Online Outreach: Lessons learned, three years on

27 March 2023

The event focused on outreach targeting sixth-form students from less advantaged and/or low socio-economic backgrounds and aiming to support their progression to university and graduate-level jobs.

Dr Penelope Griffin and Dr Jack Layton   Presentation link here

Penelope Griffin is the Director of Higher Education and Impact at the Bridge Group and Jack Layton is Senior Researcher (Qualitative) at the Bridge Group.

Penelope concluded:

"Online outreach does appear to be as effective as face-to-face outreach for providing information. But face-to-face is more effective for developing 'soft knowledge', in particular personal and social confidence – and as a result of the pandemic, students are now more in need of this."

"Online work placements seem to be more effective than the university equivalent".

Jack said:

"A lot of modern work looks like digital delivery in practice … There is a lot of scope for using digital delivery to more accurately replicate what contemporary modern work looks like".

"Digital delivery can work best when you recognise what a medium can allow you to do, and lean into its strengths. "

'Doing digital delivery isn't necessarily an easy option, it's just an option that requires a different amount of time investment".

Jonathan Tyndall   Presentation link here

Jonathan Tyndall is the Head of Programmes: University Access and Digital, at The Sutton Trust.

Jonathan said:

"This [online summer school] work has allowed us to support many more students annually. We had over 14,000 students receiving support from us annually last year, compared to 3,500 in 2019."

"There is definitely still an appetite for online programmes … we still see good engagement with Sutton Trust Online over the last few years … and [last year, at one summer school] there were three applicants for every place".

"There's a benefit in giving students what they need when they need it. The online programme has allowed us to give the relevant content support when they need it, at the time that is right in the application cycle".

Hollie Crompton   Presentation link

Hollie Crompton is the Social Mobility Lead at PwC.

Hollie commented:

"It's not easy for us to get volunteers out to [rural] schools and areas … so the geographical reach of virtual engagement really allows you to reach areas of the country that you wouldn't be able to".

"Some students [from lower socio-economic backgrounds] may feel more comfortable attending events online in the first instance. But then what an in-person event can do for the confidence of young people is fantastic as well."

[Discussing PwC's Work Experience Programme] "The experience of meeting people in the office environment … that isn't possible to replicate online".

"I think the offices can seem quite daunting to young people … and when they get there and realise it's a relaxed environment it makes a massive difference in how they feel about working in an environment like that in the future".

Q&A

Question: What mode of delivery do colleagues/volunteers tend to prefer? And why?

Hollie Crompton
- It can be difficult to recruit volunteers to in person events on their work from home (WFH) days, meaning fewer people want to host events on Fridays (most popular WFH day).
- Volunteers prefer being in a room with young people and seeing the impact that they are delivering.
- Virtual events were pre-recorded so volunteers couldn't see the impact.
- In general, PwC does not struggle to recruit volunteers.

Jonathan Tyndall
- It depends on the type of event – it's more popular to host informational sessions and panels online, especially if you need geographic representation.
- But networking events and meeting multiple employers in-person is more valuable and interesting for volunteers.

Question: How do you select students?

Jonathan Tyndall
- Support students top 15% of attainment but from lower-income households
- Criteria include 5 GCSEs at 6 or above, eligible for Free School Meals, first generation to attend higher education, postcode from a less advantaged area. The more criteria they meet, the more likely they are to be accepted.

Hollie Crompton
- Target schools with high % of Free School Meals users and target social mobility cold spots.
- Typically branch further out of cities, because there is greater proximity and access to information regarding employers in central areas (e.g. Central London).
- Access Accountancy – they collect a range of indicators and prioritise those who meet the most criteria.

Question: In relation to reaching cold spots – has online delivery broadened the geographical reach of programmes?

Jonathan Tyndall
- There hasn't been a large change and there is still a concentration of applicants from Londoners.
- For in-person events, there is usually a spike in applicants who live in the local area.

Hollie Crompton
- PwC can reach much larger numbers virtually – so there is a greater geographic spread.
- But they also don't want to limit people in remote areas solely to attending virtual events.
- For remote areas, adjustments should be made for in-person events, including changing start times and assisting with travel costs.
- There can be disparities in engagements even within urban areas. E.g. Manchester will have more applicants than Oldham, despite being geographically close and demographically similar. Employers should branch further outside of where their offices are located.

Question: What online content is most engaging?

Jonathan Tyndall
- Interactive tools were most popular.
- Short videos perform better than long videos.
- Quizzes are popular – and users can compare to what their peers on the platform are thinking as well.

Hollie Crompton
- Similar observations as JT (above)
- PwC encourages teachers to develop interactive activities that can be performed at certain points during the video.

Question: How can online delivery be improved?

Jack Layton
- Interviews suggest that variation on coordinator skills and engagement can lead to wildly different success rates – so there is sometimes a need to assess things on a case-by-case basis.

Jonathan Tyndall
- More technologies such as interview practice technology could optimise outcomes.
- Need to curate what's out there and think about how to train colleagues to learn new technologies to improve virtual activities.

[on using new virtual technologies] "It might take a bit more time to set up and take time to get colleagues on board with using new things but that might be the thing that makes your programme stand out and increase engagement."

Question: Can the funding of online outreach still be justified now that in-person events are possible?

Jonathan Tyndall
- Online programmes are still appealing to fund:
"The cost per head per student is a tenth of what it costs to put one student on a summer school for a week and we can support five times as many students each year than we can through [in-person] programmes."

Hollie Crompton
- There is an appetite to continue with online and there's been no pushback on initial investment. Online is important for reach so a blended approach seems to be the way forward for employers.