

Messaging and communication for NCOP students in the North East: Key findings

FutureMe and the North East Collaborative Outreach Programme

1. Introduction

The North East Collaborative Outreach Programme (NECOP) is a collaboration of all of the universities and colleges in the North East region. Institutions are working together to deliver a targeted programme of information and support relating to higher education (HE) options in the North East. This activity is part of the National Collaborative Outreach Programme funded by the Office for Students (OfS). FutureMe is the programme of activity being offered to students by NECOP (NECOP, 2018). The programme aims to increase participation rates among young people living in 'NCOP postcodes', which are areas where HE participation is lower than expected given the GCSE attainment of the young people who live there.

This research aims to help FutureMe communicate more effectively to hone their messaging for young people so that they can make more informed choices about HE. It specifically seeks to shed light on:

1. How different messages about HE affect young people in the North East's aspirations to apply to HE, both positively (encouraging them to apply) and negatively (discouraging them from applying).
2. How young people in the North East perceive current messaging around HE, and how persuasive they find different messages.
3. What the key influences are on young people in the North East's decision-making about applying to HE.
4. What young people in the North East feel they need to know in order to make informed decisions about applying to HE.

1.1 Method

Research was carried out with young people aged 14-18 through semi-structured focus groups in schools and colleges using both questions and stimulus material for young people to respond to. In addition, LKMco carried out an online survey with opportunistic sampling. 47 young people took part in focus groups and 78 responses were received to the survey. The research design was informed by a literature review and exploratory conversations with expert informants in target areas. The findings presented below are results from the focus groups and survey.

2. Plans and aspirations about HE

- Most young people who took part in our research aspire to HE and most plan to apply for a degree course. This is the case both for young people from NCOP postcodes and those from other postcodes. This is consistent with previous research (see, for example, Reay et al., 2009). A smaller number of young people plan to apply for other pathways, such as apprenticeships, while a minority plan to go straight into work.
- 16-18 year olds tend to have specific plans about HE, whereas 14-16 year olds tended to have very unspecified plans, and it was clear that they had yet to think about courses, pathways, or HEIs. FutureMe therefore has differing potential influence amongst 16-18 year olds compared to younger pupils and messaging should reflect this:
 - **FutureMe should prioritise messaging for pupils at KS4 and perhaps below** as young people of this age from low-participation backgrounds appear to be at an earlier stage of planning for HE, and in some cases were unclear about what HE is, or what it involves. **For these young people, FutureMe has the potential to broaden horizons by providing impartial information across a range of HE pathways before young people close down pathways and options.** Given that these young peoples' plans are at an early stage of development and still malleable, **FutureMe should ensure that they**

receive information frequently, particularly as young peoples' plans crystallise between school-to-school transitions.

- **FutureMe should also work with older pupils on a more individual basis to support decision making once young peoples' plans are more developed.** This could involve individualised information about specific courses, job opportunities, or HEIs both in, and outside the local area.

3. Attitudes to HE

- Despite the fact that most young people aspire to attend a university, as distinct from other HEIs, they also tend to hold negative associations with the words "university" and images related to it. More specifically, it seems the environment may be intimidating for them. **FutureMe should therefore use opportunities such as visits, or presentations from current students to challenge this view and present a more approachable image.**
- Young people have more positive associations with aspects of HE related to socialising and independent living but they do not always associate these aspects with HE. **FutureMe should therefore ensure they tap into young peoples' positive associations with social aspects of HE, and clearly outline the ways in which HE can support them developing friendship groups, networks and independence.**
- Younger pupils have more limited understanding regarding apprenticeships than 16-18 year olds. **FutureMe should therefore prioritise general information and guidance about pathways for younger pupils, in contrast to the more specific support that older pupils appear to require.**

4. Key influences

- Parents are the most important source of advice and guidance about HE for most young people who took part in our research. For focus group participants they were the most frequently reported influence on decision making, though this was not the case for survey respondents. **FutureMe should prioritise direct communication with parents ideally at an early stage in their children's educational career.** This might involve workshops for parents of late primary or early secondary age young people to ensure parents are informed by the time young people start thinking through HE options.
- Survey respondents were more likely to report that teachers were their key source of information regarding HE. **FutureMe should therefore work to ensure that teachers provide consistent and informed advice regarding HE and non-HE pathways.**
- Young people who were part of our research value advice from people who "know me best" and who will be honest. This is a key reason why parents are valued as a source of guidance and advice.
- Visits appeared to be a useful, informative, but under-used source of information for young people. Where young people had been on visits, these had been to universities. There appeared to be lack of visits to employers providing apprenticeships. **FutureMe should place visits at the heart of their strategy for informing young people about different HE pathways.**

5. Localism

- Young people have mixed feelings about wanting to study locally versus wanting to go further afield. The two competing views can be characterised as 'getting out' or 'staying local' and both can be framed in positive or negative terms. For instance, a desire to 'get out' can result from frustration with local opportunities, or from excitement at the prospect of new experiences. Likewise, a desire to 'stay put' can result from a fear of the unknown, or from a strong bond with family and established friendship networks.
- Financial considerations also play a role in many young peoples' desire to stay in their local area. Young people emphasised the difficulty of using public transport to navigate the region. Young people described their decisions about HE as being influenced both by options with shorter travel distances and their existing knowledge of how to get between particular HEIs and their home town.
- **FutureMe needs to tailor its communications to both preferences by offering young people support for choices that involve staying in the North East, whilst at the same time broadening horizons by showing young people what might be available further afield.**

6. Knowledge about HE

- Gaps in knowledge about HE seem to vary by age. As noted throughout this report, 14-16 year olds need basic information that tackles common misconceptions, whilst 16-18 year olds need information relating to more specific questions, for example around particular HE courses. These questions may require more individualised responses. Young people at all ages also want to know more about how HE might affect their career prospects.
- Our findings strongly suggest that young people know less about non-degree pathways at HE. **As a result, FutureMe should prioritise IAG relating to these pathways, especially amongst 14-16 year olds.**
- Amongst the young people involved in our research no single area of knowledge (such as student finance or housing options) stands out as being more or less important compared to others in terms of persuading young people to consider HE. **In order to make informed decisions about HE young people should therefore be supported to develop their knowledge about a range of aspects of HE including, for example, finance, housing, course content, travel and career prospects.**
- Although young peoples' preference was to receive information about HE during Year 12 (since this is the age at which they have to make decisions about HE), our findings in other sections suggest that younger pupils require an understanding of the fundamentals of HE. **FutureMe therefore needs to balance its support for decisions in Year 12 with early engagement.**

7. Conclusions

7.1 Differences between age groups

Younger pupils aged 14-16 often have very unspecific plans and many have yet to think about courses, pathways, or HEIs. These young people therefore need basic information, particularly in order to address common misconceptions. In contrast, 16-18 year olds often have more specific questions for example in relation to particular HE courses and these young people therefore require more specific and individualised support. This might include information about specific courses, job opportunities and HEIs both in, and outside of the local area.

FutureMe has the potential to broaden horizons for young people in Key Stages two, three and four by ensuring programmes, information and messaging contain impartial information regarding a range of HE pathways on offer. This should mitigate the risk of some pupils closing down pathways and options at an early stage. Given the embryonic nature of these young peoples' plans, and the likelihood that those plans might change during the transition from KS4 to KS5, FutureMe should also ensure that young people in their target group receive this information at frequent, repeated intervals.

There are five key misconceptions held by 14-16 year olds that FutureMe should seek to address:

"Myth-busting" common misconceptions about HE

1. **Young people do not choose their own subjects at HE:** young people should understand that they are able to choose their own path at HE and do not have to cover a range of subjects as they do at school.
2. **HE is expensive:** young people should be informed about student debt.
3. **Accommodation is expensive:** young people should have an understanding of the various options available to them in terms of living arrangements during an HE course (including non-university pathways), and understand the costs and financial support available.
4. **HE takes too long, or is too hard:** young people should be aware of the length of time HE courses generally take, and their academic requirements.
5. **HE does not help you find a job:** young people should be able to explore how graduates from a range of HE pathways build early careers. For example young people need to know that moving straight into low-paid work after graduating to cover short-term costs does not prevent graduates from finding more fulfilling long-term careers in their chosen field.

7.2 Lack of understanding of non-degree pathways

Young people's understanding of different HE pathways was patchy. Young people of all ages, but especially those aged 14-16, had considerable gaps in their knowledge about apprenticeships for example. FutureMe should therefore prioritise general information and guidance about non-degree pathways, particularly for younger pupils.

7.3 Attitudes to university pathways

Young people who took part in the research generally aspired to HE, but also revealed some fears and negative attitudes towards university HE pathways, especially at older universities. Often, these negative associations suggested a lack of cultural capital, and a sense that particular types of HEI, often older universities, were intimidating. As a result, FutureMe should make use of opportunities, such as visits or presentations from current students in order to challenge some of the ideas young people have about HEIs.

Young people had more positive associations in relation to pictures of HE students socialising and living independently. However they did not always associate these pictures and activities with HE. FutureMe should ensure that they tap into young people's positive associations with social aspects of HE, and clearly outline the ways in which HE can support them in making friends and developing their networks and independence. However, this should be balanced with the need to provide young people with a clear and accurate understanding of the academic challenges associated with HE.

7.4 Working with parents and teachers

Parents are a critical source of information regarding HE and for focus group participants (although not for survey respondents), the most frequently used. Young people felt that their parents were largely supportive of their choices, although young people felt that parents were most useful as sources of opinion on their potential choices, rather than as sources of knowledge about HE. The literature also suggests that parental outreach is vital in helping young people make informed decisions about HE while the literature on working class parents suggests that most parents from low-income backgrounds want their children to go to university.

FutureMe needs to communicate directly with parents, ideally at an early stage, for example through workshops with parents of late primary or early secondary-age pupils. This will ensure parents are better informed by the time young people begin thinking through their options for HE. Parents should be informed about the benefits of HE and educated about the benefits of - and options for - different HE pathways, not just degrees, both in and outside of the North East region.

Our findings are consistent with previous evidence suggesting that young people from low-participation backgrounds may receive more information on HE from teachers in school and college than they do from parents or other adults in their family. FutureMe should therefore work with teachers to ensure young people receive consistent information, and to ensure that teachers have a knowledge of a wide range of different options and pathways within HE.

7.5 Under-use of visits

Young people value visits to HEIs and reported finding them useful and informative. However, visits appeared to be under-used, with only a minority of the young people we spoke to reporting having visited HEIs. Where young people had been on visits, these had been to universities; few visits to employers or colleges providing apprenticeships or alternative HE pathways seemed to be taking place. FutureMe should therefore place visits at the heart of their programme of support and should particularly prioritise visits giving young people experiences of alternative HE routes and a variety of institutions.

7.6 Timing of information

Young people have a particular appetite for information about HE during Year 12, as this is the age at which they have to make decisions about HE. FutureMe should therefore ensure that young people in Year 12 receive the support they need. However, the literature, and our findings from this research, suggest that younger pupils also

require information about the fundamentals of HE. FutureMe should therefore engage with young people as well as their parents and teachers early.

7.7 Links to career prospects

Future careers seem to be key motivator for young people and the opportunity to work in sectors or roles that offer fulfilling or interesting (rather than well-paid) roles is particularly prized. Local opportunities to access such careers after having studied an HE qualification should therefore be particularly highlighted.

Meanwhile, it is clear that strengthening the regional economy would create more opportunities that motivate young people. As well as helping young people make decisions about HE, FutureMe should therefore lend its support to efforts to strengthen and diversify the regional economy. For example, FutureMe might support calls for government to invest in infrastructure in the North East, or use their expertise to support local enterprise partnerships.

7.8 Localism

We found mixed evidence on localism. While many young people want to stay near their family, most often for reasons of emotional attachment, financial support and ease of travel, others are open to the idea of moving away from the North East for HE. It is therefore important that FutureMe works with other NCOP consortia to give young people in the North East a sense of the pathways and opportunities that are available to them outside of the North East, as well as those within the region.

7.9 Avoiding perceptions of bias

Young people use information from HEIs as a primary source of knowledge about HE, but at the same time have concerns about bias. This can make information about the benefits of HE less persuasive. FutureMe should therefore ensure that young people can triangulate official information from universities with less formal sources of knowledge, such as hearing directly from current students from a similar socio-economic background.

Finally, all communication with young people should be informed by the five features of effective communication set out below.

Five features of effective communication:

1. Avoid perceptions of bias: Information should be factual and support young peoples' choices across all possible pathways.
2. Ensure that information about HE is also linked into career pathways, not just in the North East.
3. Give young people a sense of what the non-academic features of different HE pathways are like: this might include social life, accommodation, day to day and weekly schedules as well as when students see family.
4. Tailor information to different age groups' needs: basic information targeted at lower-secondary-age pupils, with more individualised support for those in 6th form.
5. Start communication with young people and their parents early: offer clearly signposted opportunities for follow up engagement.



This report was written by the education and youth development ‘think and action tank’ **LKMco**. We believe society has a duty to ensure children and young people receive the support they need in order to make a fulfilling transition to adulthood. We work towards this vision by helping education and youth organisations develop, evaluate and improve their work with young people. We then carry out academic and policy research and advocacy that is grounded in our experience.