

Getting to know you...

How to make the most of university outreach and schools liaison schemes

The introduction of variable tuition fees in England in 2006/07 brought new rules and a funding boost for university outreach and schools liaison. In the decade since, this area of universities' work has flourished.

"Schools liaison has changed a lot. It's become much bigger and more competitive," explains Paul Drinkwater, Schools Liaison Officer at the University of Southampton (a founding member of the Russell Group of leading UK universities). "Outreach has gone from being considered a 'touchy, feely' area of universities' work to being strongly connected with marketisation and student recruitment."

The nation's universities are set to spend a record £834m on schemes to widen access in 2017/18 – up 10% on last year. So how can schools and colleges ensure help their students benefit from this boom and prepare them for entry into higher education?

Meeting targets

It certainly helps if your school has pupils in any of the government's target groups currently under-represented in universities. These include young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, black and minority ethnic students, care leavers and disabled learners, as well as (since 2016) students with mental

health issues and learning difficulties such as dyslexia, Aspergers and attention deficit disorders.

Newham Collegiate Sixth Form Centre (NCS), a state sixth form in one of the poorest parts of London, has enjoyed a strategic partnership with University College London since opening in 2014. NCS benefits from guest lecturers, bespoke masterclasses, summer schools, academic competitions, staff development and support with university applications. In return, it keeps the university abreast of developments in secondary education.

"We wanted to do things differently in terms of bridging the gap between A level and university, and in enrichment provision given that Newham is the second most deprived borough in London," explains Principal Mouhssin Ismail. "Everything you would get if you were a middle class, privately educated child, we're trying to replicate because our students may not have the family connections or knowledge of the system themselves."

With 95% of NCS students' university offers coming from Russell Group universities this year, including nine from Oxbridge, the partnership is clearly extremely successful. ➔

Geneticist Professor Nessa Carey of Imperial College addresses students at Newham Collegiate Sixth Form Centre (main image). Sampling student life at a Southampton University summer school (inset).



Broadening horizons

Traditionally schools have tended to work with their nearest university, but things are changing. "We now have four schools liaison officers: me in the South East and colleagues in the South West, Midlands and North. We work with a wide variety of schools: independent, selective and comprehensive – including many BridgeU clients," reveals Paul, who's personally delivered about 120 school events in the past year.

Paul's work takes him from Essex to Gloucestershire, talking to students – and often their parents too – about university life, choosing the right course and institution, and making successful applications. His colleagues on campus provide tours, taster lectures, conferences and residential courses, as well as schemes like LifeLab, which helps teenagers make healthier life choices, and Learn With US Transition to support sixth-formers working towards the Extended Project Qualification.

NCS encourages students to broaden their horizons even further, with speakers from Harvard and support with Ivy League applications. One of its students will begin her degree studies at MIT this autumn – a first for the sixth form. "For a lot of our students it can be cheaper to study in the States, says Mouhssin. "If their parents earn less than £16,000 a year, the university may cover nearly all their costs."

Starting young

For Saheela Mohammed (pictured), student ambassador for the University of Sheffield's Engineering Faculty, the best way to get pupils thinking about university is to start young and engage parents too. Saheela won the Chancellor's Medal for her involvement in outreach work, including open days, school visits and mentoring.

But it's the family-friendly 'Science Alive, and 'Engineering Imagination' workshops run by Sheffield's engineering and science societies that she believes best spark young people's interest in studying these subjects. These events give local children the chance to try fun, interactive activities – meeting robots, playing virtual reality games and building towers out of marshmallows and spaghetti.

"Our aim is to bring the message about university education home, rather than it just being in school,"

she says. "Many children don't know anyone who's been to university, so events like this can engage them early and make it seem more normal."

Southampton's outreach projects also start young. Its 'Learn with US' programme works with local school pupils from Year 6 upwards, and their families, helping to raise aspirations, build confidence and explore the benefits of higher education.

Taking the initiative

One way NCS inspires students is by hosting guest lectures from leading figures in academia, politics and business. So how does the sixth form persuade Imperial College's Professor Nessa Carey to talk to aspiring geneticists and Oxford's Dr Natalie Quinn to meet prospective economists? (Not to mention Lord Robert Winston, Baroness Chakrabati, Lord Mervyn King and more.)

"We just ask!" says Mouhssin. "A lot of them say: 'We get invited by private schools but not by state schools. We would do more if people invited us.'"

"It's important for schools to take a proactive approach," agrees Saheela. "Teachers need to make contact with universities and find out what sort of activities and programmes are on offer. The funding is there, the initiatives are there, so get in touch and say: 'What can you offer us?'"



Find out more

University of Southampton – schools and colleges liaison:

www.southampton.ac.uk/schools-colleges.page

University of Sheffield – school and college outreach: www.sheffield.ac.uk/schools/outreach-programmes

Newham Collegiate Sixth Form Centre: www.thencs.co.uk

Russell Group – information for teachers and career advisers: <http://russellgroup.ac.uk/for-students/school-and-college-in-the-uk/for-teachers-and-career-advisers/>