Impact Evaluation Report: FutureHY Outreach Activities

Summary

This report was commissioned by FutureHY, the York and North Yorkshire Uni Connect partnership, to evaluate the impact of their outreach activities. With this aim in mind, we sought the views of young people who had engaged in the FutureHY programme over the last four years with regards to their experiences of the outreach activities and the impact of the programme on their knowledge and decisions regarding higher education. The research adopted a qualitative approach with six students interviewed from one school in North Yorkshire. With existing research and FutureHY's underlying framework as touchstones, the findings of our study suggest the outreach activities are positively received by students and are effective in encouraging students to progress into higher education. The positive impact of the activities is underpinned by increases in confidence and knowledge regarding higher education, as well as greater familiarity and identification with attending university. Areas of future outreach activity that were identified includes a focus on the financial aspects of higher education, increased autonomy and choice between and within outreach activities, and consideration of the scheduling of activities.

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Introduction

Education in the UK has featured heavily on government agendas for several decades (Breeze, Johnson and Uytman, 2020). Increasing access to higher education, in particular, has been considered a priority and means of both economic growth and addressing social exclusion (Kenyon, 2011). University graduates are more likely to be employed, experience greater employment options, and earn more in comparison to their peers who do not attend university (Department of Education, 2020). Beyond these benefits, attending university holds the potential for significant personal and social development, and plans a key role in fostering citizenship among young people (Nussbaum, 2002). In accord, over the last decade there has been an increased focus on education policies designed to eradicate participation barriers to higher education, as well as greater monitoring and scrutiny of their success (Boliver, 2013).

With approximately 453 higher education institutions (colleges and universities) across the UK, there is little shortage of destinations for students (HESA, 2021). However, it is the case that many students choose not to attend university despite achieving the required entry requirements to do so. Increasing access and participation for this group of students is a key focus of Uni Connect - a consortium of partnerships across the UK funded by the Office for Students (OfS) to provide an intensive and progressive programme of outreach activities to students in Years 9 through 13 in target wards (areas where participation in higher education is lower than expected given GCSE attainment). The aim of the current study is to evaluate the programme provided by FutureHY, the York and North Yorkshire Uni Connect partnership.

FutureHY is responsible for 10 target wards that includes approximately 3400 target students. The partnership consists of three universities and six higher education in further education colleges. It also has a number of additional partners that include York City Council, North Yorkshire County Council, York and North Yorkshire LEP/ Careers Enterprise Company, National Citizen Service, North Yorkshire Coast Opportunity Area, NYBEP and York Cares. Working with these and other organisations, FutureHY offers a programme of free activity to target schools and colleges. The programme includes over 33 different outreach and intervention activities that have, to date, been delivered at 23 schools and colleges. The current study is part of FutureHY's local evaluation that seeks to quantify and assess the impact of their work, and evidence the contribution of the activities of Future HY to the goals of Uni Connect.

FutureHY partners:

University Centre Askham Bryan, Craven College, CU Scarborough, Harrogate College, Scarborough TEC, Selby College, York College, University of York and York St John University.

The structure of the report is as follows. A brief summary of key research on access to higher education is first provided. In line with FutureHY evaluative framework, a sociological perspective is adopted when discussing research. The report then provides additional information on FutureHY and identifies the specific aims of the current project. The research methods used to gather the data for this study are then presented and discussed. This section includes the position of the research team in designing and undertaking the project, details of how the data was collected, a summary of each activity that the participants had access to, and how the data was analysed. The results of the research are then presented and accompanied by consideration of existing research and FutureHY's underlying framework.

A sociological perspective on access and participation in higher education

A wealth of sociological research suggests that the decisions young people make regarding attending university are driven by more than just personal characteristics, attainment and desires. The wider influence of social, geographical and economic demographics, in particular, are key to whether young people choose higher education and why (Evans, 2017). A study of two localities in Wales by Evans (2017) illustrates how this is the case and how the same decision can be underpinned by different outlooks. In the study, students aged 16-18 were asked about the influencing factors on attending higher education. In response to the economic crisis, students from the first area reported the need to 'race' against their fellow students to gain 'better' qualifications that would aid them in securing employment, even though the range of job opportunities for that locality were severely limited. By contrast, students from the second area, a similar 'working class' area, offered a more positive outlook on their employment prospects but chose higher education routes regardless.

Evans (2017) explained the differences between the two groups of young people through Bourdieu's concept of capital and habitus. *Social capital* is the term used to explain the reproduction and links between social class, status and power relations when individuals form networks with others (Hunter, Smith and Emerald, 2015). *Habitus* can be understood as behaviours where individuals embody certain practices and behaviours acquired via normalisation (Dunning, 2002). Evans (2017) argues that these young people were socialised by parents and broader societal experiences into understanding and embodying the ideology or habitus reflective of more than just their immediate surroundings - apparently similar localities resulting in discernibly different outlooks but the same decision to attend university. In doing so, it is apparent that the social circumstances, personal experiences and voices of young people are central to understanding decisions regarding participation in higher education.

The accounts of prospective and current students highlight a range of important factors that influence participation decisions. A number of studies have found that, whilst young people often report that they would like to attend higher education (e.g., Kettley and Whitehead, 2012; Baker at al. 2014), there are a number of barriers that mean many do not. Based on a series of focus groups, Scanlon et al. (2019), for example, identified one barrier as being the 'leap into the unknown' – the doubts and misgivings associated with the transition from school to higher education. Anxiety and lack of confidence in academic ability, and fears regarding lack of opportunities to make friends, were also cited as potential barriers by prospective students. In addition, while very few participants alluded to their social class as a distinct barrier, students felt that more prestige local universities were less likely to accept applications from those from disadvantaged backgrounds (see also Boliver, 2013). This research and other similar work that have sought the views of students themselves form the backdrop for the current study.

FutureHY - aims, approach, and activities

Established in 2017 as part of the wider OfS-funded Uni Connect Programme (previously known as NCOP - the National Collaborative Outreach Programme), FutureHY is the partnership that operates in York and North Yorkshire, and is one of 29 Uni Connect regional consortia in England. The aim of the Uni Connect Programme is to increase participation in higher education by supporting partnerships in different geographical areas in England where participation in higher education to deliver 'sustained and progressive programmes of higher education outreach to pre- and post-16 students' (OfS, 2020, p.2). FutureHY seeks to meet the aim of Uni Connect at regional level via delivery of a bespoke set of activities that meet local needs and support young people in their decisions regarding future careers and further education.

The ethos of FutureHY is grounded and underpinned by the Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions (NERUPI) framework and Gatsby Benchmarks. Each activity provided by FutureHY is mapped to the eight Gatsby Benchmarks and the five overarching pillars of NERUPI framework. The Gatsby Benchmarks provide a common framework for schools to improve their career guidance system. The benchmarks identify the level and type of support ideally available, as well as the experiences and opportunities that should be offered. The NERUPI framework complements this approach and is used to guide evaluation of outreach activities against the aim of empowering students to be knowledgeable, aware, confident and skilled at navigating the decisions and challenges associated with higher education. The NERUPI framework maps key practical learning outcomes against the five core pillars for each educational stage of widening participation students, from primary school through to postgraduate level (Hayton and Bengry-Howell, 2016).

Eight Gatsby Benchmarks

Benchmark	Title	Description
1	Stable Careers Programme	Every school and college should have an embedded programme of career education and guidance that is known and understood by pupils, parents, teachers and employers.
2	Learning from Career and Labour Market Information	Every pupil, and their parents, should have access to good-quality information about future study options and labour market opportunities. They will need the support of an informed adviser to make best use of available information.
3	Addressing the Needs of Each Pupil	Pupils have different career guidance needs at different stages. Opportunities for advice and support need to be tailored to the needs of each pupil. A school's careers programme should embed equality and diversity considerations throughout.
4	Linking Curriculum Learning To Careers	All teachers should link curriculum learning with careers. For example, STEM subject teachers should highlight the relevance of STEM subjects for a wide range of future career paths.
5	Encounters with Employers and Employees	Every pupil should have multiple opportunities to learn from employers about work, employment and the skills that are valued in the workplace. This can be through a range of enrichment activities including visiting speakers, mentoring and enterprise schemes.
6	Experiences of Workplaces	Every pupil should have first-hand experiences of the workplace through work visits, work shadowing and/or work experience to help their exploration of career opportunities, and expand their networks.
7	Encounters with Further and Higher Education	All pupils should understand the full range of learning opportunities that are available to them. This includes both academic and vocational routes and learning in schools, colleges, universities and in the workplace.
8	Personal Guidance	Every pupil should have opportunities for guidance interviews with a careers adviser, who could be internal (a member of school staff) or external, provided they are trained to an appropriate level. These should be available whenever significant study or career choices are being made. They should be expected for all pupils but should be timed to meet their individual needs.

The NERUPI framework has five pillars:

Know - Develop students' knowledge and awareness of the benefits of higher education

Choose - Develop students' capacity to navigate the Higher Education sector and make informed choices

Become - Develop students' confidence and resilience to negotiate the challenges of university life

Practice - Develop students' study skills and capacity for academic attainment

Understand - Develop students' understanding by contextualising subject knowledge

The intended outcomes of the FutureHY activities are linked to each of these sessions in the core prospectus, and mapped on the progression framework.

NERUPI is a community of practice for those seeking to reduce inequalities in higher education access, participation and progression. It includes over 70 members who share expertise and novel approaches to evaluating impact of outreach and intervention in Higher Education.

Source: http://www.nerupi.co.uk/about/overview

In their NERUPI-grounded Progression Framework, FutureHY also consider the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and his concepts of capital and habitus in relation to the five pillars. Key to their approach is that Bourdieu argued that as relationships with others are built, so is the amount of capital one can accrue. In addition, certain types of capital can be exchanged for others when meaningful networks are established (Hunter, Smith and Emerald, 2015). Bourdieu's work has proved highly effective in analysing education and is therefore a valuable theoretical lens through which to view outreach and intervention work. Notably for FutureHY, the combination of Bourdieu and the NERUPI framework provide a counterpoint to a historical model of widening participation centred on personal deficit and "raising aspirations". Instead, the focus is on providing students with the skills to overcome barriers they might face, including those that arise from systemic and structural inequality.

In FutureHY's framework, Bourdieu's notion of social and academic capital mirror the 'Know' and 'Choose'

progression pillars that are designed to develop knowledge and understanding in regard to higher education and make informed decisions. Here, students can expect to gain an understanding of higher education courses and placements, learn about financial implications and applications via UCAS and how their course may map into future employment (FutureHY, 2021). In years 12-13, habitus development mirrors the 'Become' progression pillar where the focus is on confidence and resilience. In this area, students will be able to engage in activities that allow them to become familiar with broader university life such as meeting and making friends. Next is the notion of Skills Capital that aligns with the 'Practise' pillar. The focus of this area is on skillsets of independent learning and critical thinking where students may undertake group work, reflective practice and student-centred learning exercises. Finally, Intellectual Capital aligns to the 'Understand' pillar where students are able to contextualise their learning by applying it to wider scenarios whilst participating in collaborative programmes with other or similar disciplines.

Aims of the study

The overarching aim of this project is to evaluate the impact of participation in the outreach activities provided FutureHY in regard to supporting informed decision-making around higher education. The focus here is on the experiences of six students at one secondary school and sixth form in North Yorkshire who have participated in the programme over the last your years. The intention is to assess and evidence any impact, and then improve future delivery to meet Uni Connect aims.

This project therefore, has three specific aims:

1. To engage with students who have participated in the FutureHY programme with a view to collecting personal experiences and feedback on their experiences.

2. To evaluate evidence of the impact of the FutureHY programme on students' decisions to attend higher education.

3. To use the insight gained to guide the development and refinement of current outreach activities and inform the development and planning of new outreach activities.

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This section will discuss the design of the study, the methods of data collection, and the method of data analysis. Firstly, a brief outline of the researchers' underpinning viewpoint is provided and this will be followed by a justification for the use of online semi-structured interviews. Second, how the data was collected and a description of each activity the young people participated in is provided. Finally, an outline of the evaluative framework used to underpin the data collection methods is included before a summary that will outline the key themes identified from the analysis process is presented.

Epistemological position

With the aims of this project poised to explore the experiences of participants engagement in outreach activities and to evaluate the impact of this participation on higher education decisions, an interpretivist/qualitative perspective was adopted. Having engaged in reading of relevant existing literature and following verbal discussions and reflection with FutureHY on the content and running of the activities, this study adopted an inductive approach (Watts, 2013). This approach, combined with a semi-structured interview guide, allowed the researcher to fully explore the experiences of the participants engagement in the activities while focusing them on key issues relevant to the aims (Bryman, 2016).

Method of data collection

The requirement for participant accounts and reflections on their involvement in outreach activities meant that semi-structured interviews were deemed the most appropriate method for data collection. Open-ended questions were asked to gain rich data to account for individual and shared experiences (Kvale and Brinkman, 2009). Other literature on youth interventions and participation in outreach activities has found this approach to data collection

effective in allowing similar participants to describe their experiences (e.g., Evans, 2017).

Data collection

Six semi-structured interviews with participants identified through purposive, criterion sampling by FutureHY were conducted in June 2021 (Bryman, 2016). The students were identified as having taken part in a number of outreach activities and over a sustained period of time (four-years). As such, they were considered to be well-placed to give both a detailed account of their experiences on different outreach activities while also being able to reflect on participation in the overall programme. Each participant had been involved in a minimum of four activities across a period of four years and were a mixture of male and females. The details for each participant can be found in table 1.

Table 1: Participant details and outreach activities

Participant	School Year at date of interview	Gender	Student Launch 2017	Marginal Gains 2017–2018	The Brilliant Club Scholars Programme 2017–2018	GCSE Pod (Online Platform) 2017–2018	Health Event 2018	Flood a School 2019	Unifrog (Online Platform) 2019–2020	The Brilliant Club Scholars Programme 2020	Journalism Project 2020	Flood a School 2020
1	13	Male	✓	✓x3	✓			✓x1	✓	✓		✓x1
2	13	Male	✓	✓x1	✓			✓x1	✓			✓x1
3	13	Female	✓			✓		✓x1	✓		✓x2	✓x1
4	13	Male			✓	✓		✓x1	✓	✓		✓x1
5	13	Female	✓					✓x1	✓			✓x1
6	12	Female	✓	✓x3			✓x1	✓x1	✓			✓x1

A gatekeeper at the school liaised with the researchers to agree a convenient time and date for the interviews to take place. Due to restriction associated with the Covid-19 pandemic, interviews took place remotely via the internet and videocall software (participants 4, 5, and 6) or telephone (1, 2 and 3).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis purposes. Participant and gatekeeper consent forms were collected prior to the commencement of the interviews and all participants were reminded of their voluntary participation and right to withdraw at any time prior to the recorded interview. The interviews lasted between 15 and 32 minutes.

Data analysis and rigour

After conducting the six semi-structured interviews, each interview was transcribed verbatim and the recordings listened to several times to aid the immersion and familiarity with the data for the analysing researcher (Sparkes and Smith, 2018). By engaging in this process, interpretations of themes and patterns between individual case studies were noted. This project was analysed using six-stage thematic analysis on the software programme NVivo12 (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The first of the six-stages is immersion in the data, with stages two and three devoted to creating first order themes that have similarities (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Twenty-one codes were created and remodelled. In stage four, these codes were organised into hierarchies with stage five giving names to overarching themes. The three themes identified for this study were: (1) student engagement and experience, (2) impact of the activities on students' knowledge and decision making, and (3) opportunities for development and improvement for outreach activities. Finally, in stage six, these themes were discussed based on the researcher's judgement of which best met the aims of the project (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Ethical approval

The project was granted ethical approval by the York St John University Ethics Committee in January 2021.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results of our analysis. It is organised around the three themes that are aligned with our aims: (1) student engagement and experiences of activities provided by FutureHY, (2) the impact of the activities on students' knowledge and decision making, and (3) opportunities for development and improvement for outreach activities.

'Student Launch' (2017)

Delivered by FutureHY, this event was a precursor to all activities and was designed as an introduction to the programme. At the launch, prospective students in Year 9 or above, and who lived in the targeted postcode were, invited to attend. Here, they learnt about the types of activities the programme would provide and the opportunities available to them. The launch took place in the school hall with a FutureHY representative explaining the programme via PowerPoint presentation. After this, students were invited to participate in some interactive activities that covered topics such as student societies and accommodation to test their knowledge of Higher Education.

'Marginal Gains' (2017-2018)

Marginal Gains was a third-party provider programme for male students that was delivered by Cosmos Engagement across three workshops. The workshops took place once per term, each lasting two hours and were delivered by a former athlete who had grown up in care. The aim of the workshops was to explore how tiny alterations that students could make in and outside of school could result in huge improvements in confidence and ability to achieve. The workshops took place in school, in a classroom and pupils engaged in a PowerPoint presentation. The first workshop was an introduction to learn what Marginal Gains was; session two was a goal-setting workshop where students were asked to complete a Marginal Gains 'wheel' where they set goals such as 'I will go to bed 10 minutes earlier every night'. Prior to the final workshop, a refresher session was held to remind students of their goals and aims of the activity. The final workshop covered building confidence and resilience.

'Scholars Programme' (2017-2018)

Delivered by third-party provider, 'The Brilliant Club', this activity gave pupils the opportunity to work with a PhD researcher from a Higher Education institution in the North of England to experience university-style learning and assessment. The three pupils who engaged in this activity (and whom are part of this research study) worked on an assignment entitled 'How many ways are there to read a novel?'. Prior to starting the assignment, the pupils had a tour of the university campus, participated in some Higher Education activities and met their PhD tutor. After this, the pupils engaged in weekly tutorials held in school. Of the three, two pupils completed their assignment, gaining a 1st and a 2:1 classification and were invited to another university for a graduation event.

'GCSEPod' (2017-2018)

This activity was slightly different to other 'delivered' sessions in that pupils were signposted to the online revision and learning resource GCSEPod. By using this platform, pupils were able to set up their own account according to the subjects they were studying and their relevant exam boards. The downloadable pods consisted of 3−5-minute bursts of audio-visual content on specific curriculum areas that the pupils could choose. There was no set number of pods that each pupil was required to engage with and in some cases, some teachers may have also set assignments via this platform.

'Health Event' (2018)

This event was delivered by third-party provider 'Ahead Partnership' and took place on one day at a university in Yorkshire. The aim of the event was to give students the opportunity to learn more about the range of careers available in the health sector beyond 'nurse' and 'doctor'. This event was open to pupils from across Yorkshire and the pupils within this study were taken by coach and had their lunch on campus. Pupils were able to watch demonstrations, engage in activities and listen to health professionals discuss their careers.

'Flood a School' (2019)

The purpose of this event was to recruit Student Ambassadors from a range of Higher Education institutions and take them into the school for a full day. Each ambassador was assigned to a teacher in a relevant subject area, allowing the ambassador to shadow the teacher for the day. For the pupils in this project, they were introduced to the ambassadors and listened to why the students attended university and what they studied. After this, some ambassadors were invited to answer questions from the pupils during the lesson, whereas others spoke to the pupils at the beginning of the lesson and then observed the rest of the lesson.

'Unifrog' (2019-2020)

An online platform purchased by FutureHY for the school in this study, Unifrog was a single easy-to-use platform that pulls together all available careers information into one place. If a pupil was interested in a particular career or course, the platform could provide all the necessary information for the pupil to explore their options. This was an ongoing resource that was continually available to the pupils.

'Scholars Programme' (2020)

This programme was a repeat of the 2017-2018 programme; however, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the event was delivered online and was completed in the Autumn term of 2020. The assignment title of this programme was 'Suitable for Children? Exploring Medieval Fairy Tales'.

'Journalism Project' (2020)

This project was delivered by the Journalism Course Tutor at a local university as a face-to-face event. The aim of the programme was to have York St John students work with pupils in school to learn more about journalism and to produce a story that mattered to them. Unfortunately, the project had only started when the Covid-19 pandemic hit, meaning that the students never got to finish the project. They attended sessions in school but were unable to visit the university for the studio workshop day.

'Flood a School' (2020)

This event was run exactly the same as the one in 2019 and therefore the second time the pupils had an ambassador present in their lessons.

THEME 1: Student engagement and experience

Each student was asked to describe their involvement in the activities provided by FutureHY, what they did during the activities, what their thoughts of the activities were and what they took from the activities.

All interviewees discussed a range of activities and spoke positively about the activities, acknowledging them as enjoyable, useful and informative.

Although the students had engaged in a number of activities, their accounts tended to focus on the Scholars Programme, the Unifrog platform, and Marginal Gains workshops.

The activity that students all first discussed was the Scholars Programme, delivered by The Brilliant Club, which all but one student stated was the activity most beneficial to them.

In particular, all students reported that the Scholars Programme offered them insight into university style learning which they considered important in developing their understanding of higher education:

S2: *Before the Brilliant Club [Scholars Programme] I didn't really know what it was like, wasn't sure about it. I wasn't sure about lectures, I didn't know about the volume and smaller groups and stuff like that. It definitely helped by teaching just like how it works at university, so I think it has taught me quite a lot.*

S3: *The Brilliant Club [Scholars Programme] is the one that I think was most beneficial because I think that was the one that got me to really have a feel as to what university would be like with the whole like projects and everything.*

The students' account of the importance of learning about the style of learning at university is consistent with the work of Scanlon et al. (2019) and the idea that young people are anxious about the 'leap into the unknown.' This aspect of the Scholars Programme was also highlighted as incredibly important in helping the students understand the difference between studying at high school and university:

S1: *You got something more challenging, so it helped them realise that not everything is going to be like this for the rest of our school and university life so it sort of like made them more aware of what they need to do in the future.*

S2: *It was good because it was a biology one and it was like a higher level than what we were doing at A level so you got like a snippet at what it would be like at university.*

Student 2 also said:

'It definitely helped by teaching just like how it works at university, so I think it has taught me quite a lot'. Likewise, **Student 1** stated the benefits of the Scholars Programme had on their current education, *'It was a lot higher standard to what I had usually been doing in my English lessons. But I think it helped me, like how to write essays better'.*

In this sense, the students felt that the Scholars Programme not only prepared them for university, but also provided them with resources and knowledge to be self-critical and improve their current work at school. This idea was particularly prevalent to the theme.

One reason that the students interviewed in this study spoke so highly of the Scholars Programme was due to having the opportunity to interact with a PhD student. Despite struggling with the topic covered in the programme, **Student 6** reflected on their experience of working with the PhD student as a tutor:

S6: *The way we got our information and sources was quite good with the PhD researcher. I can't say I enjoyed the topic…. But yes, I am not particularly good at essay*

writing, but I found they broke it up and it didn't feel too overwhelming and quite appreciated that.

Student 1 also discussed the benefits of working with a PhD student throughout the Scholars Programme:

S1: *It was quite good to be fair because it was smaller interactions with someone who clearly knows what they are doing and their topic. Whereas in schools it is like big classes… with less of a focus, but when we were doing that [Scholars Programme] we got more of a focus on us.*

The value of this novel interaction can be viewed from various perspectives, including the creation of social bonds and the exchange of social capital (Hoye and Nicholson, 2008).

The Scholars Programme also provided an opportunity for the students to visit a university and be presented with an award at a graduation ceremony. For the majority of students who successfully completed the Scholars Programme the opportunity to attend a graduation on a university campus, along with their parents, was seen as an incredibly valuable experience. Reflecting on the graduation ceremony **Student 2** discussed their thoughts on visiting a university campus:

S2: *At first I wasn't really sure if university was for me but when you get a chance to take a trip to these universities you get to see how like good they really are, like the facilities and stuff and then sort of makes you focus your mind a bit more… it maybe pushed me to apply to higher end universities than maybe saying I would just half-arse it.*

Likewise, **Student 3** also discussed how attending the graduation event provided by the Scholars Programme positively influenced their attitudes towards higher education:

S3: *I think that actually attending the university helped me because I had never been to a university before at that point and it made it feel more real and more like this is something that I can achieve… As much as it was for me a learning experience and learning how to reference and writes essays it was also about understand what higher education was, and also for my parents to understand as well.*

The majority of students being interviewed would be first-generation university students. This is a factor cited as a significant barrier to higher education in previous research (e.g., Lehmann, 2007) and resonates with Bourdieu's (1974) theories concerning the role of social and cultural capital in perpetuating educational inequalities (Scanlon et al., 2019). With this in mind, the graduation event, and the other outreach activities that facilitated interaction with universities, staff and students, appeared to be key in allowing students to explore university life and the acquisition of social and cultural capital.

Different types of interaction and exploration may be important. All six students reflected positively on the availability of the Unifrog online platform which was funded by FutureHY for the school they attended. Although the degree to which the students engaged with Unifrog varied, all six interviewees expressed how the online platform had been beneficial to them. The students all reported using Unifrog to help identify potential universities and degree programmes they might apply to, as described by **Students 4 and 5**:

S4: *We used Unifrog as a starter base to find what courses we might like to do and erm, to like set out a plan that was more visual.*

S5: *I used it sort of towards the end of last year [year 12] to help with my applications for university which was quite useful because it sort of, there are not many places where you can see loads of information about every university out there and you put in what you wanted to do and your predicted grades and it would generate a list of uni's that it would recommend you should apply to and your level and your aspirations of what you wanted to do.*

The account of **Student 5** on the use of Unifrog to search for universities which match pupils predicted grades and career aspirations may be especially insightful as it is common for students to report uncertainty regarding their suitability for university, especially universities that are considered prestigious (Boliver, 2013). In accord, **Student 3** expressed how the Unifrog platform helped provide them with the knowledge required to make an informed decision and, as apparent from the response, helped foster aspiration and identity around attending university:

S3: *I always thought that it was a big achievement going to university like it was a big, a big thing and obviously that by going to university you'd get a better job and my parents didn't go to university and have always been like you should aim higher than we did and things like that, so it allowed me to look at university as it was something that I did want to do.*

In some cases, the new sense of familiarity and identity was complemented by feelings of agency derived from the activities. Notably, the accounts of students who participated in the Marginal Gains workshops included reference to new skills and competencies likely important to acting on a desire to apply to university and the difficulties they may face in doing so.

All three students involved in the Marginal Gains workshops spoke positively about its benefits. Reflecting

on their experience, **Student 2** focused on the goal setting workshop (one of three sessions):

S2: *The Marginal Gains stuff was quite good, it was like how to approach it (goal setting) and that was quite useful. It was sort of doing small steps here and there to sort of solve a long-term thing… it didn't feel too difficult because we had sort of done each little thing to learn.*

Using **Student 2**'s account as an example of the responses provided, the Marginal Gains workshops was considered to help them acquire new skills that were beneficial to their current academic work, as well as navigating broader issues such as the steps required to successfully apply to university.

Opportunities to acquire transferable skills that were viewed as valuable for academic success therefore appears to be one further feature that characterised the students' experiences of the outreach activities such as the Marginal Gains workshops.

THEME 2: Impact of outreach activities

Alongside the students' discussion of the specific experiences of the activities, the students identified a range of ways in which participation had positively impacted them. The most prevalent impact of the activities cited by the students was an increase in confidence in academic performance and ability to attend university, as well as a boost to self-esteem.

Again, these gains can be understood via the concepts of Bourdieu, embodied social learning, and how altered attitudes towards attending university can accompany these positive changes within the students.

The following quotes exemplify the answers given by several students when asked about the impacts of taking part in the activities provided by FutureHY. Reflecting on the Marginal Gains workshops, **Student 1** stated:

S1: *I feel like it has strengthened my want to go to university because I know more about it and I know how to handle things better. So, it has made me more confident in wanting to go to university.*

Similarly, **Students 2 and 5** discuss how the Scholars Programme have positively impacted on their decision to apply for university:

S2: *I think that without them applying might not have been much of a push, I might not have been so into as I was. So, I think it has had an effect, like a positive effect. And erm, it makes you realise that you can apply no matter what really so push like give you aspirations. So, I may not have got quite a far as I have without it.*

S5: *I am looking forward to it because it is a new chapter in life and completely different to what I have done before and working with people who have been there and done it gives me the confidence to do it myself.*

These impacts are encouraging against a backdrop of research that indicates students can view university as intimidating, and question their academic credentials and ability to live independently when at university (Breeze, Johnson and Uytman, 2020). By contrast, captured in the responses is a sense that the FutureHY activities helped encourage a much more positive outlook and optimism surrounding higher education.

One of the main reasons students identified for their improved self-confidence was increased knowledge of higher education provided by the activities. This was the case for all students. Interactions with university students,

tutors and academics were considered valuable sources of knowledge. This was captured in a number of responses.

Student 1 discussed how the Marginal Gains workshops helped them to comprehend the challenges of starting university.

S1: *I have definitely learnt a lot more about what I am going to be doing and how I need to improve and what changes have to be made from what I am doing now compared to when I go to university.*

Students 2 and 3 similarly reflected on how the Scholars Programme had improved their understanding of university and university life:

S2: *Until then I had never really been to a university before and I didn't really understand the way that teaching was, with like the tutoring sessions and small groups instead of classrooms and then lectures as well, so learning about that.*

S3: *I didn't really know what it was like [university], I wasn't sure about it. I wasn't sure about lectures, I didn't know about the volume and the smaller groups and stuff like that. It definitely helped by teaching like how it works at university, so I think they have taught me quite a lot.*

All the students discussed different university programmes and career pathways they wished to pursue in the future and all of the students expressed a desire to attend university.

Five of them, all in year 13, had applied. One of these intended to take a year out before doing so. The remaining student, in year 12, was less sure (S6: Next year, god, I'll be going to university probably).

With these decisions as a backdrop, the students shared similar positive perceptions and thoughts on the impact that the activities provided by FutureHY.

When questioned about the impact of the outreach activities on their decision to apply for university Student 4 stated:

S4: *I feel like they strengthened my want to go to university because I know more about it and I know how to handle things better. So, it made me more confident in wanting to go to university.*

Likewise, **Student's 2 and 3** shared similar views:

S2: *At first I wasn't sure if university was for me… but then it sort of focuses your mind a bit more, so I thought about it longer than I maybe would of and maybe pushed me to apply for higher end universities than maybe just saying id half arse it and just apply to a few instead of going to the higher end ones.*

S3: *I think it [attending university] became more of a realistic thing. Like I said, I always thought I was going to uni but it was never something that I was firmly set on. But, I think by doing these projects it's made me realise that I can, I can do it.*

Evident in the two responses is some degree of uncertainty that was more broadly evident across the students' responses. The positive impact of the activities on self-confidence and reinforcement of positive dispositions towards university were seemingly central in cementing the students' decisions to apply.

For most of the students, university became a more realistic and desirable option following the outreach activities.

THEME 3: Opportunities for outreach development

Although the responses of the young people interviewed in this study were positive with regards to the outreach activities, all students identified areas that they feel could be improved and further developed.

In closing the interview, students were asked what topics they feel would be beneficial to encourage more young people to consider higher education. The most prevalent response related to finance, including budget management and further information about student finance. The requirement for budget management training was seen to be particularly desirable and as displayed by the following accounts:

S1: *I feel a lot of people who go to uni probably wouldn't handle their money as well as they could. So, if you could give them training of how to handle their money better they would probably come out of uni better.*

S6: *The finances I really do not understand. Yes, erm, specifically I think people should learn about finances and student loans and first off how we go about getting financial help and paying off student loans, I don't think people really understand that either.*

The significance of money as an influencing factor for young people deciding whether to attend higher education has been discussed in existing literature (e.g., Harrison, 2019). Harrison (2019) discussed the perceived financial risks young people face when considering the long-term financial implications of attending university. In agreement, the students here expressed a desire to better understand the financial aspects of progressing into higher education.

A second area which students focused on was the ability to choose which activities they took part in and the opportunity to take part in activities better suited to their desired career pathways. A desire for a greater degree of choice, opportunities to sample different and unfamiliar

subjects, and flexibility within the activities themselves was evident in the responses. In reference to the Scholars Programme:

S2: *You don't really get to choose what you do, you don't get to choose your topics, like if you get to choose your essay you would enjoy it more and you would get more out of it. Erm, I guess if you were to choose what you did you might be able to get a bit more out of it.*

S3: *I think if I had been able to try other subjects that are fairly similar to or politics or law, or something like that because I have never done either of those, erm so I think maybe being able to experiment in terms of what difference course, especially courses that aren't commonly studied at A level.*

S6: *The Brilliant Club [Scholars Programme] wasn't so popular. Just because of the topic though just because of the topic, because we all liked the concept it was just like, this is what we had to do, not the actual Brilliant Club concept.*

In revisiting the FutureHY framework, increased autonomy and choice between and within activities may provide the basis for greater social and cultural capital by ensuring activities are experienced as meaningful, interesting and enjoyable. In addition, it may also provide a way of encouraging greater independence and ownership that will help solidify intentions regarding attending higher education.

A final area of improvement the interviewees focused upon was the scheduling and timing of some of the activities. The COVID-19 pandemic and closure of schools had impacted some of the delivery of the activities. Outside of this disruption, the students highlighted how future activities could be better planned around the busy exam periods of school years 11 and 13.

A number of the students explained how the activities delivered alongside GCSEs and A levels was associated with increased pressures and stress, and how this had led to them withdrawing from activities in some instances. This perspective is captured by **Student 2** who describes their thoughts on the best time to take part in the activities:

S2: *Year 13 is jam packed. So, I don't think people would be interested. Year 12 is definitely a good year for it. Erm, I feel with year 11, you might not be that interested in year 11 as it has exams but yes year 12 would be a good year. 10 and 12 [school years] just before you are thinking about what you wanted to do next is a good time for it.*

Similarly, **Student 6** discussed similar issues and suggested that the beginning of year 12 was maybe the most appropriate time to take part in the activities. They had dropped out of one of the activities towards their exam period (Scholars Programme):

S6: *I got busy with other things, but I think if we had maybe done it a bit earlier and we may have done it in September of year 12 then that would have been better, a bit more ingrained part of the school year.*

The student responses regarding the timing of activities were more focused around the activities that required commitment across several weeks, such as Marginal Gains workshops and the Scholars Programme, as explained by **Student 3**:

S3: *I think especially with the Brilliant Club [Scholars Programme] because that was quite a long process and I think people at times got frustrated by it and they would try and concentrate on things that they enjoyed more, erm, like their GCSE's and A Levels.*

As a consequence, duration of the activities, mode of delivery, delivery pattern, and overall time commitment are worthy considerations for future activities and maximising participation and effectiveness for students.

Overview of the findings

The aim of this study was to evaluate the impact activities of FutureHY by exploring the experiences of students who took part in the programme over the last four years.

Our interviews revealed that the activities were a considered enjoyable, useful and informative by the students.

The particular impact of the activities centred on the development of a more positive outlook towards higher education, and increased confidence regarding decision making and study success.

These impacts were underpinned by increased knowledge, familiarity, and identification with higher education that is fostered by the activities and the positive encounters they offer.

The main areas of development for future activities was a greater focus on financial aspects of higher education. Students also would like greater choice within and between activities, as well as activities to be scheduled and designed to improve timeliness and availability.

Contextualizing the findings

Higher education decisions are complex and influenced by a range of factors. Like other research in this area, the current study sought to place the personal accounts of students at the centre of understanding these decisions and better understand how, from their perspective, outreach interventions provided by FutureHY has figured in their outlook towards higher education. Viewed through a broader sociological lens, and the work of Bourdieu especially, the experiences of the students attest to the importance of the accrual and exchange of social and academic capital in shifting habitus – their cultural or world view – which, supported by the work of FutureHY, progressively and steadily came to include higher education as a desirable, realistic, and wholly normal and reasonable choice for the students.

Novel formal and informal interactions and exchanges with higher education appear to be central to the impact of the outreach activities. The activities helped remove or reduce uncertainties and anxieties of the students – making the "leap" more known and knowable and the unfamiliar more familiar (Scanlon et al. 2019). Opportunities to explore the setting and, in some cases, to situate themselves physically or virtually in the setting, meant students were able to slowly demystify higher education and thereafter construct a sense of identity that included higher education. Rather than challenging misconceptions, per se, the students

recounted a new sense of familiarity that cemented their decisions to apply to university. This is particularly important as it is an investment in the familiar, itself a form of social capital, to alleviate or avoid the financial, social and cultural risks associated with university that has been identified as a barrier to attendance among reluctant students in previous research (Clayton et al., 2009).

The work of Reay (2010) is particularly important in regards to the intersection of familiarity, the concepts of Bourdieu, and higher education choices. She has argued that encounters with unfamiliar fields is central to the self-reflection and self-questioning required to change personal views and identity. However, as she describes, such encounters may easily contribute to the opposite - protective reinforcement or entrenchment of pre-existing habitus (e.g., confirming the view that higher education is not desirable). As such, in addition to making the unfamiliar more familiar, the value and impact of the activities of FutureHY also lies in the features of the exchanges they provide, how the unfamiliar is presented and received by the students. That is, the outreach programme provides an experience for students that encourages them to engage with the unfamiliar in a positive manner and to envisage a sense of self and successful future that includes higher education.

Author Statement

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