

Scaling Opportunities

Charlotte Gleed and Charlotte Armstrong

Terminology

Outreach: Activity by higher education providers that supports people from underrepresented groups to access higher education.¹

Executive summary

Access to high-tariff higher education remains shaped by structural inequality with large attainment and progression gaps, particularly for disadvantaged pupils and those eligible for Free School Meals (FSM). By the time students apply to higher education, subject choices, attainment gaps and perceptions that university is ‘not for people like me’ are often already embedded. Outreach approaches that rely on contextual admissions and late-stage interventions do not reach those who disengage earlier in the pipeline.

This Policy Note argues for a decisive shift from a ‘cure’ to a ‘prevention’ model of access and participation, structured around the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP)’s series of questions: ‘what works, for [whom], in what context, and why’.

What works?

Drawing on analysis from the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT), Uni Connect and wider sector evidence, this Policy Note shows that sustained and intensive outreach can materially improve progression outcomes. Students who participate in an intensive outreach package are 29% more likely to enter higher education and 19% more likely to attend a high-tariff institution than matched peers who receive minimal outreach.

For whom?

The effect is strongest for the most disadvantaged pupils. Those students eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) who engage in intensive outreach are up to 38% more likely to progress to higher education. These findings underline the importance of early, multi-activity and long-term engagement in narrowing long-standing socio-economic gaps.

In what context?

Effective outreach begins early – no later than Years 7 to 9 – and continues through to sixth form or college. Collaborative regional delivery that targets ‘cold spots’ and reduces duplication helps to strengthen the impact of outreach work and improves value for money.

Why?

Long-term early engagement helps develop knowledge of higher education before attainment gaps become deeply entrenched. However, stable funding and stronger evaluation are required for these programmes to be effectively scaled in the future.

The Policy Note sets out four priority actions:

1. Expanding sustained pre- and post-16 outreach.
2. Strengthening collaboration between providers, local authorities and national programmes.
3. Treating access as a national responsibility for which the Government provides stable, multi-year funding.
4. Investing in more rigorous evaluation to establish a clearer causal impact of programmes.

If implemented, these measures would embed early and sustained engagement as a strategic and nationally coordinated effort to help ensure that talent, not background, determines progression to higher education.

Introduction

The opportunity to progress to higher education has always been unequal. The first access programme at the University of Oxford was the ‘Tanner Scheme’, introduced in 1965. The Rt Hon. the Baroness Jacqui Smith, the now Minister for Skills and Minister for Women and Equalities, was a participant in the scheme. In *50 Years of the Tanner Revolution*, Baroness Smith recalled that ‘it was Hertford [College], with its pioneering approach to outreach and entry requirements, which gave me the confidence to apply’.² Studying Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) at the University of Oxford’s Hertford College, Baroness Smith’s story shows the transformative effect of outreach. Yet 60 years after the introduction of the Tanner Scheme, persistent inequalities in access to higher education remain.

The Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) is a research collaboration of over 100 higher education providers and third sector organisations that provides a system and data for evaluation. In 2022, the Tracker found 28% of pupils in HEAT Group 2a (highest attainment, high disadvantage) entered a ‘Top 30’ higher education institution, compared to 40% of pupils in HEAT Group 4a (highest attainment, low disadvantage).³ There is no definition of a Top 30 higher education institution in the report, and when contacted, HEAT was unable to provide the exact definition used. However, they said it was likely to coincide with the Department for Education’s definition of ‘high tariff’ institutions based on their ‘Widening participation in higher education’ statistics.⁴ The barriers of class, place, attainment, school, gender and ethnicity are alive and kicking – against the disadvantaged.

Higher education institutions cannot resolve the inequalities that are embedded earlier in the education system, or wider society, prior to interaction with these students. But they can decide where their resources are pooled and who they target. Outreach programmes can be a gateway to higher education for young people with fewer opportunities. For disadvantaged young people,

outreach activities can help tackle some of the structural inequalities that lead to access and participation challenges. It can also help give them the confidence to see selective higher education as a space they could thrive in. For parents, the financial and cultural aspects of higher education can be demystified. For teachers, outreach can provide a more concrete understanding of how best to support their students through the processes of applying to higher education institutions, as well as equipping teachers with the up-to-date knowledge necessary to advise students on course and institution choices. Intensive outreach boosts entry into higher education by 29% compared with a matched group of peers who received minimal outreach.⁵

This HEPI Policy Note attempts to highlight how intensive, sustained outreach strategies are one of the most effective methods for making high-tariff higher education accessible for disadvantaged young people. It begins by outlining some of the major problems embedded within the current education system. The Policy Note then goes on to explore what intensive and sustained outreach strategies involve – emphasising the need for them to be age appropriate. However, the Note will also acknowledge the difficulties of implementing sustained and intensive outreach interventions and highlight the lack of generalisable evidence for these interventions within the sector. The Note then moves on to provide successful examples of these strategies in practice and to demonstrate their impact. Finally, it makes a number of key policy suggestions that could be implemented to help higher education institutions overcome the barriers preventing them from implementing these techniques and practices.

The closed door: Problems in access to higher education

One of the fundamental issues that higher education institutions face with regard to widening access is that they cannot resolve the already unequal outcomes of the secondary school system. By the time students submit an application – if they even get that far – disparities in attainment, subject choice and educational progression are already deeply embedded. As a consequence, higher education institutions understandably often focus on the elements they can control – where and how to target their resources. Such decisions are complex, sometimes even contradictory. But the extensive work carried out by policymakers, higher education institutions and schools reflects a willingness to push for improvements across the sector and a shared recognition that access gaps are unacceptable.

There is a clear secondary school attainment gap between the least and most disadvantaged students. In 2024, 25% of disadvantaged pupils (around 40,000 pupils) achieved a grade 5 or above in English and Mathematics Level 2 / GCSE, compared to 52% of all other pupils (235,000 pupils) who achieved that grade.⁶ In this context, disadvantage is defined as students who are known to have been eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) at any point in the past six years, or pupils who have been looked after in, or adopted from, care. This attainment gap is not minor; it effectively halves the proportion of disadvantaged students who are meeting the key academic thresholds required for progression of post-16 qualifications, as well as future eligibility for higher education.

This inequality has a knock-on effect on entering sixth form or college. In 2022, the proportion of disadvantaged pupils who were not studying towards any substantial qualifications or apprenticeships at the beginning of Year 12 was 21.9%, while the proportion of their non-disadvantaged peers was 9.3%.⁷ This shows a considerable disparity in socio-economic backgrounds between those who continue in education and those who do not. The options for what higher education providers can do to address this disadvantage are either major commitments (think back to Theresa May's call

for universities to set up their own schools) or very limited, as this disadvantage is found within the system so many years before these students begin applying to higher education.⁸ Many universities have introduced contextualised offers and admissions to allow for this difference. These refer to when the background of a university applicant is considered as part of the admissions process, and are an attempt by the institution to recognise structural inequalities and attempt to limit their impact at the point of entry. It can result in students from underrepresented backgrounds being given guaranteed interviews, reduced grade requirements or other adjustments / considerations throughout the process.⁹

However, contextualisation only makes a difference for those students who have already made the decision to apply to higher education. It cannot reach those students who have already ruled university out, disengaged from formal higher education or selected subjects that prevent progression onto the courses they want. A 2024 report from the Education Policy Institute found that some high attainers with an A or A* in both GCSE English and Mathematics are also not progressing to higher education.¹⁰ 60,900 high attainers with these qualifications entered higher education (enrolled on a Level 4 course or above) by the time they were aged 25. Yet 5,500 of them did not. Financial barriers and social barriers, such as 'feeling that university is not for them', are quoted as reasons why. While access to higher education should not be presented as the only positive outcome for these students, the reasons given for not attending are concerning. It is important that students feel higher education is a genuine option for them when making decisions about their future. If improving access to higher education is to be effective, access and participation interventions need to reach these students earlier, before sixth form. Access and participation strategies, therefore, cannot operate solely at the post-16 level. Instead, students must be engaged with before they have selected their Key Stage 5 subject choices; before attainment gaps are firmly entrenched; and before university is written off as unattainable. Access policy must focus on early, preventative engagement with students, rather than late-stage adjustments.

Getting in and getting on: Scaling up outreach

There is much discussion across the higher education sector, the Government and the media about problems with access and widening participation, but finding solutions proves to be a difficult task. Working out whether outreach programmes can be scaled, how and to whom is challenging. But to open up the higher education system and ensure disadvantaged young people can really get in and get on, it is needed.

The former Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University, Professor Sir Chris Husbands, said that because 'talent is not distributed in the same way that wealth is distributed', there is still 'a job to be done'.¹¹ To execute this job, we need to find ways of scaling opportunities that harness talent and maximise potential. Policymakers, higher education institutions and the sector as a whole have done extensive work on the barriers which hinder access and participation to selective institutions, as well as on the value in outreach programmes to dissolve these barriers.

Intensive outreach and sustained outreach are two methods through which higher education providers can engage with students to increase access and participation levels effectively.

Analysis from the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) finds that participating in an intensive outreach package makes a student 29% more likely to enter higher education than a matched group of peers who received minimal outreach, and 19% more likely to enter a high-tariff higher education institution.¹² Additionally, the impact is strongest for the most disadvantaged students,

with students eligible for Free School Meals who engaged with intensive outreach being up to 38% more likely to progress to higher education than to matched peers.

Intensive outreach is defined by HEAT as ‘engagement in at least 11 hours of outreach activity, out of which at least eight hours are of a high intensity activity content (Activity Types: [higher education] Campus Visit, [higher education] Subject Insight, Mentoring, Skills & Attainment, Summer School).¹³

Notably, this definition produces an implied hierarchy of access interventions in terms of effectiveness. In part, this can be explained by the nature of the interventions considered. Summer schools and mentoring interactions are, by their nature, multi-day interventions. Even higher education insight events are likely full-day events that involve multiple different sessions and interactions within them. It is important to note, however, that the implication is that no number of higher education information talks alone is sufficient to qualify the interaction as ‘intensive’.

Sustained outreach is less clearly defined by organisations such as HEAT and The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO), but generally accepted to refer to participation with access and outreach initiatives in multiple activities at various stages of schooling. Thus, it tends to involve both pre- and post-16 interactions.

Intensive outreach is one method to increase the number of disadvantaged students progressing to higher education. It has been found that there is a ‘positive correlation’ between participation in outreach activities and improved knowledge, attitude and intentions towards higher education.¹⁴

Anecdotal evidence highlights how widening participation and outreach with students under the age of 16 (referred to as pre-16 outreach) can help to boost students’ academic motivation, as well as increase their familiarity with university life and culture.¹⁵ This latter point can be particularly beneficial for those students who would be the first in their family to attend university. As with post-16 interventions, more intensive outreach is associated with higher Key Stage 4 (Year 10 and 11) attainment and higher levels of progression to higher education.¹⁶ Long-term engagement with pupils, schools and parents is effective, but very expensive. Not only do repeated interventions help young people to see higher education as a possible pathway for them, but also provides them and their peers with increased knowledge of the pathway and processes necessary to enter these institutions. Additionally, certain forms of outreach intervention, such as individual mentoring, can narrow the attainment gap, making the prospect of entry into selective institutions more probable.¹⁷

What works: Intensive and sustained outreach in practice

One strong example of sustained outreach is the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) – now known as Uni Connect. This is an intervention which delivers ‘sustained, progressive, and intensive’ support to pupils in Years 9 to 13, seeking to address the gaps in long-term engagement.¹⁸ The programme was deliberately designed to be highly targeted and to develop wider engagement with local authorities, employers and others within the communities it operates in.¹⁹ By collaborating with these varied groups, the National Collaborative Outreach Programme is a solution to the ‘substantial lack of coordination’ between higher education providers.²⁰ The NCOP’s main recommendation is to adopt an intensive outreach approach using a multi-activity approach. Comprising workshops, university and employer visits, career guidance and residential trips, multiple activities are ‘more likely to deliver positive outcomes than one-off intervention’.²¹

As the NCOP highlights, it is imperative that the type of outreach activity suits the age group of participants. Access to high-quality Information, Advice, and Guidance sessions (IAG) is particularly

important in the early stages (Year 9) and later stages (Years 12 and 13) at secondary schools. In the second year of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme, 53% of participants said that access to IAG had a 'great deal of impact', marking an increase from 23% in the first year of the scheme.²²

Evaluation of the scheme, as it became the Uni Connect programme, remains largely positive and finds that it demonstrates value for money, although it is not without areas for improvement.²³

For sustained intervention to be effective, however, it must be age-appropriate. The University of Birmingham's scheme 'Forward Thinking' involves interaction with students from Year 8 to Year 11 who attend partner schools within the Birmingham area. These students participate in a series of events throughout their time in the programme – a launch event, a subject taster day, a university experience day, a mentoring scheme and a celebration event.²⁴ Evaluation of the scheme by TASO found positive outcomes for students who participated in the scheme, and favourable performance in all areas evaluated when compared to matched students who did not participate in the scheme (although not always statistically significant).²⁵

For Year 12 and 13 participants, campus visits are 'true-to-life insights' which 'demystify' higher education, especially to those with limited knowledge or experience to draw on.²⁶

Another positive example of sustained and intensive intervention is the Seren Academy. This programme is a fully funded subset of the wider Seren Network (a programme primarily funded by the Welsh Government that aims to support the aspirations and ambitions of eligible state school pupils). Seren Academy is based around three stages. Stage One is Years 8 and 9; Stage Two is Years 10 and 11; Stage Three is Years 12 and 13. The different stages have different targeted interventions, with the initial stage focused on introducing higher education, the second on exploring subjects beyond the curriculum and tasters of academic life and the final stage on university admissions processes. However, evaluation of the efficacy of the programme is limited – the last evaluation of the Seren Network was completed in 2019, and evaluation of the Seren Academy is currently being undertaken for the first time.²⁷

A final key example of sustained and intensive intervention is the IntoUniversity programme. The charity runs a multi-intervention programme in 46 centres and extension projects in 29 towns and cities across the UK – specifically focusing on running centres in social mobility cold spots. The centres run programmes for children from the age of seven through to 18, and also have a Student Associate Network for those who have completed the programme. Depending on the age of the participants, IntoUniversity's programme has a different focus. At the primary stage, the focus is on introducing the concept of higher education to students and encouraging them to think about their futures. At the secondary school and sixth form / college stage the programme runs workshops and trips to higher education campuses. Throughout the scheme participants also have access to structured academic support within the local learning centres, and university student and corporate mentoring opportunities. Independent evaluation of the programme conducted by FFT Education Datalab (a non-profit organisation specialising in education data) found that participation in IntoUniversity's programme led to a 16 percentage point uplift in the likelihood of progressing on to higher education (compared with a tailored benchmark produced from the Office for Students and Department for Education data).²⁸ When it comes to selective higher education, evaluation of the programme found that IntoUniversity students were more likely to progress to top-third higher education institutions than students

nationally (23% compared with 13% for all students and 5% for FSM students).²⁹ Evaluation of this programme also considered academic attainment and, notably, 70% of students, 74% of teachers and 84% of parents reported positive changes to students' work in school. Additionally, 63% of students reported an improvement in their grades.³⁰ This is key when considering the attainment gaps outlined previously.

What blocks scaling: Cost, coordination and weak evaluation

There are several barriers preventing providers from broadly implementing sustained and intensive outreach interventions. Both forms of intervention are typically associated with higher costs for higher education providers, and schemes such as on-campus summer schools also entail logistical constraints, including providing accommodation and sufficient safeguarding supervision for a large group of under-18s.

Sustained intervention also relies on a relatively high level of teacher buy-in and inter-school collaboration. Teachers must be engaged, and crucially also have the time to devote to it, including bringing students on trips to university campuses or booking rooms in schools (and getting approval for pupils to be out of lessons) for outreach staff to run sessions for pupils. Additionally, sustained interventions should, by design, follow students throughout their time at school. However, students do not always follow a clear feeder school pathway throughout their education. When running sustained interventions, higher education providers would ideally be able to keep track of where the students they are working with go, but this can be a complicated endeavour and poses clear logistical challenges.

Additionally, despite individual programme and institution-level evaluations of programmes, there is a lack of overall evidence and research into the efficacy of these programmes. TASO is funded by the Office for Students and undertakes research to provide evidence toolkits for different types of intervention aimed at improving student access, success and progression.³¹ None of the intervention types analysed by TASO ranked as having strong evidence. Multi-intervention outreach (the closest intervention analysed to intensive outreach) is ranked as having only a small positive impact on and a mixed impact on behaviour / outcomes, yet it comes with high associated costs. Without more substantive sector-wide evidence, it may be difficult for institutions to justify the time and money associated with adopting these practices, especially when university finances are as squeezed as they currently are.

A systematic review of the efficacy of UK widening participation programmes and the quality of evaluation by Baines, Gooch and Ng-Knight highlights the lack of psychological theory underpinning much of the existing evaluation, as well as moderate to high levels of bias within all the evaluation they analysed. They summarised that 'Causal inference is not possible in the majority of cases, and the lack of clarity in study design and methods render many evaluations unreliable'.³² However, the need for more rigorous evaluation should not lead institutions and outreach practitioners to stop running programmes at all. While evaluation needs to be improved across the sector, this should happen concurrently with the focus of resources on the outcomes that demonstrate the most impact – intensive and sustained intervention.

Recommendations and conclusion

The National Collaborative Outreach Programme directed higher education institutions towards questions they should think about when deciding who and where to pool their outreach resources: 'what works, for [whom], in what context, and why'.³³

The current formulation of outreach has taken a cure rather than a prevention approach. Interventions are designed and implemented by higher education providers to cure, rather than prevent, access and participation gaps in the first place. Higher education providers recognise that many of the problems of inequality are entrenched within the education system before they begin applying to higher education. However, this does not mean there is little providers can do, rather that outreach interventions need to be designed to be sustained and intensive – collaborating with schools and local areas for maximum effect.

1. What works: Higher education institutions should expand and scale up sustained contact programmes (pre- and post-16 outreach)

While sustained contact programmes do exist in some form at some higher education institutions, they should be expanded and become common practice. By introducing disadvantaged children to the idea of higher education at an early stage, most probably between Years 7 to 9, a seed is sown. If outreach interventions only focus on post-16 activities, by this time it is too late. At this stage, the Key Stage 4 attainment gap exists, some students will have already written off university as 'not for them', some will have selected the wrong qualifications and subjects for the higher education pathways they wanted and more advantaged students are ahead in terms of the super-curricular activities required for high-tariff institutions.

Sustained contact programmes should be evaluated to see at what stage they can be scaled. For example, in the first interventions between Years 7 and 9, the most appropriate activity is information sessions and potentially a campus visit. Cost-effective ways to deliver this can be found, as the IAG sessions are low-cost options with moderate evidence supporting their efficacy.³⁴ Particularly when targeted at younger years, these sessions can focus on introducing higher education to students who may have no personal links / interactions with institutions or graduates, helping to develop their understanding before they are brought up by teachers in the classroom. Whereas when pupils participate in summer schools during sixth form or college, these activities are more expensive and time-intensive than the cheaper sessions organised for younger students. Therefore, considerations should not only be about when to intervene but also how much money and effort are put into each stage.

2. For whom: Higher education institutions should work with local authorities to effectively target widening participation initiatives within their local area. Additionally, they should collaborate with other institutions and national programmes to ensure cold spots are being effectively covered

Working collaboratively with local authorities, other institutions and nationwide programmes would help to ensure maximum impact and value for money for widening participation initiatives. The Uni Connect programme has been praised for its collaborative role.³⁵ While this scheme has different levels of funding among individual higher education providers – and higher education providers cannot reasonably be expected to operate in exactly the same way – collaboration among multiple providers within a region to target cold spots would pool resources, potentially making these efforts more effective.

The Government's 2025 *Post-16 Education and Skills* white paper gives lip service to 'develop[ing] options to address cold-spots in underserved regions and tackl[ing] the most systemic barriers to access'.³⁶ While this has limited detail for now, a specific and collaborative focus on cold spots could be encouraged to enable work together on this issue, even if individual institutions' Access and Participation Plans do not precisely dovetail. This is particularly time sensitive as the retrenchment of some universities (such as the Southend Campus at the University of Essex) due to financial constraints is only increasing cold spots across the country.

3. In what context: Access and participation should be understood as a national responsibility that higher education institutions prioritise and work collaboratively on

Access and participation schemes reach across a breadth of policy objectives – from social mobility and regional opportunity to skills supply. They therefore require national engagement and support to allow institutions to work collaboratively rather than competitively.

Schemes like Uni Connect, while not perfect, have been consistently evaluated as effective and demonstrate what system coordination can achieve – offering value for money, not least by reducing duplication and improving local targeting. Despite this, Uni Connect's funding was cut from £60 million in 2020/21 to £20 million in 2024/25.³⁷ This undermines the scheme's delivery capacity, weakening partnerships with schools and other stakeholders. If the Government is serious about tackling access and participation, then rhetoric alone is not sufficient; it must be combined with resources. This means restoring stable multi-year funding for collaborative schemes such as Uni Connect and combining this with clear expectations on institutions to participate in local and regional delivery of these schemes.

4. Why: Further evaluation is required to analyse the efficacy of these schemes

As highlighted in this report, the evaluation of widening participation schemes needs improvement. TASO is currently developing the Higher Education Evaluation Library (HEEL), an online, freely accessible and searchable database of evaluations focused on access, success and progression interventions.³⁸ This will enable easier evaluation and increased knowledge sharing across providers. However, a problem within evaluation still remains. Much of the existing evaluation struggles to demonstrate causal links between participation in widening participation programmes and progression to higher education. Additionally, evaluation of access initiatives such as summer schools and subject insight days may suffer from a biased sample, as choosing to participate in programmes like these may indicate a stronger desire to attend higher education in the first place. Until these difficulties in evaluation can be effectively tackled, the evaluation of widening participation programmes will continue to face significant limitations.

Endnotes

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