one exclaiming 'I can do that'. It was not just about loan repayment that had become more manageable, but budgeting generally with one learner

noting that organisation of money was ‘a big thing’ for them and now it was ‘not as overwhelming as I thought’.

Funding university and university life over the past year had gone from being ‘too much’, a stand-out non-positive that was overwhelming and ‘never’ doable, to something that could be broken down and was ‘achievable’. A shift had taken place that may in part have been attributable to Higher Horizons activities with one learner specifically noting that these activities ‘helped’ them get a ‘better grasp’ of student finance.

EXPERIENCE activities and developing an awareness of HE life

“Definitely for me”

Where IAG on Finance calmed nerves, visits to campuses opened eyes with the experience for some being a revelation. One learner never realised what a campus involved and were surprised to discover that everything was there whereas previously they expected to go elsewhere for shopping, etc. Besides practical considerations such as these, the biggest take-away was its fundamental difference from school which for some was a key positive. They noted how lives were more ‘independent’ and there was more freedom with no uniform, less repetitiveness, and more to do in terms of social activity, hobbies, and societies. One learner was explicit in their admiration for university life and identified it as the primary motivator for progressing with the lifestyle being ‘definitely for me’.

A couple of learners did identify, however, that the repetitiveness and routine of school benefited them and conversely expressed reservation about how they would discipline and motivate themselves at university. What pulled some learners towards university was daunting for others. However, there was an appreciation and awareness of the difference between the experience of education to be had at different levels and whether this was viewed positively or negatively, learners felt more informed. Indeed, this contrasts with activity surveys completed the previous year where those who felt they understood the difference between school and university and who felt they knew what it was like to be a university student were in the minority.

ENABLE activities and developing skills for HE progression

“Definitely improved”

In many of our activities attention is paid to soft skills that will provide learners with the social and emotional skills required for transition. Indeed, even the IAG on university finance was seen to have a positive effect in this area with one learner noting how it ‘calmed my nerves’. Another, reflecting on Higher Horizons activities generally, felt more optimism and had learnt to ‘calm down and find the route’. That said some of the learners, especially those with some family history of HE participation, felt this type of benefit less; the aforementioned quotes came from those without this background suggesting that activities designed to emotionally enable learners ought to be particularly targeted.

Many of our ‘enable’ activities are focused on enhancing learners’ understanding of subjects, subjects they are currently studying (with a view to motivation and attainment raising) or could study

at HE level, or connected to study and revision skills generally. In early 2023, in what was their most recent activity, all members of the group had taken part in the ‘Academic Programme’ where they learnt about researching a topic and writing an essay, and in the process secured feedback from a university academic. The activity helped to pre-empt potential imposter syndrome with some pleasantly surprised by the feedback; one learner was ‘surprised’ especially as they struggled at first and another used the same word as they had not written an essay before and ‘didn’t expect’ the positive feedback. In their current studies, essays are on the horizon and one learner was pleased that they would now know how to write one and another had greater awareness of what they needed to do to get the higher grades. One learner noted that they were a ‘lot better’ at writing longer pieces that they thought they would be; before it was hard to write ‘loads’ but can write lots of things now and while they always struggled they had ‘definitely improved’.

While INFORM and EXPERIENCE activities can be a revelation, opening eyes to what HE involves, ENABLE activities such as these can be a revelation as well, but revealing something to the learners about themselves. When asked in the abstract what they had learned from these activities about themselves and how they would tackle problems differently, the learners did not see any change, but when homing in on a specific activity or challenge, these shifts were coming through in what they were saying.

Some struggled with the workload and the disciplined side of it, knowing when to take breaks and how to stay focused. The activity was meant to be difficult, however, and the learners seemed to appreciate that. One learner noted how they struggled but also how ‘Lucy helped me’, demonstrating how behind academic tests and education processes are human faces – one learner was learning not to beat herself up about work and another noted the need not to be scared to ask for help.

More likely to attend university?

“Lucy has opened that door for me”

In the previous year’s surveys the majority of these learners could see the job benefits of HE and were considering it, but the majority could not see HE as a likely destination. By the time of the focus group there was a shift in that the majority now did see university as a likely destination. There is a nuance here where the learners shift to a less detached relationship and closer identification with HE.

The difference between then and now has been a series of Higher Horizons activities with one learner noting that ‘Lucy has opened that door for me’, Lucy being the school’s Higher Horizon’s practitioner. There were signs that learners were identifying with HE not just seeing its functional benefits with one learner saying they could ‘see’ themselves being at university and another being intrigued by university life. Crucially these comments came from those whose family had minimal or disrupted experience of HE. There were others, however, who could see it as the likely destination because they were going to ‘end up’ there or would ‘find myself’ there, in a fashion not too dissimilar to more middle class and more HE experienced learners who ‘fall into’ HE because it is just the norm. These phrases came from learners who did have some, often still limited, family experience of HE. Although a small sample, the group’s different reactions to this question points to just having one or two people graduating within a family can help to normalise HE for an individual.

Several learners were very clear that their parents expected them or hoped they would go to University. One learner whose family experience of HE had been difficult, was not put off and saw it as a way of avoiding living 'on side of a pathway'. Their parents still saw it as key to getting a good job and were adamant that their child was going. Another had had much encouragement from their parents and the family dynamic was key with the idea of providing an example to younger siblings being a key motivator. Whatever impact Higher Horizons activities, parental guidance had been and would continue to be critical. However, parental drive cannot be assumed with some parents providing 'hands off' support - not pressing their own preferences and letting their children work it out themselves. One learner said that their parents were 'not too bothered' either way but interestingly this same learner was one who noted that they switched between intending to go to university and not, and was the most open about their prevarication.

It is difficult to claim that outreach activities had a conversion effect on a group of learners who were open to HE and whose parents were mostly keen. However, their reluctance to see themselves in HE despite seeing job benefits and being open to it, suggest that while the relationship these learners had with HE was not hostile, it was still remote and detached. What we see is a consolidation effect where reassurance regarding finance, reassurance regarding academic requirements, and exposure through tangible experience act upon the learners who are relating to and identifying with HE more than ever before.

Next Steps

The principle of sustained engagement is built on the idea of the journey towards HE rather than the destination, progression rather than revelation. It is for this reason that our activities are designed according to a *progression* framework. As such we always anticipate gaps to remain depending on the stage of the learners' education. The opportunity to speak to these learners afforded the Partnership to not just secure feedback on activities and insight into their HE perceptions and understanding, but also information on what gaps the learners need working on.

While the learners expressed a desire to go to HE, increasingly identified with it, and were reassured regarding the finances and the academic requirements, there seemed to be consensus that they did not know about the process, the practical steps needed to take up the opportunity. Sometimes campus visits and skills development activities are preceded by IAG activities, but in reality IAG is a constant and is something practitioners return to time and time again. Higher Horizons run 'mini programmes' of activities, programmes consisting of 3 one hour sessions, designed to address relevant issues and concerns that arise with different age groups. One programme, actually called the 'Next Steps' programme, is an IAG mini programme that is designed for Years 10 and 11 and is all about the pathways and processes that lead to HE. Over the last year Higher Horizons provision has brought these learners closer to HE the 'place' and with further outreach over the next year we would expect to see them closer to the 'process' of entering HE as well.

In Summary

The learners who took part in this focus group after a year's sustained engagement with Higher Horizons outreach provision would appear to have a closer relationship and stronger identification with HE and are now ready to tackle the practicalities of it. In Widening Participation we know that many learners already have aspirations before they engage with any outreach, but the findings of this focus group support the idea that sustained engagement over a period of time can enable learners to develop and elaborate on these aspirations, turning 'ideal selves' into 'possible selves'

(Markus & Nurius, 1986). With continued sustained engagement, with perhaps an increased focus on pathways and process, Higher Horizons will continue to help move these aspirations closer to reality.

James Elliott
Higher Horizons
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ANNEX 1

Schedule of Questions

1. Tell us your name and what experience there is in your family and among family friends of university.
2. Where do you see yourself in three years' time?
 - a. At university? Which universities? What subjects?
 - b. If not university, why not? Uni at some point in the future?
 - c. What do you want to do long term – career, job, etc?
3. Cast your mind back, lockdowns and closures drawing to an end, a year ago what did you think the future held for you?
 - a. Did university seem like a realistic option?
 - b. How did you feel about the cost of it?
 - c. What did you think about your workload an schoolwork a year ago?
4. Now we turn to the activities specifically
 - a. What have you enjoyed?
 - b. What have you learnt?
 - i. I note that all of you went to a finance talk in December. What have you learnt about financing university studies?
 - ii. I see that not all but most of you have visited universities – what have you learnt about life at university?
 - iii. All of you have taken part in the Academic programme. You have written an essay as well that is subject to university level marking. What have you learnt from this? What have you learnt about studying, writing, and revising?
 - iv. What have you learnt about yourself?
 - c. Have you acted or will you make any changes because of what you've experienced or learnt on these activities?
 - i. Dealing with problems or challenges?
 - ii. The way you do your schoolwork?
5. Are you confident about your next steps?