

Take Your Place Phase 1 Evaluation Report

Executive Summary

Introduction

Take Your Place is the programme of collaborative outreach activity undertaken since 2017 by neaco, the Network for East Anglian Collaborative Outreach. With a funding mandate to address disproportionately low rates of higher education access in the East Anglian region, by focusing on the geographical areas where this occurs, Take Your Place works with the schools and further education colleges that serve students living in those areas.

Running to 31 July 2019, Phase 1 of the programme saw a complex mix of activities delivered by Higher Education Champions in three counties (Cambridgeshire & Peterborough; Norfolk; Suffolk). Activity was based on a core of provision underpinned by a Progressive Framework. This framework set out a package of activities (and associated outcomes) on two separate strands: “understanding and preparedness” and “passion and ambition”, and a third stream of wrap-around activities.

To understand the implementation and outcomes of Take Your Place, a programme of research and evaluation was implemented alongside the programme. Sitting alongside a broader national evaluation effort, the local evaluation approach consisted of two inter-related strands of work, spanning a range of research and evaluation designs and activities.

Phase 1 evaluation strategy

The *impact evaluation* explored through experimental and quasi-experimental designs the impact of the wider Take Your Place programme and of specific targeted provision, on key outcomes. It made use of a large-scale survey deployed as part of national evaluation efforts reaching over 20,000 students in three consecutive academic years starting Autumn 2017 to understand (1) successive cohorts’ higher education intentions and knowledge, compared to a pre-programme baseline; (2) changes in participants’ higher education intentions and knowledge, compared to before their participation in the programme. Linking survey data with activity monitoring data allowed for the exploration of (3) the relationship between participation in specific types, and amounts, of Take Your Place activity and the same outcomes. Experimental design research, in the form of three randomised control trials, further allowed for the investigation of (4) the impact of two light-touch interventions complementing in-school/college provision on higher education applications, and respective knowledge of options. Finally, the use of linked administrative data provided an overview of (5) the actual rates of progression to higher education as a function of Take Your Place participation.

The *process evaluation* aimed to understand how the intervention is implemented, how the different stakeholders engage with the intervention, as well as how the involved individuals and institutions perceive their involvement, and potential benefits from this involvement. It made use of a wide-ranging qualitative study undertaken in the first year of programme delivery, and later consultations with key stakeholders including students and parents.

What the evaluation tells us

The results of the impact and process evaluation point to a broadly positive, and on rare occasion mixed picture of the impact of Take Your Place on a range of higher education application intentions and relevant education knowledge, and the manner in which participation is perceived.

The three rounds of the large-scale survey indicate that prior to the start of Take Your Place, students reported only moderate levels of knowledge of higher education options and pathways. Year-on-year comparisons highlight a mixture of patterns of change, including small decreases for subsequent cohorts, stable patterns showing no change, or slight upticks in self-reported knowledge. Final year students (respectively at the end of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications respectively) consistently reported the highest levels of knowledge. This seems to point to a natural cycle of knowledge, decisions, and transitions.

The results also suggest complex patterns of change, with some very positive trends displayed in relation to knowledge of facilitating subjects and qualifications for initially-year 11 students tracked longitudinally for all three surveys, but less positive trends for year 10 students similarly tracked, and relatively flat trajectories for the other year groups. This relates to overall participation in Take Your Place, more specifically the existence of Take Your Place as a programme in these students' schools, and not necessarily their individual levels of engagement.

That Take Your Place contributes to improvement within a natural cycle of variation in knowledge and intentions is supported by further analysis of a cohort of students tracked over time, across the three survey rounds, which points to pre-transition years (e.g. Year 11, Year 13, college Level 3 year 2 students) generally having more positive attitudes towards higher education and higher levels of knowledge than their respective comparison groups.

Focusing on the students specifically targeted by Take Your Place (those residing in the target geographical areas described above), the picture painted by the survey is on the whole more positive than for the full cohorts. This includes bigger positive changes, and fewer negative changes, both for the self-reported levels of knowledge, and for overall higher education intentions. Taken together with evidence that Take Your Place appears to be well-targeted (though of course it engages with a substantial number of students not residing in the Uni Connect target wards), this points to a positive message. The reasons behind some of the downward trends noted above remain to be explored through further research.

To explore individual levels of engagement with Take Your Place and the relationship between this and the key outcomes noted above, analysis exploring linked survey and monitoring data was undertaken. This pointed to a positive, small, but statistically significant relationship between each additional contact hour in Take Your Place and both final levels, and change from Phase 1 start to finish, of attitude and knowledge of (higher) education. The results also suggest that certain types of activities, specifically summer schools and those classified using the Skill and Attainment HEAT category, as well as school-specific activities funded through neaco school grants are statistically significantly associated with better student outcomes.

The linked activity data analysis results are therefore consistent with the Take Your Place set-up, and also with wider higher education outreach literature and the general reasoning behind Take Your Place, of targeted, school-specific, contextualised activity that seeks to improve students' knowledge and options. They also align with meta-findings from the CFE National Evaluation reports. It remains to be seen how, in the future, this might create a virtuous cycle, resulting in the higher levels of attainment that are the key driver of higher education access inequalities in England. Evidence pointing to Skills

and Attainment activities having the strongest relationship with higher education application intentions, certainly appears to confirm this hypothesis.

The analysis of linked administrative data on realised rates of higher education progression points to no evidence of a statistically significant association between Take Your Place participation and higher education access, though the validity of this analysis is limited by the coverage of the data, available only for the first cohort of Take Your Place participants, students who were in Year 13 in 2017-18, potentially making application decisions too early for the programme to have had the chance to provide meaningful impact.

Altogether, these results suggest a positive impact of Take Your Place activity. We are unable to definitely attribute changes to Take Your Place participation in the absence of a perfect experimental evaluation design; however, the quasi-experimental nature of the cohort-on-cohort analysis, together with the longitudinal results points to robust findings of small, sometimes mixed, but generally positive impact of Take Your Place on students' higher education intentions and relevant educational knowledge.

Attribution of effects is possible, however, in relation to the light-touch behavioural nudging interventions (taking place alongside in-school/college provision) evaluated in three randomised control trials. These low-cost interventions, additional to the substantial in-school activity outlined above, showed no meaningful impact on students' applications to higher education (for Year 13 students). The Year 11, education-options-focused trial was faced with substantial attrition challenges due to loss at Follow-Up (with data being collected through the main survey used in all of the above analyses). Despite this, and the inability to carry out the analysis as intended for this trial, these experimental approaches represent valuable learning for the sector from an evaluation perspective. They have also directly informed Take Your Place provision, with decisions to not continue distributing the text messages taken as a result of the trial results.

The varied qualitative and activity-specific feedback insights offer a further account of the diversity and fluidity of choices in relation to higher education, with different routes and types of higher education intentions expressed even by the small sample of stakeholders participating in the end-of-Phase small scale process evaluation.

This is reflected, for instance, in the ratings by participants in Take Your Place activity of specific sessions they had attended. Results from these post-session questionnaires administered by staff point to overall positive activity ratings by participants, especially around the performance of the staff delivering the sessions, and the provision of relevant and actionable knowledge. The two core types of Take Your Place activity are rated most positively amongst all activity types in relation to participants' confidence of using acquired knowledge, though least positively in relation to immediate action, reflective of the overall progressive nature of Take Your Place.

Further qualitative insights provide a wealth of information around the challenges of on-the-ground implementation and practical application of the progressive framework to the realities of schools and colleges participating in Take Your Place. Findings from the review were presented to the steering group at the time, and informed approaches to training new staff members, and later on, revisions to the progressive framework for Phase 2, alongside further insights gathered by the central team administering neaco and Take Your Place.

The end-of-Phase qualitative results suggest that the knowledge of higher education options or how to apply – precisely the aspects addressed by the survey questions – seems to sometimes materialise *after*

decisions about routes have been taken. In other words, some knowledge prompts the decision to choose, or switch to, a particular route, and some knowledge follows that decision.

Taken together with evidence from the above analysis pointing to transition years showing the greatest benefit from Phase 1 of Take Your Place, this suggests that the programme is addressing an otherwise complex decision space, and overall is positively supporting young people to make the best possible decisions about their higher education.