

# Attainment Raising Outreach: Exploring the Tensions Involved in Targeting

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With the cost of living crisis feared to damage the life chances of disadvantaged young people, it is critical that activities aimed at narrowing the school attainment gap are targeted towards those learners who need them most. This paper adds to the debate around attainment raising outreach by, first, proposing that lower attaining learners are the most appropriate target recipients, before examining the extent to which these learners have engaged in the attainment raising outreach recorded on the HEAT database.

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## Introduction

The rationale for universities' involvement in raising attainment in schools is often based on research showing that a lack of performance at Key Stage 4 (GCSE) is the greatest barrier to subsequent entry to university ([Crawford, 2014](#)). Analysing national datasets, Crawford found that students who fail to achieve five GCSEs at grade A\* to C, including English and Maths, are much less likely to pursue the academic pathway towards higher education. This is also true of outreach participants, with [evidence from HEAT](#) showing stark differences in higher education progression depending on participants' attainment at Key Stage 4. This is not surprising as many schools require pupils to achieve passes in English and Maths to enter academic qualifications at Key Stage 5, and furthermore, the majority of universities require this as a minimum standard on entry.

The main reason we have a socio-economic gap in higher education is because such a high proportion of disadvantaged students fail to achieve this GCSE benchmark<sup>1</sup>. For this reason, when John Blake, the Office for Students' newly appointed Director for Fair Access and Participation [set out his expectations](#) (08/02/2022), he emphasized that outreach delivered by Providers must focus on improving pre-16 attainment, with this being "a challenge which affects us all". An [Insight Brief](#) published by the Office for Students provides further supportive evidence, presenting data which clearly show that the higher education participation gap between free school meals and non-free school meals eligible pupils is almost eradicated when prior attainment is taken into account.

It follows, therefore, that to narrow the socio-economic gap in higher education, ensuring equality of opportunity, which is the [Office for Students' national objective](#), attainment-raising outreach should be targeted toward learners who are not 'on track' to achieve at Key Stage 4. This includes, specifically, those not expected to pass their English and Maths GCSEs as the research above identifies these subjects as critical. The corollary to this is that working with pupils who **are** on track to achieve at Key Stage 4 will not help narrow the socio-economic gap in higher education as these learners are already on the

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<sup>1</sup> In 2020/21, 53% of disadvantaged pupils and 79% of non-disadvantaged pupils achieved grades 4 or above in English and mathematics GCSEs. The Department for Education's definition of a disadvantaged pupil is those who were eligible for free school meals at any time during the last 6 years and children looked after (in the care of the local authority for a day or more or who have been adopted from care).

conveyor belt to higher education. It has been argued that these learners are ‘deadweight’, a term used to describe the diversion of resources towards individuals who are relatively educationally advantaged ([Harrison and Waller, 2017](#)). Accurate targeting of learners is more important now than ever, with fears that the cost of living crisis will damage the life chances of disadvantaged children who face issues that their more advantaged peers may be insulated from. Indeed, John Blake [also states](#) that “Universities and colleges have a moral duty to put their shoulder to the wheel” to help close attainment gaps in schools.

However, there are competing priorities at play here that must also be considered. The Office for Students have left Providers to make decisions about how they deliver their attainment raising activities. A survey conducted by HEAT of current members’ Access and Participation Plans (202/21 to 2024/25)<sup>2</sup> found that this tends to be driven by their institutional priorities. Providers must set targets, often relating to the Access and/or Participation gaps within their own institutions, that have been exposed in providers’ [Access and participation data dashboards](#). It is these institution level gaps that usually drive providers’ strategies to outreach delivery, rather than any national level priorities or what might be perceived as their moral responsibility. For some Providers, engaging lower attaining learners, before the age of 16, will not help improve the Access and/or Participation gaps at their own institutions and, thus, there are clear tensions between these institution level priorities and the national level aim. As institution level aims are more likely to determine how the policy will be implemented on the ground, clarity around the correct targeting of attainment raising outreach is required now if we want to maximise support for those disadvantaged learners not currently on track to enter higher education.

To further complicate the matter, there are also practical challenges involved in targeting sub-groups of learners within schools, such as the lower attaining pupils identified above. These students may not be targeted easily as school staff may, for example, be reluctant to group them together, highlighting their need for special attention, and importantly signifying their difference from their peers; or the students themselves may

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<sup>2</sup> 84 Access and Participation Plans were reviewed as part of this analysis.

be unwilling to engage with outreach, again, for a variety of reasons such as attitudes towards their education and the perception that higher education may not be for them. These, and many other practical reasons make the targeting of such sub-groups difficult.

Despite these considerations, the assumption that attainment raising activities should be targeted towards lower attaining learners remains compelling. This report adds to this debate by setting out these issues, raising important questions still to be answered across the sector, and supporting this with data recorded on HEAT on the historical delivery of attainment raising outreach. The analysis presented next uses data recorded on HEAT that has been linked with the National Pupil Database to examine the prior attainment at Key Stage 2 of outreach participants who engaged in attainment raising activities<sup>3</sup> between year groups 7 and 11 and then went on to take their GCSEs in the Key Stage 4 exam year of 2020. This allows an assessment of whether the learners currently taking part in attainment raising outreach are amongst those least likely to achieve the grades at Key Stage 4 that enable subsequent entry to higher education.

Predicting whether a learner will or will not achieve at Key Stage 4 is not an easy task. We do, however, know that [nationally](#), of those who achieved greater than Level 4 in Key Stage 2 exams taken at age 11, known as ‘High’ attainers, 95% went on to achieve at least a grade 4 in English and Maths at Key Stage 4 (grade 4 being approximately equivalent to the old grade C). In contrast, reaching this benchmark is far less certain for those who achieve only ‘Average’ (at Level 4) or ‘Low’ (below Level 4) attainment bands at Key Stage 2, (65% and 13% respectively).

In this analysis we show the percentage of participants engaging in attainment raising outreach who had previously achieved either an Average or Low prior attainment band. These two bands are aggregated, and the group is referred to as ‘lower attainers’, those who were in need of attainment raising support. All other learners will have ‘High’ prior attainment and for these students data suggests that success in GCSEs is more likely.

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<sup>3</sup> Classified as the Skills and Attainment activity type on the HEAT database. This Activity Type will, however, not encompass all attainment raising activity – see the Limitations section for discuss on this.

## Key Findings

- This analysis suggests that attainment raising outreach has not, historically, been targeted towards those lower attaining students identified as most in need of support.
- The proportion of learners with lower attainment from the outreach participant population is roughly the same as the proportion of learners nationally, with lower attainment (59% and 57% respectively).
- Considering the research which indicates that attainment at Key Stage 4 almost eradicates the gap in higher education participation, it is logical to recommend that improvements in targeting are needed so that those lower attaining pupils, who need most support, benefit from this type of outreach in the future. However, it is also acknowledged that more debate is needed within the sector to unpick this assumption, and in the Discussion section we further discuss the competing need to tackle Access and Participation gaps within Higher Education Providers.
- Regional comparison shows that learners with lower prior attainment in London are less likely to receive outreach than pupils in other regions. Only 38% of the learners who took part in attainment raising outreach had lower prior attainment, compared with 55% of pupils found in London as a whole.
- Fewer outreach Providers are delivering attainment raising activities in the North East, when compared with other regions in England, which may result in a more limited range of attainment raising activities on offer.
- Comparison of the types of Providers delivering attainment raising outreach shows that Uni Connect Partnerships are more likely to engage learners with lower prior attainment than Higher Education Providers.
- Of the learners who engaged in an attainment raising activity delivered by a Uni Connect Partnership, 61% were from lower prior attainment bands. This compares with 51% of learners engaged by a Higher Education Provider and 44% by a high tariff Higher Education Provider.
- With the scaling down of Uni Connect funding, there is a danger that we may see opportunities for learners with lower prior attainment decline in the future.

## Recommendations

- Across the sector, outreach Providers should focus their attention on targeting strategies, to ensure that their attainment raising outreach reaches those whose prior attainment suggests they are not already on an academic trajectory towards university. However, there may not be consensus on this view and more debate is needed, with key questions raised in the Discussion section of this paper below.
- HEAT member Providers can use their Key Stage 4 Attainment Tracking Dashboards to review the prior attainment levels of the learners they are currently engaging in pre-16 outreach. In these dashboards, the Key Stage 2 prior attainment bands for participants (overall and at activity level) are provided alongside their Key Stage 4 exam attainment.
- For those HEAT members wishing to improve their targeting, HEAT's school-level Planning datasets provide Key Stage 4 exam results which can be used to identify schools with lower attainment levels.
- Engaging those individual pupils who are at risk of attaining below a grade 4 will require careful targeting with the help of teachers. However, there are often practical challenges involved in targeting sub-groups on which further research and examples of good practise are needed.
- Continued data collection through HEAT is needed to monitor the prior attainment levels of the participants of attainment raising outreach. This is essential given the concerns over declining Uni Connect funding, resulting in a reduction in outreach opportunities for learners with lower prior attainment.
- Continued data collection through HEAT will also enable the monitoring of gaps in attainment raising outreach opportunities nationally, such as those identified in London and the North East.

## Regional Analysis of Attainment Raising outreach

Table 1 and figure 1 show the percentage of learners with lower prior attainment who took part in an attainment raising outreach, by region. This is compared with the percentage of all learners in the region with lower prior attainment. The analysis therefore investigates the extent to which learners in the lower prior bands, who were identified as more in need of support with attainment, are more or less likely to take part in outreach, showing differences across regions. The table provides the percentage

point (p.p.) difference between the percentage of outreach participants in each prior band and the percentage of all learners in the region in each prior band. A p.p. difference of 0 means that the same proportion of learners within the lower prior bands took part in outreach as is seen in the region as a whole. This comparison therefore considers the number of lower attaining learners within the region who are available to participate in attainment raising outreach activities. Multiple HEAT members have delivered outreach within each region and so any differences observed cannot be linked to a specific outreach Provider.

The data show that learners with lower prior attainment in London are less likely to receive outreach than lower attaining pupils in other regions. As explained above, this takes into account that there is a smaller proportion of lower attaining learners in London to start with (55% in the region) compared with other regions. Only 38% of outreach participants attending London schools are from lower attainment bands, a -17 p.p. difference when compared with the proportion of lower attainers found in the region (55%). Lower attaining learners are also underrepresented in the East Midlands, albeit to a lesser extent (-3 p.p. difference). However, as noted in the Limitations section at the end of this report, there are larger outreach providers in the East and West Midlands that do not record data with HEAT and so the data will not reflect all the delivery in those two regions.

Another interesting finding is that fewer outreach providers are delivering attainment raising activities in the North East, when compared with other regions in England, where multiple Providers deliver in each region<sup>4</sup>. This may result in a lack of diversity in the attainment raising outreach on offer. In light of the most recent (2022) exams showing [increasing gaps in attainment](#) between pupils in the north and south of England, additional opportunities may be needed in the North East to ensure sufficient attainment raising activities are in place for young people living in the region.

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<sup>4</sup> For a Provider to be counted as delivering in the region, they must have delivered at least one Skills and Attainment activity to no fewer than 80 registered pupils in years 7 to 11.

Table 1: Regional comparison of the prior attainment of attainment raising outreach participants

Region	Count of attainment raising outreach participants	Percentage of Participants with Low or Average prior attainment	Percentage of all pupils in region with Low or Average prior attainment	P.p. difference between participants with Low or Average prior attainment and regional average	Count of outreach Providers delivering attainment raising outreach in region
East Midlands	1490	56%	59%	-3%	5
East of England	12170 <sup>5</sup>	61%	57%	4%	10
London	1820	38%	55%	-17%	18
North East	1210	60%	56%	4%	<5*
North West	9320	57%	57%	0%	9
South East	7520	59%	55%	4%	17
South West	5580	57%	56%	1%	13
West Midlands	5050	63%	59%	4%	17
Yorkshire and The Humber	7620	63%	62%	1%	21
<b>Total</b>	<b>51770</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>57%</b>	<b>2%</b>	<b>65</b>

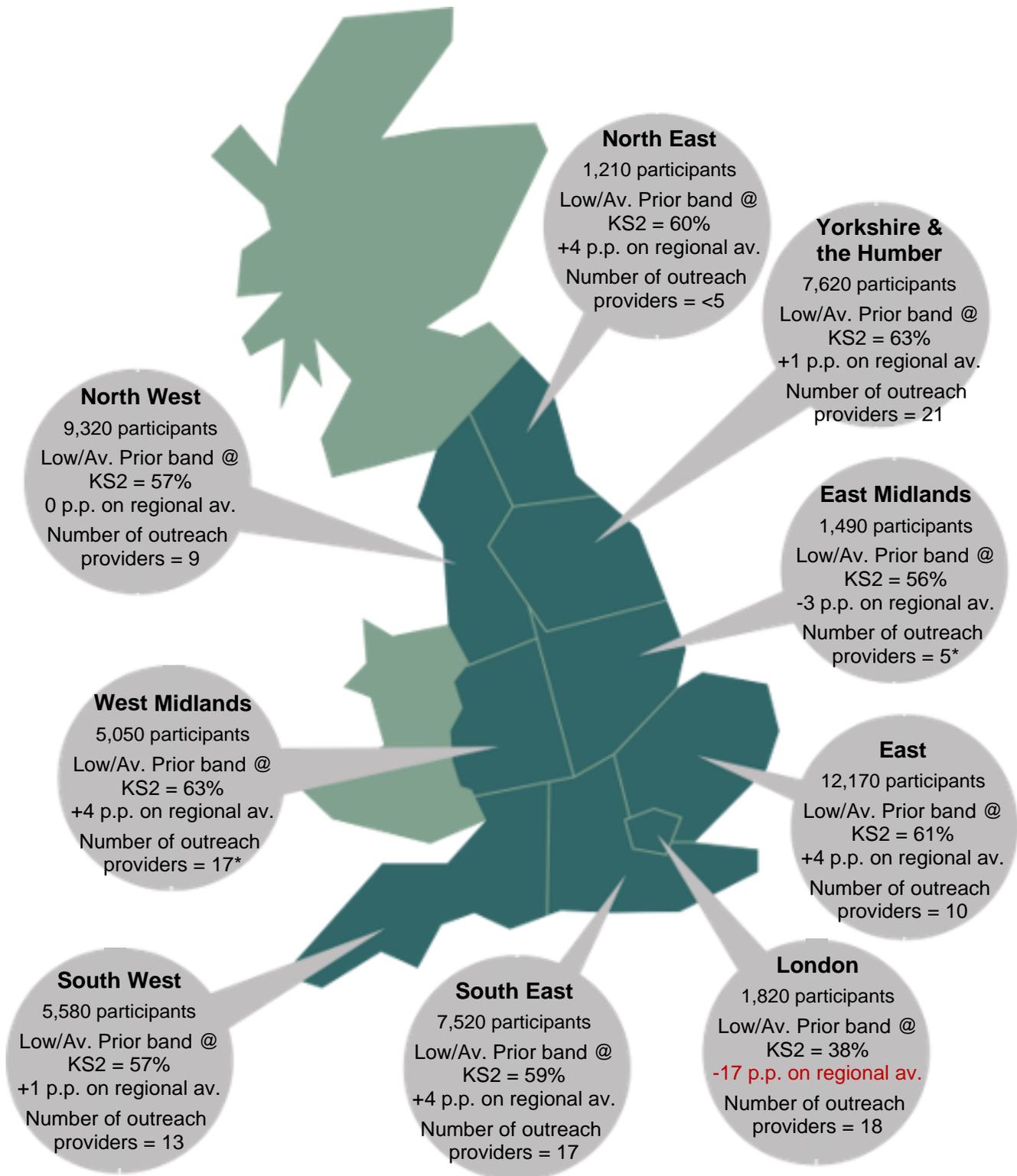
\*This figure, of less than 5, has been suppressed to protect the identity of individual Providers

The final column, giving the count of outreach Providers delivering attainment raising outreach in each region includes only those Providers that have recorded Skills and Attainment activities on the HEAT database, and delivered those activities to learners within the cohort included in this analysis, before taking their GCSE exams. A larger number of Providers will therefore be operating within the region, delivering other types of outreach and to other cohorts.

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<sup>5</sup> Although this comparatively large number suggests more extensive delivery in the East of England, there may be gaps in data recording that prevent us from drawing any firm conclusions in relation to coverage/volume of delivery per region – see the Limitation section for more discussion.

Figure 1: Regional comparison of the prior attainment of attainment raising outreach participants



\*Regional trackers are used by outreach Providers based in the East and West Midlands

## Provider Type Analysis of Attainment Raising outreach

Table 2 shows the prior attainment of learners who took part in an attainment raising outreach, delivered by different types of Providers. The analysis shows that Uni Connect Partnerships were more likely to engage learners with lower prior attainment than Higher Education Providers. High tariff Higher Education Providers were the least likely to engage students with lower prior attainment.

It is, however, important to note that there is likely to be a degree of overlap in delivery by Provider type as Uni Connect Partnerships are often embedded within their university partners. Outreach organised by a Uni Connect partnership working with lower tariff learners may be delivered in partnership with a university and, in these cases, data may be recorded under both Provider types. Whether this outreach would be delivered without Uni Connect is unknown, but we can raise concerns around whether, as Uni Connect delivery reduces in the future, the profile of learners engaged by Higher Education Providers may also change, with fewer lower attaining learners engaged overall.

Table 2: Prior attainment breakdown of participants engaged in attainment raising outreach, by Provider type

Region	Count of Participants	% Participants with Low or Average prior attainment	% Participants with High prior attainment
Uni Connect Partnerships	38510	61%	39%
Higher Education Providers	12560	51%	49%
High tariff Higher Education Providers	5410	44%	56%
National Average for England	-	57%	43%

## Discussion

This analysis provides useful data for monitoring the current engagement of learners in attainment raising activities. The findings suggest that improvements should be made in the targeting of attainment raising outreach so that it reaches lower attaining learners who are most in need of support with their attainment. However, it also raises some important questions around the groups of learners for whom this policy is intended, and

the tensions between national and institutional level priorities, the latter of which are often driven by targets set in Access and Participation Plans.

The analysis shows that Uni Connect Partnerships are more likely to engage lower attaining learners in their attainment raising outreach activities, when compared with Higher Education Providers. This may be partially due to universities being incentivised to recruit disadvantaged learners through their Access and Participation Plan 'recruitment' targets, whilst Uni Connect may have the greater freedom to carefully target those learners who are less likely to progress but may be more in need of support. As we know, disadvantage and poor attainment frequently go hand in hand and so it is not surprising that targeting appears more successful in the case of Uni Connect. However, this raises questions around whether opportunities for lower attaining learners will decline along with the funding for Uni Connect partnerships. The survey conducted by HEAT of current member Access and Participation Plans (202/21 to 2024/25) shows there is often a planned division of labour, with plans stating that the local Uni Connect Partnership will deliver attainment raising activities with a view to improving access to higher education, and the Higher Education Provider will have responsibility for delivering activities concerned with improving the continuation, attainment and progression outcomes for students enrolled at their institutions. As stated in the Recommendations, continued data collection through HEAT will be needed to monitor this.

High tariff Providers are least likely to engage learners with lower attainment. Although we have argued that engaging learners with High prior attainment is less likely to have an impact on the national aim to narrow the socio-economic gap in progression to higher education, there are other strategic objectives to consider. The Office for Students' also seek to narrow the socio-economic gap in progression to higher tariff Providers. Under this objective, learners with High prior attainment may be worthy candidates for attainment raising outreach, to support improvements in grades from 7s to 8s and 9s, cultivating the academic standards needed to attend high tariff universities.

However, it remains important that opportunities for learners from lower attainment bands are in place across all regions. As the cost of living increases, the challenges faced by the most disadvantaged and lowest achieving pupils are predicted to become

more severe. Careful targeting of the support offered by outreach Providers is critical if we want to help mitigate these challenges.

Agreement across the sector, supported by guidance from the Office for Students, is needed now to determine those for whom this policy is intended. Is it the low attaining group identified in this analysis, or should we also be concerned with raising the attainment of higher attaining pupils? Should only certain types of institution be focusing their finite resources on the learners from lower attainment bands identified in this analysis, or is there a place for this in all Providers' Access and Participation Plans? More guidance is clearly warranted as universities start focusing on the next Access and Participation Plan cycles.

It is worth noting that, because of the Office for Students' requirement for Providers to submit variations to their Access and Participation Plans in order to set out how they will address pre-16 attainment ([Priority B](#)), this report concentrates on how the policy aligns with Access measures. However, there may be other types of worthwhile attainment raising activities that could align with Student Success, such as activities around preparedness for academic life at university. Although John Blake [observes](#) that universities and colleges should have a "moral duty" to improve attainment in schools, this may be difficult for those universities with no targets relating to Access to embrace at a time when resources scarce. After all, rising costs will be felt by all – not just families and schools, but universities and colleges too.

Finally, this report has focussed on targeting, but many questions remain around what constitutes an attainment raising outreach activity. This policy has come at a difficult time for many schools, with some schools [reporting](#) they are now 'part of the welfare state', describing growing numbers of pupils coming to school hungry or without a clean uniform and rates of absenteeism increasing, all things that will almost certainly have a negative impact on attainment. As schools struggle to contend with these issues, we need a clearer understanding of how universities can use the unique expertise they hold to contribute to closing the attainment gap. Should this be limited to academic support or is it within their remit to tackle other issues such as absenteeism or poor nutrition? Yet, before we can begin to look at what outreach Providers can do to help raise attainment,

we need consensus around who it is we are helping. The answer to this question, which is asked throughout this report, will inevitably determine what is delivered.

We are only just starting to explore many of the challenges associated with attainment raising outreach, but with continued data collection through HEAT and evaluation guidance from [TASO](#) we are in a better position than ever to formulate the evidence we need to show what works and in what context.

## Limitations

This analysis contains the following limitations. First, HEAT data cannot provide a complete picture of outreach delivery nationally. It does capture the majority, with 87% of large outreach providers using the Service, but there are several large providers delivering in the East and West Midlands that record data elsewhere. In addition, HEAT members are under no obligation to record all the outreach they deliver and so there may be gaps in data recording within the membership. For example, individual student data may be recorded for intensive interventions only by some Providers, although a survey conducted by HEAT showed that data collection is relatively complete<sup>6</sup> for the Skills and Attainment Activity Type on which this analysis is based.

Second, the Skills and Attainment Activity Type has been used to define attainment raising outreach. However, as the requirement for outreach to raise attainment is fairly new, these activities may not have specifically had this aim at the point of delivery, and other activities classified under different types may also have had links with attainment.

The third limitation relates to the ability for Key Stage 2 data to accurately predict whether a pupil is in need of attainment raising support at Key Stage 4. Outreach providers may have access to data on pupils' attainment through schools that we do not have access to here. Teachers may have identified pupils with high Key Stage 2 attainment who have fallen behind. However, this is likely to be the minority and would not account for all 41% of high attainment participants within the analytical cohort.

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<sup>6</sup> 70% of HEAT members reported that they record 'All' or 'Most' of the students they engage in Skills and Attainment activities.

Therefore, the overall finding that attainment raising support has not been targeted towards lower attaining pupils remains as valid.

Finally, both outreach delivery and exam processes experienced huge disruption in 2020 and 2021 due to COVID and there may be concerns that this will have skewed the data included in this report. However, although we examine the 2020 Key Stage 4 exam cohort, we consider only prior attainment at Key Stage 2, exams taken five years previously and therefore well before the pandemic. In terms of outreach delivery, learners received outreach at any time between Year Group 7 and Year Group 11, (academic years of 2016/17-2019/20) and so the majority of delivery would have pre-dated the pandemic.

Despite the limitations listed above this research raises important questions about the nature of attainment raising outreach and whom it is intended to help.

### **Acknowledgements**

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