

# Multi-intervention outreach across Law, Social Sciences, and Health Sciences: Reflections from online delivery

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**Abstract** Multi-intervention outreach is defined as combining two or more activities into an ongoing programme of support for students at different stages of their education. This paper details three multi-intervention outreach programmes in the disciplines of Law, Social Sciences, and Health Sciences. The *Preparing for Law* programme was designed as an in-person multi-intervention outreach programme; the *Preparing for Social Sciences* programme transitioned from face-to-face to online delivery, and the *Preparing for Health Sciences* programme was planned solely online due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. The discussion draws on the experiences and reflections from three academic leads who designed and implemented the programmes. The focus of these reflections centre on programme design, resourcing and engagement, entwined with their learnings from design changes due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is imperative for future programme leads to consider the timing in designing a multi-intervention outreach programme, along with factors affecting participant motivation to enhance programme engagement. Additional consideration should be given to the cost-effectiveness of online/hybrid programmes.

**Key words** Multi-intervention outreach; widening Participation; online intervention; online delivery; transition; hybrid outreach

## Background

Disparities and persistent inequalities in access and educational outcomes are evident across socio-economic and demographic groups (Crenna-Jennings, 2018; James et al., 2008). Inequalities in education were further heightened by COVID-19 disruptions (Blundell et al., 2022). Widening participation (WP) and/or outreach teams work to create and progress initiatives to improve disadvantaged groups' lower progression rates into higher

education (HE). One approach taken by such teams is the design of multi-intervention outreach.

Multi-intervention outreach can be defined as outreach that 'combines two or more activities into an ongoing programme of support for students at different stages of their education' (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education, n.d.). This might include targeted, repeated engagement with student groups who are under-represented in HE<sup>i</sup>. Activities may include mentoring, information and guidance (IAG), summer schools, counselling, financial support, campus visits and workshops.

There are several existing multi-intervention outreach programmes, each spanning around two years. Since 2017, Uni Connect has brought together universities and stakeholders to deliver repeated targeted outreach in England. Other examples, including Sutton Trust Pathways Programmes (The Sutton Trust, 2021), Reach Scotland (Enquire, 2017), K+ (King's College London, 2016) and Ambition Nottingham (University of Nottingham, 2016), offer campus visits, mentoring, summer schools and application support.

Studies indicate that participation in multi-intervention outreach is associated with positive outcomes and are more effective than single interventions (Avery, 2010; Cunha et al., 2018; Ford et al., 2012; Herbaut and Geven, 2020; Robinson and Salvestrini, 2020). A recent comprehensive study indicated that five- and six-component multi-intervention outreach programmes provide the optimal balance between input and impact, having a positive impact on HE acceptance (Burgess et al., 2021).

Existing evidence on the impact of multi-intervention outreach has focused on enrolment into HE, student aspirations and attitudes. Evidence from Uni Connect partnerships on multi-intervention approaches suggest that they have a positive impact on learners' knowledge and confidence to make an informed choice, but the evidence is mixed on the likelihood of applying to HE (Harding and Bowes, 2022). Noteworthy, systematic reviews on WP and outreach research in England, including that of multi-intervention outreach, highlight issues with quality and design limitations, particularly regarding small sample sizes and issues

with external validity (Herbaut and Geven, 2020; Younger et al., 2019).

## The 'Preparing for ...' programmes

Many existing subject-specific multi-intervention outreach programmes in the sector have a narrow focus. For example, some limit participants to those who have already committed to a particular course or subject (e.g. law focused) or are selective in the participants accepted onto the programmes (e.g. grades attained at GCSE). In light of this, three 'Preparing for ...' multi-intervention outreach programmes were developed at one UK HE institution. These programmes aimed to support participants to make informed choices in their future pathways, and in their transitions into university, taking an open and inclusive approach to participant selection.

This paper first provides a case study of the three multi-intervention outreach programmes. The case studies will detail the format of each programme, e.g. face to face, or online. Online delivery was driven by the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw closures to schools and colleges in England (March 2020). With most young people and adult learners remaining at home, teaching and outreach needed to adapt and take place online. The subsequent discussion shares experiences and reflections from the academic leads of each programme to inform future practice around implementing online and/or hybrid outreach programmes.

## Case studies

The case studies presented below span the disciplines of Law, Social Sciences and Health Sciences. Each *Preparing for ...* programme progresses from the previous iteration, e.g. *Preparing for Social Sciences* is a renewed iteration of *Preparing for Law*. Each iteration was designed to address limitations of previous programmes, along with the needs of each target group and any field-specific requirements. Each case study has a different timeframe (spanning 12–18 months) and offers different interventions.

## Case Study 1: Preparing for Law

**Aim:** To help students make a successful transition into studying Law in HE.

**Target group:** Students recruited in February of Year 12 in secondary schools /Level 3 Year 1 (16 years of age). WP eligibility criteria apply.

**Delivery:** In person, entirely face-to-face with the addition of electronic mentoring (eMentoring).

**Programme:** This longitudinal programme supported students over 18 months, exposing them to formal legal environments, building confidence and supporting decision making. In designing the programme, emphasis was placed on creating opportunities to 'level the playing field' in a subject where there are clear advantages to students who have previously participated in co-curricular activities involving public speaking and opportunities to network in professional environments. Such opportunities are recognised as being more consistently offered in independent schools (Cullinane and Moontacute, 2017) than those attended by our participatory cohort.

Participants were involved in five main interventions (Table 1).

**Table 1** Interventions included in Preparing for Law

<b>No. of participants</b>	Cohort 1: 13 Cohort 2: 9 Cohort 3: 10	<b>Widening participation criteria</b>	Pupils within Norfolk who met one of the following WP criteria: POLAR4/POLAR3 <sup>ii</sup> /TUNDRA <sup>iii</sup> Q1 postcode, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic or declared a disability		
<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Delivery</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Time of year</b>	<b>Evaluation</b>
Decision-making support	A series of workshops to help participants understand variance amongst HE Law options and institutions.	Face-to-face, in person	2 × 1 hour sessions	April and July	Design: survey Summary: pre- and post-survey
Legal academic skills	Workshops on emotive topics participants will likely encounter in legal study. Participants attempt to use legislation and case law to answer problem questions. The focus is on building confidence to actively participate in seminars.	Face-to-face, in person	3 hours	July	Design: survey Summary: pre- and post-survey
Legal practical skills	Workshops to practise advocacy and negotiation skills. Mooting and other legal competitions are key for students who wish to enter the legal profession, as law students are expected to engage from their first year of study.	Face-to-face, in person	3 hours	September	Design: survey Summary: pre- and post-survey

Employer engagement	Participants attend networking workshops followed by the undergraduate law fair, where they can practise their newly developed skills.	Face-to-face, in person	4 hours	Early November	Design: survey Summary: pre- and post-survey
	Residential visit hosted in conjunction with our partners. Participants visit and dine at Inner Temple (2021) and attend workshops at Allen & Overy (2021). The primary focus for the visit is to provide participants with a low-risk exposure to corporate environments. Based on the experiences of participants on the programme thus far, many had not previously visited London, and none had entered a corporate environment. As such, autonomous navigating between locations and checking into venues was a conscious part of the activity design.	Face-to-face, in person	2 days	Late November	Design: survey Summary: pre- and post-survey
eMentoring	Electronic or online mentoring: participants were paired with an undergraduate student at the launch of the programme. Participants have the capacity to select an eMentor, and swap, if they wish to speak with a student on another course. Participants communicate with students online via the text-based platform Brightside (Brightside, 2003).	Online, synchronous and/or asynchronous	1 hour per month (18 in total)	April–September (18 months total)	Design: survey Summary: pre- and post-survey plus mentor reflection task.

	<p>The eMentoring runs consistently for the full 18 months following a mentoring plan. This plan includes relevant and topical discussion points. We advocate for communication each month but leave this open to e-mentees and e-mentors to work out what suits them best.</p> <p>The eMentoring is supplemented by face-to-face opportunities, including shadowing days and invitations to current student events. Government restrictions permitting, participants shadow their mentor during the autumn term of their Year 13 or Year 2 of Level 3 (~17 year of age).</p>				
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## Case Study 2: Preparing for Social Sciences

*Preparing for Social Sciences* was designed in Spring 2020, after deciding to expand the *Preparing for Law* programme. The field of Social Sciences at the institution includes the subjects of Business, Economics, Education, International Development/Human Geography, Law, Psychology and Social Work.

**Aim:** To help students make an informed choice about HE and support them through the application process and their transition to university.

**Target group:** Students are recruited towards the end of Year 12 in secondary schools, Level 3 Year 1 (~16 years of age) or on Access courses (a qualification which prepares people without traditional qualifications for study at university) and participate until their first term at university.

**Delivery:** In person but moved swiftly to online delivery with restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Programme:** Students engage in multiple 'subject strands' offered by the Faculty of Social Science at the institution. The subject strands include Law, Economics, Business, Psychology, Education, Physical Education, Sport and Health, International Development, and Social Work. Each subject strand involves interventions to develop core skills specific to courses within that subject strand, as well as core skills relating to general success at university.

A key theme of the programme was exploring subjects that are orthogonal to core interests. This is demonstrated in Table 2, where participants are encouraged to engage with subject tasters outside of their selected subject strand. There are four main interventions (Table 3) taking place over a period of 16 months.

**Table 2** Example of sign-posting subject taster sessions

<b>Taster session</b>	<b>Applicable subjects</b>
Economics – why do you make your decisions?	Try if you’re interested in: Business, Economics, Education, International Development/Human Geography, Psychology
Women in Economics morning	Try if you’re interested in: Business, Economics, Education, International Development/Human Geography, Law, Psychology
Law session 1: (un)social media (banter or crime) Law session 2: Justice on trial	Try if you’re interested in: Law, Education
Psychology – The science of sleep	Try if you’re interested in: Education, Psychology
Sociology	Try if you’re interested in: Education, Law, Psychology
International Development (Human Geography): Catching more than just fish: HIV/AIDS in fishing communities in Uganda	Try if you’re interested in: Economics, Education, International Development/Human Geography, Law
Business	Try if you’re interested in: Business, Economics, International Development/Human Geography, Law

**Table 3** Interventions included in Preparing for Social Sciences

<b>No. of participants</b>	39	<b>Widening participation criteria</b>	Pupils within Norfolk who met one of the following WP criteria: POLAR4/POLAR3/TUNDRA Q1 postcode, Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic or declared a disability		
<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Delivery</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Time of year</b>	<b>Evaluation</b>
eMentoring	*See description in Table 1. We offer an 'ask the expert' option through the Brightside platform. An expert may be a member of the admissions team.	Online	16 months	May–September	Design: survey Summary: pre- and post-intervention for mentees and post-intervention for mentors.
Discover Social Science	Participants are encouraged to attend multiple 'taster sessions' over the course of a week, regardless of whether they signed up for only one subject strand. Participants are signposted to other related subjects.	Online	1 hour session daily over 2 weeks	July of Year 12/Level 3 Year 1	Design: survey Summary: pre- and post-survey.
Skills month	A series of skill-development sessions informed by discussions with academic colleagues about what they perceive are important	Online	1–2-hour session per week over	November of Year 13/Level 3 Year 2.	Design: survey Summary: mid-programme survey

	skills prospective students need for their discipline. Sessions include building maths confidence for students wishing to pursue Psychology or Economics, and advocacy for students who want to pursue law, in addition to general study skills workshops.		the course of a month.		administered in the middle of the intervention.
Employability month	Information sessions and careers talks (online due to COVID-19). These sessions allow us to signpost participants to careers available post-university.	Online, asynchronous	1 month	February Year 13/Level 3 Year 2.	Design: Survey Summary: mid-programme survey administered in the middle of the intervention.

### Case Study 3: Preparing for Health Sciences

*Preparing for Health Sciences* was developed in 2020/21 for solely online delivery, alongside the potential opportunity to shadow current students. Health Sciences at the institution includes Nursing, Physiotherapy, Occupational Therapy, Operating Department Practice, Paramedic Science, Midwifery, and Speech and Language Therapy courses.

**Aim:** To support successful application to and transition into university.

**Target group:** People who intended to make an application to study Health Sciences at university in the following year. In 2020/21, the programme was piloted with students from local Access Colleges (mature students).

**Delivery:** Designed and implemented entirely online.

**Programme:** This programme supported students over 15 months (September through to December the following year). Participants received support with the application and interview process, building confidence and intellectual capital (Network Evaluating & Researching University Participation Interventions (NERUPI), 2021). In designing the programme, emphasis was placed on supporting successful transition into university, particularly given the disrupted student educational journey due to COVID-19. Participants were involved in four main interventions (Table 4).

**Table 4** Interventions included in Preparing for Health Sciences

<b>No. of participants</b>	19	<b>Widening participation Criteria</b>	Participants were recruited from local Access Colleges across Norfolk.		
<b>Intervention</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Delivery</b>	<b>Duration</b>	<b>Time of year</b>	<b>Evaluation</b>
Health Sciences application support	The 2020/21 intervention offered three video resources: (1) reflecting on your work experience, (2) writing your personal statement, and (3) interview preparation. Alongside the video resources, participants can opt to attend a mock interview session where they are informed about the interview process and participate in a 20-minute interview simulation conducted by a current university student. After the interview, participants debrief before receiving feedback from their interviewer then work together to develop one of their interview responses.	Online, synchronous, and asynchronous	3 hours per session	October–January	Design: survey Summary: pre- and post-programme survey.
Information and guidance sessions	Topics included the mature student experience, returning to learning, balancing work and/or family life, finance, teaching and learning. These are informal sessions with topics suggested by participants. Scheduled after 6 pm.	Online, synchronous	1 hour per session (5 hours total)	Monthly	Design: survey Summary: examined in end-of-programme survey.
The Preparing for Health Sciences Module	A pre-university module with a suite of resources on academic literacy topics including asking questions, independent study, structure and writing practices, textual analysis, using numbers in Health Sciences,	Online, asynchronous	16 hours	August–July	Design: survey Summary: pre-intervention survey, followed by a survey after each Learning Block ( $n=7$ ).

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	referencing, anatomy and physiology and reflection, specific to Health Sciences.				
eMentoring	*See Table 1	Online, synchronous	1 hour per month (12 hours total)	December–December	Design: survey Summary: pre- and post-intervention survey.

## Evaluation and reflection

Evaluation data were collected across all three programmes. The evaluation employed surveys, usually including a pre-, mid- and post-survey. Participant data were primarily collected through quantitative means, with the inclusion of a small set of qualitative questions. The discussion includes attendance data.

The primary focus of this paper is on the reflective discussions of the three academic leads<sup>iv</sup> of each programme. This paper does not aim to present a robust and externally valid impact evaluation of the intervention, but rather reflect on the subjective effectiveness and comment on the relative costs and benefits of such an intervention. Whilst we acknowledge the dilemmas in undertaking this kind of reflection (Toy-Cronin, 2018), for example the concern over a lack of reflexivity (Humphrey, 2012), the academic leads are uniquely able to critique their practice to draw insights for other practitioners, and for future programme development.

Reflecting as a group, from similar contexts, brings multiple perspectives and offers the opportunity to talk about actions (Valli, 1992), engage with difference (Osmond and Darlington, 2005), and provides the opportunity to problem solve. The reflective discussions were held at three timepoints post programme delivery. These discussions were informed by independent reflection through and after each programme. We used reflective prompts/questions and prompts based on Gibbs' reflective cycle (1988), including:

- Discuss the programme design and structure.
- How did you feel about the programme?
- What do you think worked well?
- What worked least well?
- Why do you think that was the case?
- What actions will you take for next year?

By using these guiding questions, and given the collaborative design of the projects, the academic leads occupied an 'insider-outsider position', which can work to mitigate the desire for positive outcomes (Humphrey, 2012). Notes were taken at each discussion, documenting similarities and differences between the programme delivery and subsequent reflection. All authors

contributed to the final categorisation of the included themes for discussion.

## Discussion: Lessons learned so far

The variations within the three multi-intervention outreach programmes used as case studies above, including both face-to-face in person, and asynchronous and synchronous online delivery, provide some important considerations for engagement and lessons learned. The discussion focuses on three key reflections: (1) programme design and timeframe, (2) resourcing, and (3) engagement and attrition.

### Programme design and timeframe

The *Preparing for ...* programmes were designed to meet the needs of diverse cohorts. *Preparing for Health Sciences* offered various timings to promote attendance from those with caring or employment responsibilities – a particularly important feature for the mature students. Additionally, the eMentoring element on all programmes utilised an online platform, Brightside, that provided convenience and flexibility, allowing individual needs to guide the conversations.

Design of the programmes was an iterative process. On each iteration of the *Preparing for ...* programmes, we reflected on successes and limitations, accounting for cohort feedback and sharing best practice across the programmes. An important feature of the programmes is accommodating participants who are not absolute in their course/subject choice. In this way, we provide a different avenue for participants who may not benefit from national programmes with a focus on those with more concrete aspirations. As an example of a further iteration, following *Preparing for Health Sciences 2020/21*, *Preparing for Social Sciences* will extend the eMentoring to support participant transition into HE and over the first few months on their course.

### Resourcing

#### **Online delivery cost/benefit**

Across the education sector, challenges and inequalities in access to learning created greater disparity in the digital divide due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Coleman, 2021). Many

disadvantaged young people were unable to access online learning resources, information technology and Wi-Fi. Raven (2020) also describes the structural impediments along with socio-cultural factors that have a significant impact on young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. As such, it can be argued that the need for outreach is greater than ever (Raven, 2020; Rose and Mallinson, 2022).

While acknowledging the digital divide, the climate of the pandemic also presented the need for additional support for individuals applying to university through an accessible medium. With schools and colleges closing their doors to external presenters, the *Preparing for ...* programmes adapted to meet this challenge. Online delivery allowed more flexible participation from participants as well as from academics offering sessions. Removing the travel time and room restrictions allowed us to reach a geographically dispersed audience and cater for those with considerable time commitments such as caring or employment responsibilities.

We found that interactivity in online sessions was high. Starting and closing sessions with informal conversations, regular use of the text-chat function throughout the sessions and housing an online space for participants (e.g. a Microsoft Teams Group) allowed participants' confidence in communication to grow with each session.

The need for online mediums during this period brought an opportunity for increased multi-intervention outreach, which may have been costly to implement face-to-face. Intended face-to-face programmes, such as *Preparing for Social Sciences*, necessitate costs and challenges associated with travel, refreshments and space limitations. Providing transport, including taxis, for participants to/from an address was a key feature. This was a great expense given the rural locations and personal circumstances (employment, family lives) of our target beneficiaries. Refreshments were specifically designed to fit with the aim of each session; for example, during student shadowing, flexible choice and replicating student experience of accessing eateries using vouchers was key. For other events, group catering kept the group together to provide structured informal time. While online delivery circumvents such costs, it also brings the

loss of the time together and exposure to experiences. This loss was particularly felt with the student shadowing and employability aspects of the programme. While participants could access online classes and virtual experiences offered by employers, it was not possible to recreate atmosphere, shared meals nor the accomplishment of navigating an unfamiliar, professional environment.

## eMentoring

Electronic mentoring (eMentoring) has been a cornerstone of the *Preparing for ...* programmes. Evidence suggests that mentoring is associated with positive attitudes and behavioural changes in mentees (Eby et al., 2008). Previous research on eMentoring found that both WP and non-WP applicants benefitted equally from eMentoring (Harris and Lane, 2020).

In our setting, the perceived benefits for eMentors were extremely positive, with many mentors identifying with the aims of the programmes. Additionally, the programmes have the capacity to recruit cyclically with WP students supporting WP applicants. Although Whiting et al. (2020) found that being from a 'widening access' background can be useful, it is not necessary for the effectiveness of the mentoring programme.

In terms of financial outlay, outsourcing a mentoring platform and paying eMentors have been the largest expenses of all *Preparing for ...* programmes. The use of an external organisation to host eMentoring, such as Brightside (2003), ensures that participants have a flexible and meaningful user journey. The platform includes a mentor-matching tool, providing mentees agency in selecting a mentor who matches their interests. The platform also uses automated engagement reminders and reports (Brightside, 2003). The platform filters conversations to prevent inappropriate materials being shared (Brightside, 2003) and conforms to the University Safeguarding Policy. These actions are a timesaving investment for academic leads using mentoring as an intervention.

We also pay eMentors to attend training and provide a mentor guide, which details prompts for conversations that support the timeline of the programme and the UCAS (University and Colleges Admissions Service) undergraduate application cycle whilst

allowing each mentoring pair to tailor the discussion to suit their needs. Employing current students as mentors is crucial to the authenticity of the programmes. Payment for both training and delivery acknowledges the time-commitment and professional expectations borne by the mentors.

## Engagement

In 2020/21, application figures for each of the *Preparing for ...* programmes indicated that the content and timing of the promoted sessions, which were developed following participant feedback, appealed to the intended cohorts. However, all programmes experienced attrition and reduced engagement in scheduled sessions (Table 5). Comparatively, *Preparing for Law* 2019/20, the only programme to operate wholly face-to-face, saw significantly less attrition than *Preparing for ...* programmes in 2020/2021. Participants who left the programme cited time commitment as the most significant factor. The rationale behind this may link to the in-person on-campus events, with participants provided with transport from home/school, acting as a possible physical compulsion to attend. The COVID-19 pandemic may also have played a significant factor.

To some extent, attrition is expected and can even be considered a positive outcome. For example, an aim of the *Preparing for Law* and *Preparing for Social Sciences* programmes was to support participants to make an informed choice about HE studies and subject selection. As such, attrition based on a decision not to pursue a subject met this aim. This approach did however raise the question about how participants would be supported in their newly decided path. Thus, the programme developed away from a single subject (Law) to a range of subjects (Social Sciences) to support participants as they navigate the decision-making process.

**Table 5** 2020/21 application and attrition figures (as of September 2021)

<b>Programme</b>	<b>Applicants</b>	<b>Attrition (the number of individuals who left the programme before it finished)</b>
Preparing for Social Sciences	39 <sup>v</sup>	15
Preparing for Health Sciences	19	12 <sup>vi</sup>

Attrition unrelated to subject choice requires further examination. Again, COVID-19, or implications of the pandemic (e.g. digital divide, illness), may have played a fundamental factor in the most recent programme attrition figures. Reasons offered by participants in the most recent programmes included the perceived time commitment due to competing activities. This is understandable given the cohorts involved. As one example, at the time of sign up, participants on the *Preparing for Health Sciences* programme were recommencing studies within Further Education Colleges, alongside work and, for some, caring responsibilities.

Concerns over time commitment raise questions about the frequency of online sessions, clarity of the outlined expectations prior to application and marketing of a programme that is at least a year long. Here, the provision of flexibility and choice may evoke feelings of autonomy (Ryan and Deci, 2000). For example, designing a programme that has essential and optional interventions may empower participants to take ownership over their continued involvement in a multi-intervention outreach programme, building feelings of competency and potentially reducing attrition.

An additional consideration and explanation to attrition is the development of friends and communities at in-person events compared to online communities. While there were attempts to replicate communities online, our experiences have demonstrated that the online medium of communication creates different communities and potentially leads to different levels of commitment to a programme. Developing friendships and communities can facilitate the development of motivation to participate by drawing on somewhat external locus of causality

(Deci and Ryan, 1985). In other words, friends/communities act as external motivators to participate in an activity.

Engagement of the continuing cohort remains a feature under scrutiny. *Preparing for Health Sciences* averaged 4/19 (21%) attendance at the monthly online information and guidance sessions. Additionally, engagement with post-evaluation was extremely low (1/19). Similarly, *Preparing for Social Sciences* averaged 5/39 (12%) engagement with sessions. However, it should be noted that engagement with the eMentoring remained strong throughout both programmes. Further evaluation is required to understand the barriers to engagement. The impact of the COVID-19 restrictions and resulting online fatigue (Syahputri et al., 2020) has not, and arguably cannot, be fully measured but remains a question.

In an effort to enhance engagement in the *Preparing for ...* programmes we are currently exploring the impact of non-financial incentives. *Preparing for Social Sciences* is offering a guaranteed reduced offer<sup>vii</sup> to study at undergraduate level after meeting a minimum engagement level. Previous studies from the United States found support for encouraging engagement using monetary incentives (Jones et al., 2002); however, findings from a similar study with students in the UK lacked sufficiently clear reporting, rigorous design and appropriate outcome measures (Gorard et al., 2012; Torgerson et al., 2008). A monetary incentive is an additional cost to a potentially already expensive intervention.

## Recommendations for future practice

Based on the reflections of three multi-intervention outreach programmes from the disciplines of Law, Social Sciences and Health Sciences, we provide recommendations for the future design and implementation of online/hybrid programmes:

- Learning from experience and evaluation: Utilise evaluation data and discussion with participants and implementers in your programme to understand what elements are effective and have impact. Identifying effective elements from online and face-to-face delivery should help you to identify the best combination of activities to construct a programme. Based on the reflections of each case study, the next iterations of the *Preparing for ...* programmes will be in-

person face-to-face sessions to build a sense of belonging for participants, and to build community and friendships. We plan to supplement these in-person sessions with eMentoring, which has seemingly positive outcomes and high engagement.

- **Timing of the programme is key:** Consideration should be given to the timing of assessment periods, and other key factors, which may help to prevent attrition. Timing is also relevant in terms of marketing. Young people (Year 12 in secondary schools /Level 3; 17–18 years old) struggle to contextualise the time commitment; an 18-month programme may feel overwhelming (de Souza, 2021).
- **Autonomy:** To encourage engagement and retention on programmes, future programmes could investigate developing options for participants to select elements for participation based on interest e.g. select and participate in at least three, but no more than six interventions. Linked to self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000), encouraging the development of autonomy through choice may promote participant investment and the development of motivation.
- **Budget:** Where possible, we advocate for paying eMentors and appropriate budgeting to pay for current student support on programmes. Current university students are an influential factor to students entering HE (UCAS, 2023).
- **Community:** Building a community amongst participants is a factor linked to ongoing participation. This appears to be more easily achievable with face-to-face activities. Future programmes should consider that a hybrid or blended format may be more favourable than solely online. However, an online medium creates opportunities to connect people from geographically dispersed areas and diverse backgrounds.
- **Cost/benefit:** Resources attributed to outreach can often be limited. As such, we require interventions that are cost-effective. A discussion around monetary incentives to promote sign-up and retention in multi-intervention outreach programmes (Jones et al., 2002) raises the question, 'What level of engagement is needed to justify

the investment in terms of time and funding?’ Future practitioners may need to test and consider the appropriate amount required to support engagement, recruitment and retention.

- **Engagement:** While we affirm the positive impact and significant benefits of outreach, we are also challenged by issues of attrition and engagement. Our experiences of digital or blended outreach are that it requires significant investment and resourcing. Future evaluation should attempt to undertake the difficult task of a cost-effectiveness analysis of a programme, considering the positive impact of a programme, plus monetary and staff resource.

While these recommendations stem from discussions between three academic leads who designed and delivered the programmes, it is important to note that other perspectives – for example from others involved in delivery, including mentors – would hold further valuable insights.

## Conclusion

This paper details the design and implementation of three multi-intervention outreach programmes across the disciplines of Law (face-to-face delivery), Social Sciences (hybrid delivery), and Health Sciences (online delivery). In-person activities were costly but facilitated greater community building and engagement with the programme. However, online delivery brings opportunities to reach more under-represented groups and offers flexibility to participants and session leads. Investments in mentoring platforms and the employment of eMentors saw positive outcomes and high engagement. However, challenges with online engagement and attrition with multi-intervention programmes still need to be considered. The next iterations of our multi-intervention outreach programmes will likely include an initial in-person face-to-face session to build friendships, a sense of community and belonging for participants, alongside eMentoring. Future multi-intervention outreach programmes should seek ways to increase engagement in online programme content and motivate participants in longer-term programmes. Further consideration should be given to hybrid multi-intervention

outreach programmes, with an emphasis on adequate funding and embedded cost-effectiveness evaluation.

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<sup>i</sup> Existing Multi-intervention outreach programmes which we are aware of have worked with students from lower socioeconomic groups, black and minority ethnic groups, care leavers, mature students, and disabled students.

<sup>ii</sup> POLAR – Participation of Local Areas, Office for Students: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/polar-participation-of-local-areas/>.

<sup>iii</sup> TUNDRA (tracking underrepresentation by area) is an area-based measure that uses tracking of state-funded mainstream school pupils in England to calculate young participation: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/about-tundra/>

<sup>iv</sup> One academic lead has 10 years of experience working at the University within outreach and WP. The other two academic leads have a research background and have <4 years' experience working at the University within outreach and WP.

<sup>v</sup> This represents the application from students who were eligible to participate and were made an offer. The total number of applications was 58.

<sup>vi</sup> Some participants left the cohort in 2021 due to either not receiving an offer from the institution or receiving an offer for a place on a course at another HE institution.

<sup>vii</sup> There were exceptions to the guaranteed reduced offer, most notably for Social Work, due to the professional nature of the course. Instead, a guaranteed interview was offered.

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