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Explaining the Gaps: Utilising Uni Connect national learner survey data to inform the local delivery of higher education transformative outreach activities in Lincolnshire

Abstract Paper (750 word maximum)

Funded by the Office for Students (OfS), the Uni Connect programme is delivered nationally through 29 local learning partnerships. The programme delivers targeted higher education transformative outreach activities to young people in Years 9 to 13 in areas where the higher education participation of young people is much lower than expected based on GCSE-level attainment. These areas often coincide with where universities focus their widening participation efforts to help them meet their Access and Participation Plan targets (OfS, 2020). In Lincolnshire the programme is delivered and managed by LINCHigher and evaluated locally.

Explaining the Gaps is a project nested within the local evaluation that utilises data from the national learner impact survey to identify gaps at school level to enable the effective delivery of targeted transformative outreach in schools. This large longitudinal dataset, now in its fourth year, consists locally of around 28,000 responses and explores learners' knowledge of, confidence to participate in, and the perceived benefits of, higher education as well as learner plans for further study and the strengths or weaknesses of their study skills. The wider local evaluation takes a mixed methods approach which comprises learner activity surveys, with all LINCHigher schools, and focus groups, reflective diaries and School Lead interviews with six case study schools.

Whilst there are numerous, mostly qualitative, studies in this area of enquiry the majority focus on the situation facing students post-transition to higher education, (see for example Young et al., 2019) with few concentrating on the pre-transition period and how well secondary schools prepare their students for post-16 pathways. Where studies do exist, they focus mainly on STEM subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) and come predominantly from an international perspective. For example, in their systematic review of evidence on the effectiveness of interventions and strategies for widening participation in higher education, Younger et al., (2019) found just 16 studies, out of more than 3,500, that were relevant to the UK context. Likewise, the recent systematic review of studies between 2005 and 2015 by Heaslip et al. (2020) found just 26 UK-focused studies out of 847, the majority of which (16) were qualitative. Both reviews highlight the lack of good quality, robust evidence available in the UK in this field of inquiry. This study aims to fill the gaps in two ways. First, it explores the subject from the perspective of secondary school learners. Secondly, it draws predominantly on quantitative data through the national learner survey.

The resulting survey data has been used to identify the higher aspiration and skills gaps of specific student groups (i.e. by gender or Special Educational Needs etc) within individual schools and to enhance the wider local evaluation, specifically by tracking Year 11 and 12 learners for whom the study now has at least three years of data. This offers a unique opportunity to follow a small cohort of students in selected case study schools across the county on a longitudinal basis.

This paper will explore how students respond to higher education outreach activities and assess whether or not they lead to a positive impact in learners' attitude towards higher education study. Learners identified through the survey data will be specifically included in focus groups to enable a greater depth of understanding of the impact of outreach activities over a period of time. The project, which is underpinned by Bourdieu's (1977 and 1986) concepts of habitus and cultural and social capital, has been tracking the impact of outreach activities at a school level using a deductive theory of change (Laing and Todd, 2015) framework. The main components of the deductive model are the literature review that informs the gathering of quantitative data which is then followed up with qualitative measures, such as interviews and focus groups; hence the mixed methods approach taken to the wider local evaluation.

As well as presenting findings from the Explaining the Gaps local learner survey data, which this year included questions on the impact of Covid-19 on learners higher education aspirations, the paper also will explore how the data has been used in conjunction with the wider local evaluation to target transformative outreach delivery and discuss the implications of the findings for higher education Access and Participation Plans.

References (250 word maximum)

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