Title: Exploring the effectiveness of low-cost low-intensity programmes for improving educational knowledge and progression

Background

Widening participation activity is currently benefitting from an expansion of evaluation work that aims to understand the effectiveness of programmes and interventions for improving equitable access to higher education. This builds both on existing evidence from other contexts (such as the US, e.g. Hoxby & Turner, 2013), and on recent guidance on best-practice evaluation approaches in the UK context (Crawford et al, 2017).

In the widening participation evaluation field, short-term, low-intensity and relatively low-cost interventions have been shown to be effective at increasing the proportion of applications to higher education for students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Hoxby & Turner, 2013), for ensuring that the summer period between school finishing and university beginning does not result in pre-entry drop-out (Castleman & Page, 2015), and also improving the rates of financial support applications (Bettinger et al, 2009).

Paper aims

This paper presents new evidence exploring the effectiveness of two low-cost, low-intensity behavioural nudging interventions (O'Reilly et al., 2017) with a widening participation remit. These interventions are part of a broader programme of progressive widening participation initiative engaging over 100 schools and their students in the East of England, and were developed in collaboration with a broader set of partners.

WP Interventions

The first intervention involved over 800 Year 11 students who received text messages containing information regarding their educational options beyond age 16. The messages included brief and clear explanations about post-16 educational options, as well as guidance towards specific free and online resources that students could use to research those options further if they so wished. The aim of the intervention was to improve the overall level of knowledge about post-16 educational progression, including aspects related to qualification and subject choice. This will be measured through a self-report questionnaire scale.

The second intervention involved over 500 Year 13 students, who were guided through the UCAS application process between October 2017 and January 2018 also by means of short text messages. These messages were timed to coincide with the last 3.5 months prior to the UCAS application deadline in January 2018, and participants were students who in a separate survey had expressed at least a mild interest in applying to university at that point. The messages contained guidance related to writing personal statements, choices of university and subject, and information about navigating the UCAS application itself, including links to relevant information and tools. The aim of the intervention was to increase the application rates to university, and this will also represent the main outcome of the evaluation.

Evaluation approach

Both interventions were evaluated with experimental research designs, whereby participants were randomly allocated to either receive the text messages, or be part of a control group. Participants to both groups were involved in other school-based WP activity as part of the broader programme, and ethical permission was obtained to carry out both randomised controlled trials.

Data was collected from participants before they were allocated to each of the two groups, for each of the two interventions separately, and included questions about perceived likelihood of progression to HE (for Year 13 students) and self-assessments of the knowledge of post-16 progression options (for Year 11 students).

Final data collection, including the two main outcomes of the intervention (as detailed above) is currently underway, and will also take place in September 2018.

Results

The paper will report on the results of the evaluation, the analysis for which will take the place of two separate regression models, one for each intervention. For the Year 11 intervention evaluation the model estimated will be a simple OLS regression, that accounts for the clustering of students in schools. For the Year 13 intervention the analytical model will be a linear logistic regression model, that accounts for the binary outcome (applied/did not apply to HE via UCAS by the January 2018 deadline), and also for the clustering of students in schools, as above.

Discussion

The paper will conclude with a discussion of the emerging findings in relation to the effectiveness of the two interventions, situating them as potentially relevant interventions alongside more comprehensive widening participation activity that more deeply addressed local socio-cultural aspects. Practical aspects regarding the evaluation of such interventions will also be discussed.

References

Bettinger, E. P., Long, B. T., Oreopoulos, P., & Sanbonmatsu, L. (2009). The role of simplification and information in college decisions: Results from the H&R Block FAFSA experiment (No. w15361). National Bureau of Economic Research.

Hoxby, C., & Turner, S. (2013). Expanding college opportunities for high-achieving, low income students. Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research Discussion Paper, (12-014).

Castleman, B. L., & Page, L. C. (2015). Summer nudging: Can personalized text messages and peer mentor outreach increase college going among low-income high school graduates?. Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization, 115, 144-160.

Crawford, C., Dytham, S. & Naylor, R. (2017). The evaluation of the impact of outreach. Office for Fain Access. Retrieved https://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Standards-of-Evaluation-Practice-and-Associated-Guidance-FINAL.pdf

O'Reilly, F., Chande, R., Groot, B., Sanders, M., & Soon, Z. (2017). Behavioural Insights for Education. Behavioural Insights Team. Retrieved http://38r8om2xjhhl25mw24492dir-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/BI-for-Education-A-Practical-Guide-for-Parents-Teachers-and-School-Leaders.pdf