

Full Report

HeppSY

Cohort Evaluation

HE Knowledge Matched Analysis

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Introduction and Context

The Higher Education Progression Partnership South Yorkshire (HeppSY) is part of the national Uni Connect programme (UCP), funded by the Office for Students (OfS), to help school and college students aged 13-19 across South Yorkshire who are most at risk of missing out on higher education (HE). HeppSY is working in partnership with Sheffield Hallam University, The University of Sheffield and South Yorkshire schools and colleges.

The Uni Connect programme aims to increase the HE participation rate of students from underrepresented backgrounds, and to support young people in making well-informed decisions about their future (OfS, 2020). A key part of the programme is also to evaluate the effectiveness of outreach provision in achieving these goals.

Local Impact Evaluation

The local impact evaluation at HeppSY is split into two overarching strands: cohort-level analyses, and programme case studies. The purpose of the cohort-level analyses is to investigate how effective the programme has been overall in achieving its aims, by determining associations and causal relationships between participation in outreach activity and outcomes related to higher education (HE). Previous analysis using this approach with HeppSY datasets found a positive association between the number of outreach contact hours that Year 10 students participated in and their expectations of applying to HE at Year 11, after controlling for prior expectations (Fletcher and Brown, 2020). This cohort-type analysis is important as it incorporates a broad range of the outreach activity that is delivered as part of the programme and is well suited to tracking outcomes longitudinally for large sample sizes. The limitation is that the diversity of the activity profiles of different students means that even if the data suggest the overall programme was effective, it is difficult to determine which features were necessary and sufficient in achieving a given outcome.

To address this concern, a series of programme level impact evaluations will be undertaken. These will be small-scale, well-controlled pieces of evaluation on specific, sustained programmes of activity. The aim is to provide robust evidence for the effectiveness of specific interventions, which are based on a detailed theory of change model. This is further supported by ongoing evaluation of the partnership's core offer, through case-study evaluations of purposively sampled activities across the four strands of the programme.

This evidence will offer the programme and our funders an insight into what type of interventions have the greatest impact for different target student groups.

Aims and Objectives

Building on previous cohort-level analyses which focused on students' expectations of progressing to HE (Fletcher and Brown, 2020), in the present report we use this approach to consider another important outcome: knowledge of higher education. HE knowledge is one of the four strands of the HeppSY programme, in addition to: career knowledge, confidence and resilience, and attainment. Increasing the HE knowledge of target students is a valuable goal in its own right as it supports students in making well-informed decisions about their education - specified as a key aim of the Uni

Connect programme by OfS (OfS, 2020). Additionally, it has been posited that a lack of access to salient HE information advice and guidance is an enduring barrier to entry for students from underrepresented areas, with the implication being that provision of such information could increase participation rates (Moore, Sanders and Higham 2013).

Drawing on data from Wave 1 and Wave 2 of the CFE annual learner survey, and HeppSY and partner activity data held in the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT); the aim of this project was to investigate the association between the number of contact hours that students participated in between waves and their self-reported HE knowledge at Wave 2, focussing on a Year 10 (W1) and a Year 12(W1) cohort of students.

Many aspects of HE knowledge, such as awareness of the subjects and courses available, the costs, financial support available, and information about student life, are relevant to both secondary and post-secondary students. However, we would expect more practical knowledge about how to apply and where to live whilst studying to be specifically relevant to post-secondary students, who are approaching an application window. Analyses for secondary and post-secondary students will therefore be conducted separately using separate HE knowledge scales.

Research Questions

As the analysis for secondary and post-secondary students is to be conducted separately using slightly different outcome measures, two research questions are posed:

After controlling for prior HE knowledge, what is the association between the number of HeppSY contact hours received by students in Year 10, and their self-reported HE knowledge in Year 11?

After controlling for prior HE knowledge, what is the association between the number of HeppSY contact hours received by students in Year 12/Level 3 Year 1, and their self-reported HE knowledge in Year 13/Level 3 Year 2?

Methodology

Data

CFE Survey

The student survey data used here was collected as part of the Wave 1 (W1) and Wave 2 (W2) CFE Annual Learner Survey. W1 responses were gathered from students in HeppSY partner schools and colleges in Autumn 2018, and W2 data was collected in Autumn/Winter 2019. HeppSY co-ordinated with Key Points of Contact (KPOC) in partner institutions, who administered the survey to their students on our behalf. The W1 and W2 survey datasets contained useable data from 10786 and 12246 students, respectively.

HEAT

The HEAT dataset was based on HeppSY and partner (UoS, SHU, Hepp) HEAT exports of student records and OfS funded activity data. Student records were matched across the four export files using a concatenation of the first three letters of student first name, full surname, date of birth, and postcode. The HEAT dataset included information on the cumulative number of contact hours, total activities, and the count of activity by type that each student had participated in.

School/College Registers

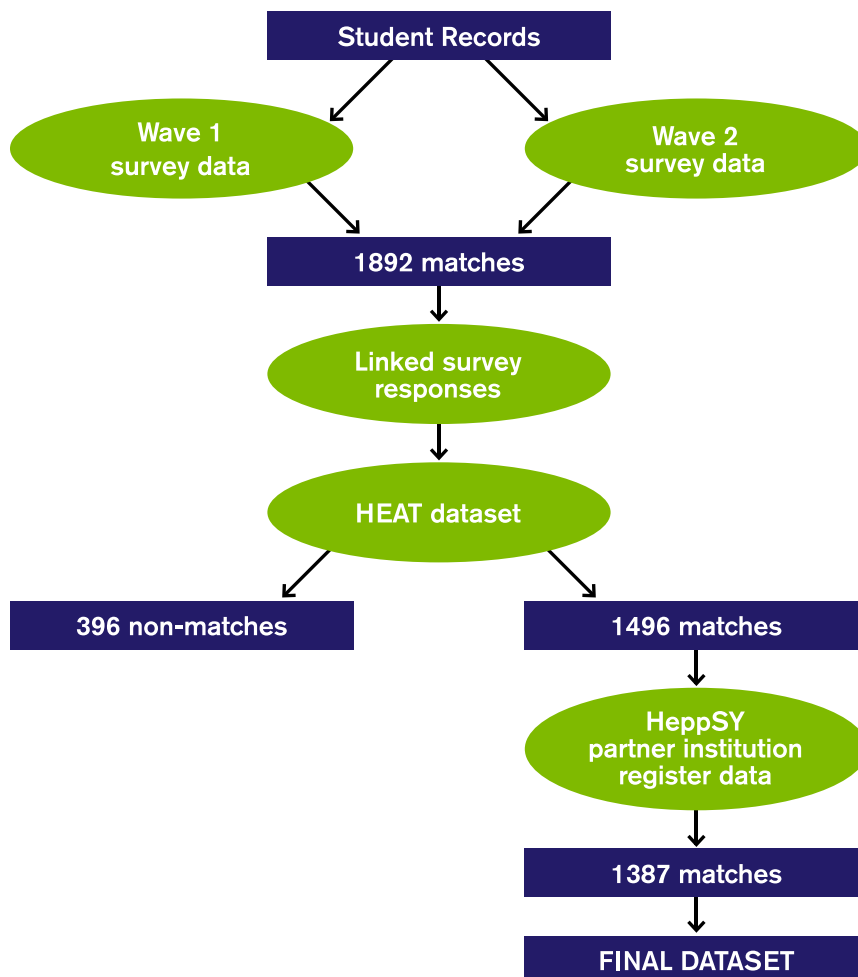
Each academic year, partner institutions provide HeppSY with a register dataset including all students in Years 9-13, and their assigned HE potential coding (see the Measures section below for a description). The 2018-19 register was used in the present analysis to link HE potential coding to students in the matched survey dataset.

Matching Process

The process used for matching students across datasets is described below. Note that the present analysis focused on students who were in Year 10 or Year 12 at W1, and therefore only used a subset of the overall matched dataset.

Individual students were matched across the two waves of survey data using fuzzy matching in Excel Power Query. Matches of 90% or higher were accepted, subject to random spot-checks of the data. This resulted in 1892 matches. Student records were merged so that every case had a W1 and a W2 response for each survey question.

The linked survey responses were then matched to individual student activity records in the HEAT dataset. Activity was filtered by date, so that only engagements that took place in-between the close of the W1 survey and the opening of W2 were included in the matching process. Fuzzy matching of the linked survey and HEAT datasets resulted in 1496 matches.



The 396 linked survey records that could not be matched to the HEAT dataset were either due to data quality issues, or because a student had not participated in any activity between survey waves. As non-matches do not necessarily indicate non-participation, these records were excluded from the dataset rather than being included as zero activity students.

Finally, the 1496 students that had been matched to both survey waves and to the HEAT dataset were matched to HeppSY partner institution register data, to add the HE potential coding that schools/colleges had assigned to students. This resulted in 1387 matches, which formed the final dataset of students.

Measures

HE Knowledge

At each wave, students were asked how much they knew about a range of HE topics, providing responses on a three-point scale (1 – Nothing, 2 – A little, 3 – A lot). Responses to individual items were combined to form a W1 and W2 HE knowledge scale. Separate HE knowledge scales were created for secondary (Year 10 – W1) and post-secondary (Year 12 – W1) year groups, with three items that were included in the W2 post-secondary student scale being omitted from the W2 secondary student scale (see Table 1).

Although the HE knowledge questions included in the CFE survey broadly covered the same themes across both waves, the questions were not identical. Therefore, while W1 HE knowledge scores do provide a measure to control for prior HE knowledge, the scores are not directly comparable with those measured at W2. See Appendix 1 for a comparison between W1 and W2 HE knowledge questions. Table 1 displays the W2 HE knowledge questions that comprise the secondary and post-secondary student scales.

Table 1. HE Knowledge Wave 2 Scales

Item	Scale	
	Secondary ($\alpha = .77$)	Post-secondary ($\alpha = .78$)
The subjects that you could study	✓	✓
The type of course you could take, such as: degree, foundation degree, or higher/degree apprenticeships	✓	✓
The qualifications and grades needed to get into higher education	✓	✓
What student life would be like	✓	✓
The costs of study	✓	✓
The financial support available	✓	✓
How to apply to study higher education	✗	✓
Where to find information about applying	✗	✓
The options about where to live whilst studying	✗	✓

α represents the Cronbach's Alpha – a measure of inter-correlations between items in a scale.

Contact hours (HEAT)

Contact hours reflect the cumulative hours of HeppSY activity that students participated in between the two survey waves. Contact hours is a broad measure, which does not differentiate between different types of activity – some of which will be more specifically focused on HE knowledge than others. However, due to the practical difficulty of classifying the level of HE knowledge focus for each activity delivered (which is not a binary classification), and given the theoretical expectation that the majority of sessions would build towards improving HE knowledge in some sense (even where it was just a peripheral element), it was considered to be a suitable measure.

An alternative (also broad) measure of engagement that could have been used is number of activities participated in. For this study, contact hours was deemed a more appropriate measure of engagement than the number of activities participated in for two main reasons. Firstly, number of activities is an indicator open to issues of inconsistent recording across the partnership and inconsistent interpretation across the sector (e.g. is a series of five mentoring sessions one activity or five?). Secondly, an activity count measure is less likely to reflect the amount and quality of information a student has received. For example, a student that has participated in two, 30-minute sessions is likely to have received less in-depth information than a student that has participated in two, three-hour sessions, though both will have engaged in the same number of activities.

Considering the opposing scenario, in which two students have participated in the same number of contact hours but a different number of activities, also highlights the uncertainty of using activity count as a measure. Whilst covering the same number of contact hours across more activities may suggest a greater range of topics covered, it could equally suggest less opportunity for in-depth provision and more repetition of content.

HE Potential Coding (School Registers)

HE potential coding is assigned to students by KPOCs at HeppSY institutions, based on whether a student lives in a target postcode, and whether they believe that the student is academically capable of progressing to HE.

Green = student is from a HeppSY target postcode and has the potential to progress to HE.

Red = student is from a HeppSY target postcode but does not have the potential to progress to HE.

Non-UCP = student is not from a HeppSY target postcode.

Sample

There were 679 Year 10 (W1) and 423 Year 12 (W1) students in the dataset. The following exclusions were applied for Year 10 (W1) students: contact hours over 25 hours (~ 2 S.D above the mean, N = 34), did not complete HE knowledge questions for both waves (N = 45), missing response for gender at both waves (N = 15). For Year 12 (W1) students, the following exclusions were applied: contact hours over 20 hours (~ 2 S.D above the mean, N = 19), did not complete HE knowledge questions for both waves (N = 19).

The final sample included 585 Year 10 (W1) students and 385 Year 12 (W1) students. A breakdown of respondents is displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Sample Size by Gender and HE Potential Coding

Year Group at W1	Gender	HE Potential			Total
		Green	Red	Non-UCP	
Year 10 (Secondary)	Male	119	33	92	244
	Female	176	34	115	325
	Prefer not to say / Other	8	3	5	16
	Total	303	70	212	585
Year 12 (Post-secondary)	Male	57	2	69	128
	Female	96	6	146	248
	Prefer not to say / Other	3	0	6	9
	Total	156	8	221	385

Analytical Method

First, descriptive statistics were calculated to overview the HE knowledge scores at W1 and W2 for pre and post-16 samples. This gave an indication of the change in responses between waves prior to controlling for activity and other theoretically significant variables.

For the main analyses, hierarchical linear regression analyses were conducted on W2 HE knowledge scores. Prior HE knowledge (W1) was entered as a control variable in Block 1, gender and HE potential were added in Block 2, school was added in Block 3, and contact hours (our predictor variable of interest) was added in Block 4. This method provides an estimate of the additional variance in the outcome measure explained by the variable(s) added in the current block, after controlling for theoretically important variables added in preceding blocks.

For transparency and as an aid to interpreting the data, we report p-values throughout. However, we do not consider a strict dichotomy between significant and non-significant to be an appropriate way to report the findings, particularly given that the observations do not come from a random sample of the population of interest.

Analysis and Results

Secondary School Students (Pre-16)

Descriptive Statistics

The secondary student HE knowledge scales for both waves had possible values ranging from 6-18, with higher scores reflecting greater perceived HE knowledge. The mean score was 11.56 (S.D = 2.66) at W1 and 12.39 (S.D = 2.59) at W2.

Figure 1. Secondary School Students (Pre-16) Wave 1 and Wave 2 HE Knowledge Responses



Note. "A little" responses (not displayed) bring the total for each row to 100%. Two questions from the HE knowledge scales are not displayed here as the wording makes them incomparable between waves. See Appendix 1 for full list of questions with exact wording.

^ p < .1

** p < .001

Regression Analysis

The results from the hierarchical linear regression conducted on W2 HE knowledge for secondary school students are displayed in Table 3 (model summary statistics) and Table 4 (Block 4 variable coefficients).

W1 HE knowledge scores (Block 1) accounted for 18% of the variance in W2 HE knowledge scores. Variables added in Block 2 (gender and HE potential status) accounted for an additional 2% of the variance, school effects (Block 3) an additional 7%, and contact hours (Block 4) an additional 3%.

The final model (Block 4) accounted for 29% of the variance in W2 HE knowledge, with higher W1 HE knowledge scores, male gender, Green HE potential status, and more contact hours all independently associated with higher W2 scores (Table 4).

Table 3. Secondary Student Model Summary

Block	Variable(s) Added in Block	Change Statistics			R ² Total
		R ² Change	df (1;2)	p-value	
1	W1 HE Knowledge	.18	1; 583	<.01	.18
2	Gender; HE Potential Status	.02	5; 578	.06	.19
3	School	.07	34; 544	.02	.27
4	Contact Hours	.03	1; 543	<.01	.29

Note. Change statistics relate to the variable(s) added in the current block, R² Total relates to all variables in the current and preceding blocks.

Table 4. Secondary Student Variable Coefficients – Block Four

Variable	B	SE	β	p-value
W1 HE Knowledge	0.39	0.04	.40	<.01
Gender: Male ^A	0.53	0.21	.12	.01
Gender: Prefer not to say ^A	0.80	0.72	.04	.27
Gender: Other ^A	-1.50	1.04	-.05	.15
HE Potential: Green ^B	0.62	0.35	.12	.07
HE Potential: Non-UCP ^B	0.62	0.39	.12	.11
Contact Hours	0.12	0.02	.25	<.01

Note. Shows the coefficients in the final block, where all variables are included.

B = unstandardised coefficient, **β** = standardised coefficient.

^A Reference category: Female

^B Reference category: HE Potential: Red

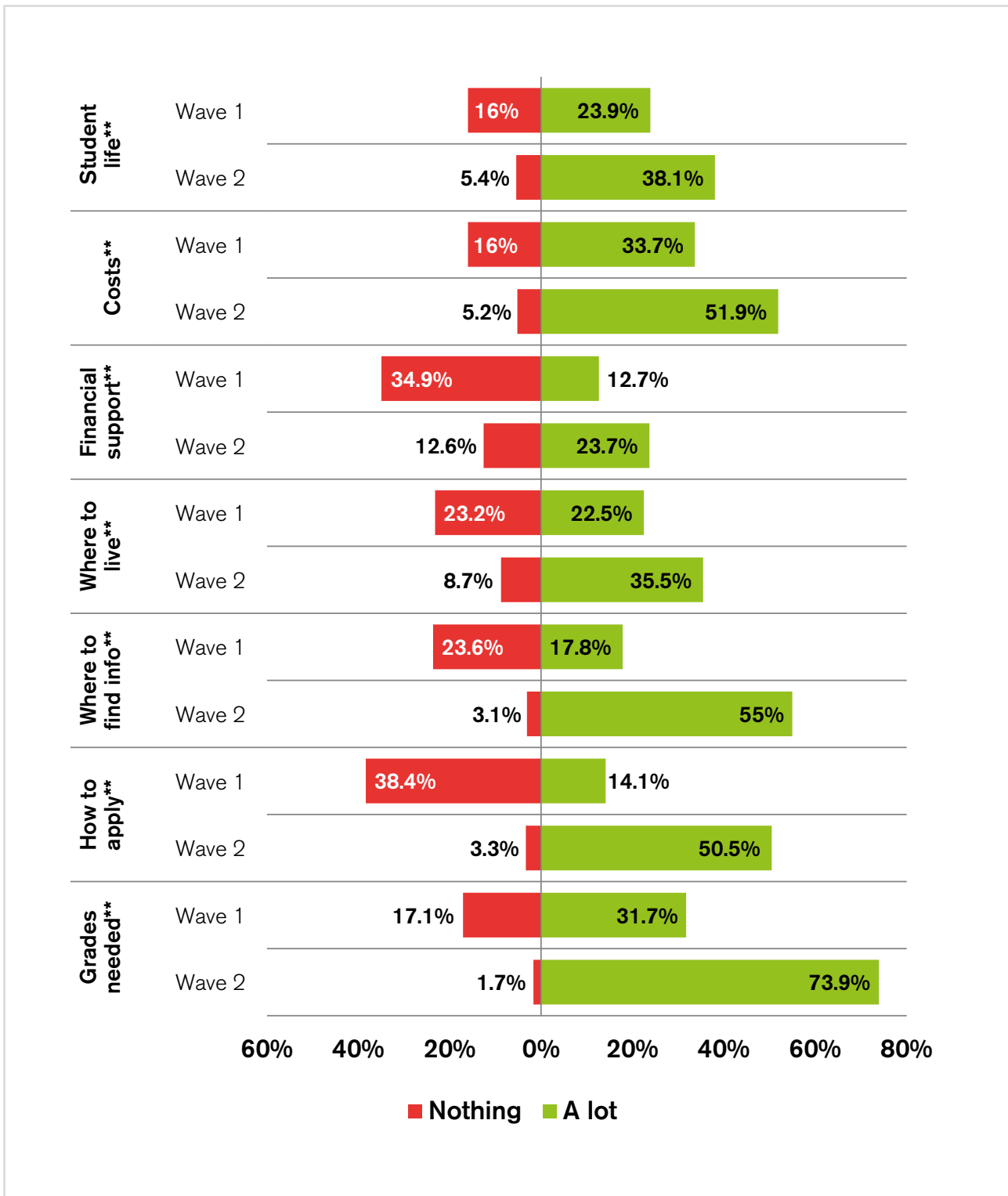
Post-Secondary Students (Post-16)

Descriptive Statistics

The post-secondary student HE knowledge scales for both waves had possible values ranging from 9-27, with higher scores reflecting greater perceived HE knowledge. The mean score was 17.93 (S.D = 3.47) at W1 and 21.88 (S.D = 3.21) at W2.

A comparison of W1 and W2 responses for the individual statements within the scales are displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Post-16 Students Wave 1 and Wave 2 HE Knowledge Responses



Note. "A little" responses (not displayed) bring the total for each row to 100%. Two questions from the HE knowledge scales are not displayed here as the wording makes them incomparable between waves. See Appendix 1 for full list of questions with exact wording.

** p < .001

Regression Analysis

The results from the hierarchical linear regression conducted on W2 HE knowledge scores for secondary school students are displayed in Table 5 (model summary statistics) and Table 6 (Block 4 coefficients).

W1 HE knowledge scores (Block 1) accounted for 18% of the variance in W2 HE knowledge scores. Variables added in Block 2 (gender and HE potential status) accounted for an additional 4% of the variance, school/college effects (Block 3) an additional 4%, and contact hours (Block 4) less than 1% additional variance.

The final model accounted for 27% of the variance in W2 HE knowledge, with higher W1 HE knowledge scores, female gender, and Non-UCP HE potential status all independently associated with higher W2 scores (Table 6).

Table 5. Post-Secondary Student Model Summary

Block	Variable(s) Added in Block	Change Statistics			R ² Total
		R ² Change	df (1;2)	p-value	
1	W1 HE Knowledge	.18	1; 383	<.01	.18
2	Gender; HE Potential Status	.04	5; 378	<.01	.23
3	School/College	.04	16; 362	.21	.27
4	Contact Hours	<.01	1; 361	.40	.27

Note. Change statistics relate to the variable(s) added in the current block, R² Total relates to all variables in the current and preceding blocks.

Table 6. *Post-Secondary Student Variable Coefficients – Block Four*

Variable	B	SE	β	p-value
W1 HE Knowledge	0.39	0.04	.43	<.01
Gender: Male ^A	-0.56	0.32	-.08	.08
Gender: Prefer not to say ^A	-4.48	1.44	-.14	<.01
Gender: Other ^A	-0.94	1.30	-.03	.47
HE Potential: Green ^B	1.56	1.10	.24	.16
HE Potential: Non-UCP ^B	2.07	1.07	.32	.05
Contact Hours	0.04	0.04	.05	.40

Note. Shows the coefficients in the final block, where all variables are included.

B = unstandardised coefficient, **β** = standardised coefficient.

^A Reference category: Female

^B Reference category: HE Potential: Red

Discussion

The aim of the present analysis was to investigate the association between the number of HeppSY contact hours students had participated in and their self-reported HE knowledge at W2 of the CFE annual survey, after controlling for W1 HE knowledge, gender, school/college assigned HE potential, and school/college level effects.

Separate regression analyses were conducted for secondary school and post-secondary students (using different HE knowledge scales): with a small association observed between contact hours and W2 HE knowledge for secondary school students (pre-16), but no association found for post-secondary students (post-16). There are several potential explanations for the divergent associations observed for pre- and post-16 students, which we will now consider in turn.

Firstly, it could be argued that the absence of an observed association between contact hours and HE knowledge in the post-16 sample is because they were already likely to have high scores at baseline. Restricted potential for increase could either reflect measurement issues – the three-point measurement scales may not have been sensitive enough to detect increases in HE knowledge for post-16 students – or that the underlying construct itself had little capacity for further increase. However, these explanations appear to be ruled out by the descriptive statistics, which indicated that self-reported HE knowledge did increase between waves for post-16 students – substantially for some items in the scale.

Considering that scores did increase between waves, there are at least two further possible explanations for why there was no association with contact hours. Firstly, it is possible that post-16 students are likely to increase their HE knowledge between Year 12 and 13 through other means, such as information provided by their institution, or information that they seek out themselves as they consider post-18 options. As a result, HeppSY activity as delivered could have had less of an impact on these students, in contrast to pre-16 students who are less likely to encounter information on higher education in their general schooling.

This does not mean that HeppSY activity focussed on increasing students' HE knowledge cannot benefit post-16 cohorts. However, the findings do suggest that further preparatory work may be required to ascertain what is being delivered by post-16 institutions themselves, allowing us to ensure that delivery plans are based on the HeppSY interventions that can add the most value, by focussing on aspects of HE knowledge that are not already being covered.

A second possible explanation is that any effect of HE knowledge-focused activity with post-16 students was diluted due to the broad measure of contact hours used. As pre-16 students are likely to have had less exposure to HE-related information than post-16 students through both formal and informal networks, a broader range of activity could be expected to increase their knowledge. This may mean that even peripheral aspects of non-HE knowledge focussed sessions, such as informal exchanges with recent graduates that are delivering a session, may increase the HE knowledge of pre-16 students – making contact hours an appropriate measure of engagement for this study. In contrast, post-16 students are likely to have had more exposure to HE-related information (already captured in W1 responses), and therefore only targeted, more scaffolded HE knowledge engagements may be expected to increase their knowledge as measured at W2. By this account, any effect these more specific HE knowledge sessions did have on post-16 students may have been diluted by a larger proportion of non-HE knowledge activities that - compared to in the pre-16 cohort - were less likely to have been effective in increasing HE knowledge.

Limitations

An important limitation of this analysis is that the sample was not random. Schools more closely engaged with HeppSY may have been more likely to facilitate student participation in the survey across both waves, and details on how schools select students to complete the survey are not always known. Ideally, all students would be given the opportunity to respond, but it is possible that schools selected specific classes to participate based on convenience or other factors.

Similarly, student response bias is a potential issue. Students who completed the survey across both waves may have differed in important ways from those that had the opportunity to participate but chose not to. For example, in the case of secondary school students where an association between contact hours and W2 HE knowledge was observed, perhaps those students who felt that HeppSY outreach had helped them to broaden their knowledge about HE were more inclined to complete Wave 2 of the survey than students who had participated in HeppSY outreach but did not find it to be valuable.

As in the cohort analysis conducted on expectations of applying to HE (Fletcher and Brown 2020), the outcome measures used here are drawn from a self-report survey, and consequently are subject to the limitations associated with this form of data. Further, whilst the HE knowledge scale used in W1 provides a suitable measure for us to control for prior HE knowledge, some of the statements are worded differently at W2, which must be considered when comparing scores across waves. Statements in each wave are outlined in Appendix 1.

Finally, it is important to note that attainment data was not included in the analysis. Attainment data on individual students from the National Pupil Database (NPD) is not currently available through HEAT for UCP consortia. While the HE potential coding given to students by schools was included, this is not a precise or objective measure, with different schools likely to use varying criteria in establishing the coding. Not including an objective measure of prior educational achievement such as KS2 or KS3 attainment is an important confound that precludes confidently making causal claims about the relationship between contact hours and W2 HE knowledge that was observed for secondary school students. For example, it is plausible that secondary school students with high prior attainment were more likely to seek out their own information about HE between waves, and more likely to have participated in greater amounts of outreach activity.

Conclusions

Supporting target students to develop their HE knowledge is a key component of the HeppSY programme. This is done through various means, from general assemblies to focussed information, advice and guidance sessions, covering topics ranging from student finance to extra-curricular opportunities.

This section summarises the main findings from the evaluation, and makes recommendations for ongoing practice, as well as future research and evaluation activity.

Headline Conclusions

For pre-16 learners, this study highlights an association between increased engagement with the HeppSY programme and higher levels of HE knowledge, after controlling for prior HE knowledge. A similar analysis for the post-16 cohort found no evidence for an association between number of contact hours and greater HE knowledge. This could be the result of a number of factors relating to research design, post-16 HE knowledge provision delivered as part of the HeppSY programme, and HE knowledge acquisition outside of the programme. Further work is required to focus on the associations between engagement with specific types of HE knowledge provision and change in HE knowledge scores for this particular cohort.

It is important to note that whilst this analysis offers evidence of a positive association between engagement with the HeppSY programme and increased HE knowledge (for the pre-16 cohort), no causal inferences can be made due to the omission of theoretically important variables, such as prior attainment. Further work to obtain attainment data and create matched control groups would be required to make causal claims about the impact of engaging with the HeppSY programme.

Recommendations for HeppSY Practice

The following recommendations are made for HeppSY practice moving forward:

1. Before undertaking HE knowledge activity with post-16 cohorts, work should be done with centres to understand what is being provided in the curriculum, to ensure the HeppSY programme is delivering added value. These discussions may be best undertaken during the delivery planning phase.
2. HE knowledge activity that is delivered to post-16 students should be specific and tailored. The progression framework should be further consulted to ensure that this is the case.

Recommendations for Further Research and Evaluation

The following recommendations are made for future research and evaluation to develop that outlined in this report:

1. Further analysis should be undertaken for the post-16 cohort, based on a subset of activities that are determined to be primarily focused on HE knowledge provision. This will help to determine whether under more concentrated conditions – absent the potentially dilutive effects of less focused activity – these specific sessions are associated with increased HE knowledge.
2. Qualitative research should be conducted with post-16 students to understand more about which sources they get HE-related information from, which areas they believe they have inadequate knowledge of, and how different information/sources have influenced their decision-making regarding HE progression.
3. Further qualitative research should be undertaken to explore how and why HeppSY provision was associated with HE knowledge amongst pre-16 students.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Item	
Wave 1	Wave 2
The courses that are available**	The subjects that you could study**
Different routes, such as: higher/degree apprenticeships, distance learning, and higher education in a further education setting**	The type of course you could take, such as: degree, foundation degree, or higher/degree apprenticeships**
The qualifications and grades needed to get into the course you want*	The qualifications and grades needed to get into higher education*
What student life would be like	What student life would be like
The costs of study	The costs of study
The financial support available	The financial support available
How to apply through UCAS*	How to apply to study higher education*
Where to find information about applying	Where to find information about applying
The options about where to live whilst studying	The options about where to live whilst studying



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