Access and Widening Participation in College HE

Briefing paper 3: Effective and Collaborative Outreach
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Introduction
This is the third in a series of briefings on aspects of college higher education (HE) sponsored by the Association of Colleges (AoC) and Action on Access. The briefings describe key concepts and models of practice and realistic ways to implement widening participation policies and practices. The briefings will be useful for all colleges that receive the HEFCE the student opportunity grant. The other guidance notes in this series of briefings will examine:

- Measures and indicators;
- Student success and retention; and
- Evaluation.

Context
Colleges have a long tradition of providing effective means by which “first in family” young people and adults can enter, experience and succeed in HE. Colleges recruit and serve their local community, often one with a significant proportion of disadvantaged students. The transformative effects on lives of vocationally-related programmes such as higher apprenticeships, Higher National Certificates/Diplomas (HNCs/Ds) and Foundation Degrees and the type of “second chance” provision typified by the Access movement is well documented. Ironically it is sometimes a challenge for colleges to justify to others, including the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), the two funders of most widening participation in HE, that they are playing their part in national strategies.

A total of 63 further education (FE) colleges recently completed an Action on Access-AoC survey which asked them to identify the major challenges facing them in developing and managing their widening participation (WP) HE provision. The most difficult challenges were: targeting mature students; influencing careers guidance agencies; and developing outreach. The survey analysis suggested with regard to the latter:

“The preferred means of doing this is through enhancing internal progression (76%). Other favoured strategies included curriculum development and increasing the number of partner schools though not, interestingly, increasing the number of higher education institution (HEI) partnerships which was the least favoured strategy at 29%. Extending outreach provision was not especially favoured at 51%.”

This might give a misleading impression of college commitment to outreach work given their mission, capacity and traditions. This briefing seeks to draw out the wealth of approaches which colleges adopt, and outline and describe current

responses to the strategies laid down by HEFCE and OFFA – guidance aimed at all institutions providing HE which may not always make the best fit to college HE provision. Finally this briefing will outline and give context to questions that colleges are asking themselves when developing outreach to enable them to reflect on, and develop, their strategies for effective and collaborative outreach.

Some approaches to outreach delivery

There are many approaches in outreach activities which colleges use, informed by the fact that they are deliverers of both HE programme and deliverers of programme leading to HE. The following seven approaches have been chosen from 2015/16 Access Agreement submissions. They are briefly illustrated in the Appendices, and can be seen in more detail on the OFFA website.² Colleges offer outreach in a variety of approaches or models, often in combination, with the intention to:

1. Encourage progression of their own Level 3 students to the college's HE programmes. This is widely employed and arguably demonstrates their impact on not just increased access to HE but also increased retention and attainment. Appendix A – Leeds City College.

2. Encourage progression of their own Level 3 students to other HE institutions, include partner universities as an integral part of the college's own information, advice and guidance (IAG) provision requiring impartiality and a knowledge about different progression routes. Appendix B – City of Liverpool College.

3. Encourage the progression of Key Stage (KS) 3 and 4 students at schools to the college's own HE programmes. One important factor of this is the use of HE students and alumni to raise the awareness of students, teachers, parents, guardians and other stakeholders about the variety of routes into careers via vocational routes. Appendix C – Colchester Institute.

4. Encourage the progression of KS 3 and 4 students at schools to learn about, and consider progression to, other HE institutions as well as the college; often this might focus on vocational educational routes into careers and influence study choices at school. Specialist colleges, such as those involved in music, drama and land-based education are often engaged in this model. Appendix D – Trinity Laban.

5. Engage primary school students, which not only provide role models and raise the awareness of parents and teachers but also provide invaluable experience

² http://www.offa.org.uk/access-agreements/
for college students themselves acting as Ambassadors in these programmes. Appendix E – Doncaster College.

6. Attract and engage mature students, either in the workplace or in the community with the intention of encouraging progression to the college's own HE provision. This is often delivered through collaborative outreach networks, such as the recent National Network for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO), apprentice providers networks, regional skills networks, businesses, trade unions and the local enterprise partnership. Colleges link this to their own Business Support and Training departments, many of which have strong links with local employers, local authorities and Chambers of Commerce. Appendix F – Blackpool and Fylde College.

7. Attract and engage mature students, either in the workplace or in the community with the intention of encouraging progression to other HE institutions, delivered through the same mechanism as described above but with an impartial view as to the students’ options for progression. The issue of delivering impartial guidance (as in the other examples above) requires the college to recognise staff should be supported in this role and valued as to the outcomes they achieve. Appendix G – Heart (NNCO).

The National Strategy and approach to outreach

The National Strategy for Access and Student Success in Higher Education, written by HEFCE and OFFA and published by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in April 2014, identified a number of approaches and activities pertinent to excellent outreach (and which are reiterated in the Reflective Questions at the end of this briefing).

A balanced approach of outreach impacting on recruitment and aspiration, attainment and access (Reflective Question 1)

‘... research shows that some institutions have reacted to governments’ desire for demonstrable impact by shifting the balance of their outreach further towards recruitment activity that allows them to meet access agreement milestones, rather than longer-term aspiration building and attainment raising. As OFFA and HEFCE make clear in our respective guidance documents, a balanced approach is important, with activities that widen the pool of young people able to progress to HE working alongside activities that help the institution recruit from it.\(^3\)

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\(^3\) ‘National Strategy for access and student success in higher education’, April 2014, Pt 2, chap 1, paragraph 51.
Although this statement is primarily aimed at universities it is also appropriate for colleges, particularly those with an access agreement, to justify the rationale, extent and nature of the balance between recruitment and general HE aspiration and awareness; a balance which does not simply recruit WP students to their own institution but creates longer-term aspiration building and attainment raising. This might be demonstrated in partnership outreach work with neighbouring colleges or universities, or by contributing to coherent programmes over time with relevant IAG delivered at appropriate times.

The importance of raising aspiration and attainment (Reflective Questions 2)

‘Research undertaken by the Policy Research Institute for Aimhigher Greater Manchester in 2011 found that the most significant impact of Aimhigher on learner identity was the increase in confidence and self-esteem... finding that changing behaviours and actions led to increased impact on outcomes; it noted... that the outreach activity highlighted to the learners the need to achieve in their GCSE exams because these outcomes affected their progression to HE....’

This excerpt from the national strategy highlights the growing recognition of the importance of confidence and self-esteem not only in terms of preparing students to enter HE but also of the importance of encouraging students to engage once they have entered HE. The ‘What Works? Student retention and success’ research, conducted by Action on Access and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) highlights the importance of these attributes for student retention and success, and explains how they work. Colleges are in a unique position to work with both KS 3 school students and their own students at level 3 as those students progress onto the college’s own HE provision.

Effective use of partnerships (Reflective Question 3)

‘The international research and the literature review stress that partnership between HEIs, schools and colleges is key to effective outreach, a finding that was endorsed by roundtable discussion participants. As the literature review points out, cross-sector and inter-sector partnership can maximise resources, ensure impartiality, widen the distribution of activity and aid equitable distribution of HE outreach and progression opportunities...collaboration can enable pooling of smaller sub-groups of disadvantaged people to make outreach more efficient, thus improving provision and targeting.’

4 ‘National Strategy for access and student success in higher education’, April 2014, Pt2, ch1, para 55.
6 ‘National Strategy for access and student success in higher education’, April 2014, Pt2, ch1, para 57.
'Building the pool of applicants can encompass a wider partnership between HE providers and schools that focuses on school improvement, enabling a broader cultural change across the school that leads to enhanced progression.'

These two observations state clearly the benefits of working in partnership and many colleges have been involved over a number of years in productive relationships at sub-regional and regional levels. However colleges often face challenging situations regarding partnership working. Relationships with local schools may be difficult if schools encourage their students to progress to their sixth form after Key Stage 3. Many partnerships with universities are productive but there may be other questions for example around franchised or validated programmes of delivery. It is important therefore that the responsibility for partnership working is taken at the highest level within the college; and that the strategic approach is recognised and implemented by those delivering outreach activities. Encouraging staff to build partnerships at an operational level must be supported strategically.

**What makes for effective information, advice and guidance (IAG) (Reflective Questions 4)**

‘The literature review underlines that simply delivering more IAG is not enough: it needs to dovetail with the needs of the learner and be part of a framework of outreach activity. The Higher Education Progression Framework, developed by Action on Access with Aimhigher partnerships, promotes this approach.’

Effective IAG must be delivered in a way that accommodates the guidance needs of the learner and learning styles. More than one intervention, appropriately timed to the learners learning journey and within a coherent programme of interventions is likely to be more effective than a one-off intervention. IAG must be informed by a wide understanding of the benefits of HE whether delivered locally or elsewhere, at the college, other colleges or universities and not remain at the level of information alone.

**Outreach to older students (Reflective Questions 5)**

‘Neither the international research nor the literature review revealed much about how HE providers and employers interact to support the participation of older learners, and both noted that there was a paucity of information about partnership in this area.’

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7 ibid, para 60
8 ‘National Strategy for access and student success in higher education’, April 2014, Pt 2, ch1, para 63
9 ibid, para 67
‘OFFA’s guidance to institutions on preparing their access agreements has specifically encouraged them to consider working with communities and employers to reach out to mature learners. Teesside University, for example, takes an innovative approach to outreach for older learners who are likely to want to study HE part-time, and also demonstrates a highly flexible, demand-led style of provision that is tailored to meet the needs of employers and their employees’.10

These statements in the National strategy reflect the low priority which universities in general have given to working with mature students in terms of WP outreach and where outreach may have exclusively focused on young students. Colleges are more likely to run programmes designed to attract those seeking professional development and to provide ways back into the workforce aimed at adult learners. Further opportunities exist for internal partnership working with college’s own business support and training departments as well as their other employer and community external partnerships.

The rationale and use of robust evaluation (Reflective Question 6)

‘A key challenge in evaluating access work is tracking outcomes for the learners that institutions engage with through outreach. Local, robust tracking systems would greatly help institutions and their partners to generate better evidence that they can use to inform their approaches, improve the impact of their activities and demonstrate how they meet collaborative targets. Some tracking systems are already in place, for example the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT)...(for more information, see www.highereducationaccesstracker.org.uk)’.11

OFFA and HEFCE have been pressing institutions to sharpen their evaluation strategies and evidence-based practice and embed them consistently into planning in order to align institutional investment of time and money with demonstrable achievement. It is now not sufficient to rely on annual monitoring of performance against targets to chart institutional progress, and colleges are expected to develop a more nuanced account of the way their strategies and activities impact on students to change behaviours and produce positive outcomes. A college should have a clear, strong rationale to inform outreach programmes and activities.

Essentially evaluation will identify what is working and what is not and, provided the right questions are asked, it will indicate why this is the case. Evaluation will facilitate targeted resource allocation, it will drive improvement through good

10 ‘National Strategy for access and student success in higher education’, April 2014, Pt 2, ch1, para 70
11 ibid, para 80
intelligence (formative evaluation), and it will provide a retrospective analysis which shows distance travelled at the end of a project (summative evaluation).

A focus on the applicant experience (Reflective Question 7)

‘The Supporting Professionalism in Admissions (SPA) guide for institutions on developing best practice throughout the applicant journey, http://www.spa.ac.uk/support/applicantexperience/elementsoftheapplicantexperience, defines four stages of the applicant experience – pre-application, application, admissions and transition, and supports the need for learners to get individualised advice and guidance throughout their progression to HE.’

‘HEFCE and OFFA recommend that all HE providers ensure that those admissions policies are aligned to and informed by their WP strategies.’

The National Strategy emphasises that embedding an application, enrolment and induction strategy will lead to increased student retention and success and a good applicant experience will bring down barriers to entry, engage potential applicants and their advisors, improve congruence between student expectations and institutional character, therefore.

Effective and impartial internal progression – (Reflective Question 8)

The National Strategy does not address this issue directly but 79% of colleges in the recent Action on Access-AoC survey indicated that they would prioritise internal progression. Some colleges curriculum explicitly include work to improve self-confidence and self-esteem through the learning offer on Level 3 courses upwards. This includes encouraging engagement at course or programme level; creating meaningful relationships; facilitating better feedback from staff; and creating the self-confidence in belonging to the college HE community. All of this creates effective internal progression with college staff teaching on Level 3 and 4 courses working together to improve performance in the first year of the HE experience. This creates a fit between the college’s Access Agreement and the retention programme and strategy.

The role of students – (Reflective Question 9)

Again, though not specifically addressed in the National Strategy, students as ambassadors and mentors working alongside and partner with outreach staff and academic staff exert a strong influence as credible role models in activities. For maximum effect both the delivering students and their participants should benefit from a robust selection, training, and recognition process. Lead student

12 ibid
13 ibid
ambassadors, often in an internship role, design and deliver the selection and training programmes as well as advising the college generally on its engagement with the student body therefore helping to develop student representation on their HE programmes. (Appendix H outlines this approach.)

**Reviewing and planning outreach strategies and programmes**

Some specific questions that colleges might ask themselves in reviewing and planning their outreach strategies and programmes are given in the reflective questions below. It is critical that the development and delivery of effective outreach programmes and activities are proactively underpinned by strategic leadership – (Reflective Question 10). Issues needing to be addressed at a senior or middle management level include:

- What is the college's approach to outreach, and how is this captured in strategies?
- How far is the college's outreach made visible and designed to complement other strategic objectives such as civic engagement, employer engagement, curriculum development and student recruitment?
- How is the outreach programme funded? Who monitors the spending?
- How will the outreach programme be evaluated and reported on internally and externally?
- How does partnership deliver and improve college outreach and how will these relationships be developed and sustained?
- How will professional and academic staff who contribute to the outreach programme be supported and recognised?

**Reflective Questions**

1. How far do you deliver a ‘balanced approach’ in college HE provision where outreach impacts on both aspiration, attainment and access and on recruitment. Is this documented in the institution’s Access Agreement or other strategic documents?

2. How do the activities in the college HE outreach programme seek to increase confidence and self-esteem in students so that aspiration, attainment, access and student success are improved?
3. How is your college HE outreach programme integrated into partnership working and how is this communicated to staff working at the college?

4. In what ways are effective and impartial IAG utilised within college HE outreach?

5. How is college HE outreach directed to attracting and supporting older students?

6. How would you describe the rationale and use of evaluation to show the impact and success of college HE outreach?

7. How does college HE outreach meet the needs of the applicant experience?

8. How does the college ensure that internal progression activity is effective, impartial and linked to retention and success strategies employed on HE programmes?

9. How are students utilised in the development, delivery and evaluation of college HE outreach programmes and how does this work connect to the college strategy regarding student engagement and representation?

10. Which senior and middle managers take responsibility for the strategic direction of the outreach programmes and are they tackling the key issues?
Appendix A

‘Outreach In addition to our current outreach work for HE students, we have developed a ‘Progression to HE’ course for current Level 3 students. This will be delivered as part of the tutorial programme for Level 3 students and will focus on developing academic skills in preparation for entry into HE. This will not only benefit students progressing onto Leeds City College (LCC) HE courses but all students wishing to progress to HE at other institutions. The course will include the development of research skills and independent learning skills as preparation for the HE system. This can also be delivered in local schools by school teaching staff with input from relevant College staff where appropriate. Progression Officers and the School Liaison team will promote LCC HE opportunities to both internal students and prospective students from local schools.’

Excerpt from Leeds City College Access Agreement 15/16

Appendix B

‘The College has recently been involved with forming the national network for outreach activity, Merseyside Collaborative Network, in partnership with the Liverpool University and other Merseyside based HEIs. Since the dissolution of Aim Higher in 2011, there has been a lack of co-ordinated partnership work in Greater Merseyside between HEIs, FE Colleges and associated stakeholders such as Education Business Partnerships. New partnership is aiming to cover this gap.

Initial discussions identified the following targets:

Collaborative network areas of focus – As proposed in initial paper

- Primary School pupils
- Access to Higher Education/Adult learners/Part-Time students
- Black and Minority Ethnic groups (BME)/Community engagement
- Looked After Children (LAC)/Care Leavers
- Employer engagement/Skills development amongst workforce
- Careers Information Advice and Guidance (CIAG) within secondary schools
- Academic Taster Days/Master Classes
- Evaluation

The College will set own targets in relation to agreed areas of focus.’

Excerpt from The City of Liverpool College Access Agreement 15/16

Appendix C

‘As a provider of further and higher education, the College has long established relationships with local schools and large numbers of groups of pupils from Key Stages 3 and 4 attend the regular open events held at the College which showcase the all-through provision that the College is able to offer from Level 1 vocational study at age 16 via Level 3 to undergraduate and then postgraduate study (in Art, Design or Music). The Schools Liaison team carries out a scheduled programme of
school visits accompanied by vocational experts in areas such as Construction or Engineering and aim to make school pupils aware of the full range of study opportunities leading to higher education via a Level 3 vocational route.’

Excerpt from Colchester Institute Access Agreement 2015-16

Appendix D
‘Trinity Laban maintains an extensive, long-term programme of outreach and in reach activities to support its WP and fair access objectives that target participants from early years (0-5) through to adult students in further education colleges and the informal/non-formal learning sector. Our programmes reach 11,000 children and young people per year and we work in collaboration with 80 primary and secondary schools as well as partner FE colleges and other industry and community partners.

In determining how we should develop our outreach and in reach programmes through the deployment of additional fee income, we have been mindful that the continuity of the WP process in music and dance is such that each category of activity (outreach to promote initial participation; progression opportunities to facilitate longer-term engagement and develop ability; advanced training within the CATs) carries its own importance and contributes to the overall outcome.

Outreach activities include one-off workshops, longer term creative projects and live performances, curriculum based projects raising achievement of pupils and supporting and enriching the school's cultural offer, presentations and information for parents and carers, and regular after hours and holiday provision in music and dance. In the planning and delivery of outreach programmes, we recognise that successful widening participation in professional performance training at HE level is reliant on creating and maintaining ladders of opportunity from first access to on-going learning programmes to (for classical music especially) sustained periods of specialist preparation. At all points, we look to signpost progression routes for participants, whether directly into our own provision or to appropriate training and performing options in other institutions and partner organisations.’

Excerpt from Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance Access Agreement 15/16

Appendix E
‘Outreach activity Doncaster College Children's University established in 2007 provided a variety of activities for 750 primary children in the borough during 2012-13. We also provide workshops and aspire to HE activities for our local secondary schools. However we recognise that our current outreach work with primary and secondary local schools is patchy and we currently do not have an effective infrastructure to see the longitudinal effects of this work. Therefore we intend to recruit a student intern who will work with the Student Experience
Officer in partnership with a local WP primary and secondary school to develop and pilot a series of events at various key stages (year 6, 9, 10/11) to help their pupils to aspire to higher education. An appropriate infrastructure will be put in place to enable monitoring, evaluation and impact of these long, medium and short term interventions. The above initiative requires the input and support of the student body. Therefore we intend to develop and provide student mentor training to help in the development of outreach activity materials and to ensure that students feel valued when participating in these activities we intend to use some of the Access Agreement monies to provide small annual stipends.’

Excerpt from Doncaster College Access Agreement 15/16

Appendix F

Raising the aspirations and access of mature and part-time students has become a pressing national concern. The proportion of mature students in the College has declined slightly since the introduction of student led funding, and whilst the volume of part time students has fallen in line with the picture nationally, many of these students have been able to access full time provision instead as it is available more flexibly through non-traditional delivery mechanisms. However facilitating access for these groups remains a key focus. We will work even more closely with employers to raise awareness of the business impact of higher level skills development, and with employees to communicate the career benefits. To further facilitate all of this we will introduce a Career Coach vehicle, fitted out as a mobile advice and guidance, providing crucial access to information about local and national labour markets and information about employment pathways and career routes.’

Excerpt from Blackpool and the Fylde College Access Agreement 15/16

Appendix G

‘The HEART partnership was established with a key concept of bringing about equality of access to higher education for all those who are capable of and would benefit from the experience. Our partners reach out to schools, individuals and businesses to encourage underrepresented groups to access higher education. Those considered as underrepresented may include, although this list is certainly not exhaustive:

- people who are care experienced
- individuals with certain disabilities
- those living in areas with indices of multiple deprivation
- People from families with no direct experience of higher education.

As the West Yorkshire regional consortium of higher education providers HEART is committed to supporting our partners in encouraging underrepresented groups to aspire, apply, enter and succeed in higher education. We have secured the status as ‘Single Point of Contact’ from the Higher Education Funding Council for England and therefore coordinate targeted collaborative outreach to selected
schools whilst providing all 11-18 schools with details of all partner outreach activity.

HEART also focuses considerable attention on ‘Looked After Young People’ and Care Leavers and on supporting adults to progress to higher education and particularly through our work with the Leeds City Region Local Enterprise Partnership.’

Excerpt from HEART NNCO website

Appendix H
‘Activities:

a. A new team of paid student Ambassadors has been recruited, led by the Student Engagement Officer, to support a wide range of different access activities including support for school links activity and to further develop awareness of progression opportunities to higher education and the support available for such progression. Actions will include direct engagement with the local Information, Advice and Guidance teams, presentations to sixth forms within local schools/Colleges and engagement with local and regional Careers/Progression Events.

b. Improvement in the rate of internal progression of students from a widening participation background from Level 3 FE courses to higher education using the HE Careers team and student Ambassadors to support FE teaching staff in developing the expectations and awareness within College.

c. The provision of Open Events specifically targeting progression to higher education regionally and locally will complement progression activities designed to inform students who might progress within the College and across all campuses. Such Open Events will, on at least two occasions, include taster activities.

d. Development of mentoring opportunities. The scheme will be developed to support placement of students, studying at degree level, as mentors in schools without sixth forms. This project will be designed to raise aspirations and provide role models in a range of curriculum areas. The project is intended to start with the allocation of mentors to The Colchester Academy, a school situated in an area of deprivation and for whom Colchester Institute is lead sponsor.’

Excerpt from Colchester Institute Access Agreement 2015-16

14 http://www.heart.ac.uk/ accessed 29 April 2015