

Reducing the gap in higher education participation through Uni Connect

Evidence from Uni Connect Partnership Leads in support of continuing the Uni Connect Programme to Phase 3

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- Higher Horizons+ - led by University of Keele
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- Kent and Medway Collaborative Outreach Programme (KAMCOP) - led by University of Kent
- LiNCHigher - led by Bishop Grosseteste University
- Pathways - led by University of Leicester
- Next Steps South West - led by University of Plymouth
- Study Higher - led by Oxford Brookes University
- Sussex Learning Network - led by University of Brighton
- Think Higher - led by University of Warwick
- Wessex Inspiration Network (WIN) - led by University of Bath

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Key findings

- ✓ 29 partnerships across England have been funded since 2017 as part of the Office for Students' Uni Connect programme to deliver outreach in areas where the higher education (HE) participation of young people is low - and much lower than expected based on GCSE-level attainment.
- ✓ Uni Connect activities represent a very significant contribution to widening participation work across England. From early 2017 to July 2020, at least 1,600 schools and colleges and 765,389 young people, of whom 348,290 lived in target areas, took part in higher education outreach through the Uni Connect programme. Data from 24 of the 29 partnerships suggest that Uni Connect represents 42% of the outreach work recorded on the HEAT database.

This report finds evidence of progress towards each of Uni Connect's four objectives.

- ✓ Analysing HESA¹ data from 24 partnerships found HE participation rates to be 11 percentage points higher among the students from underrepresented groups who had participated in Uni Connect, compared with all students aged 18/19 in England ready to go to HE by 2018/19 (38% compared with 27% for POLAR 4 Q1), with a smaller gap between the most and least represented groups (4 percentage points, compared with 31 percentage points across England).
- ✓ Uni Connect evaluator CFE Research's 2020 Evidence Meta-Review² found evidence "to strongly indicate that a sustained, progressive and collaborative approach to outreach has a positive impact on short- to medium-term outcomes, including knowledge and awareness of higher education (HE) and learners' confidence to make informed decisions, as well as on their intentions towards HE."
- ✓ The Uni Connect (formerly NCOP) End of Phase 1 evaluation report³ noted that "[t]he collaborative approach is successfully addressing 'cold spots' in outreach provision." The report also found that "the unique and highly-targeted nature of NCOP has ... meant that established partnerships have had to broaden their membership by engaging new partners and stakeholders from inside and outside the education sector."
- ✓ The annual survey of students in schools working with Uni Connect has generated a considerable data set for analysis, of just under 230,000 survey responses. All partnerships have engaged with tracking students engaged in activities using databases, to facilitate research into the impact of outreach activity of different types and intensities.

¹ Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2018/19 data.

² Uni Connect: Evidence Meta- Review. A report for the Office for Students on the findings from the second call for local evaluation evidence (October 2020). P1.

³ National Collaborative Outreach Programme End of Phase 1 report for the national formative and impact evaluations (October 2019). Prepared by CFE Research, Sheffield Institute of Education at Sheffield Hallam University and the Behavioural Insights Team.

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Introduction

Phase 1

Jan 2017 - Jul 2019

- To support the Government's social mobility goals by rapidly increasing the number of young people from underrepresented groups who go into higher education.
- Focus on areas where higher education participation is lower than might be expected given the GCSE results of the young people who live there.

Phase 2

Aug 2019 - Jul 2021

- Targeted higher education outreach within the local areas with potential for the most impact (these are the same areas targeted under Phase 1)
- Outreach hubs within the 29 local partnerships with cross-England coverage to help schools and colleges access the higher education outreach they need and provide a platform for wider collaboration.

Phase 3

TBC Aug 2021

- Consultation on the possible extension of the programme to Phase 3 to take place in late 2020/early 2021.

Uni Connect⁴ brings together 29 partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners to offer activities, advice and information on the benefits and realities of going to university or college for young people in years 9 to 13 in particular geographic areas.

It provides impartial information, advice and guidance to underrepresented students at levels 3, 4, 5 and 6, supporting pathways to further and higher education.

Through providing an efficient single point of contact for schools and colleges to find out what opportunities are available for students in their area, Uni Connect helps to remove the academic, financial and cultural barriers to progression and supports students to achieve their ambitions. The programme can adjust its focus to different age groups and progression routes to support local priorities.

With the challenges that 2020 has brought for young people, achieving these aims is more important than ever. A rapid evidence assessment by the Education Endowment Foundation

projected that school closures will widen the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers, likely reversing progress made to narrow the gap since 2011⁵. In their analysis of the impact of the learning loss due to Covid-19, London Economics and the Sutton Trust assume that the labour market penalty associated with the learning loss will be incurred by only those individuals likely to achieve lower levels of post-compulsory education, not by those who progress to higher education.⁶

⁴ Uni Connect was formerly known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP).

⁵ Education Endowment Foundation (2020) Impact of school closures on the attainment gap: Rapid Evidence Assessment, London: Education Endowment Foundation.

⁶ Halterbeck, M., Conlon, G., Patrignani, P., & Pritchard, A. [Lost Learning, Lost Earnings](#).

Through its long-term, coordinated outreach to support student progression to further and higher education, Uni Connect enables schools and colleges to focus resources on the academic performance of young people from those disadvantaged groups disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

The Office for Students has provided funding of £60 million per year for the Uni Connect programme for academic years 2017-18, 2018-19, 2019-20 and 2020-21.

The programme aims to:

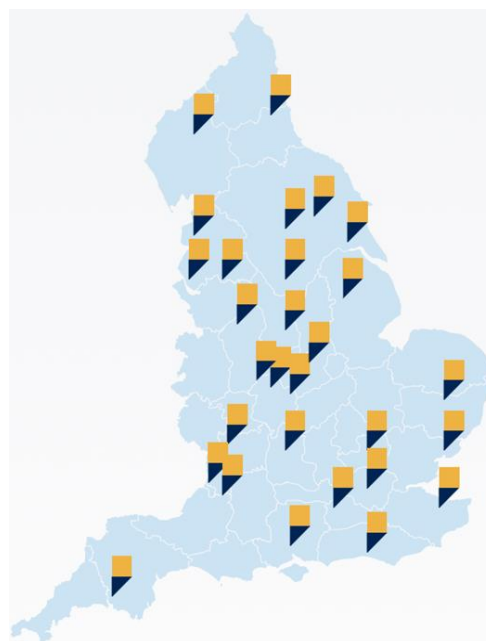
reduce the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups

support young people to make well-informed decisions about their future education

support effective and impactful local collaboration by higher education providers working together with schools, colleges, employers and other partners

contribute to a stronger evidence base around 'what works' in higher education outreach and strengthen evaluation practice in the sector.

Figure 1 Map of the 29 Uni Connect partnerships across England



This report examines the evidence available across partnerships to understand progress towards these aims. It looks first at what Uni Connect partnerships have achieved, and then at available evidence of the difference the programme has made under each objective, at the national, partnership, activity, school and student level.

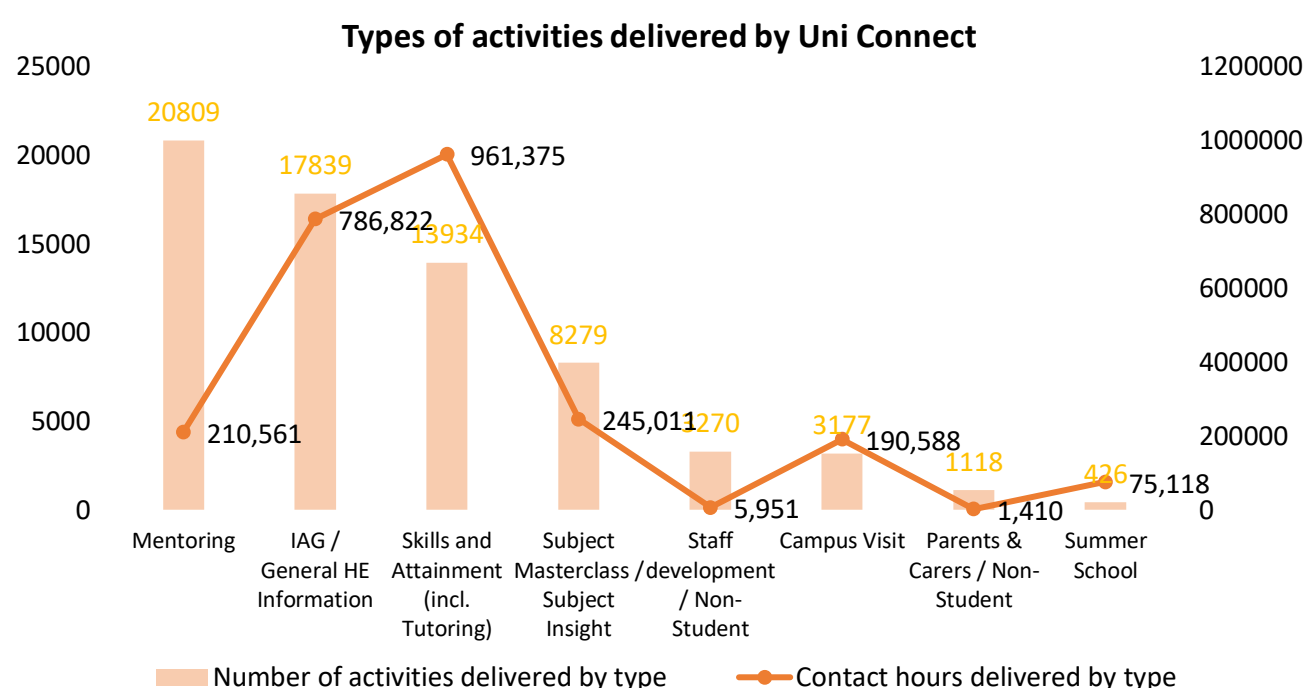
What has been achieved so far?

Uni Connect activities represent a very significant contribution to the widening participation work taking place across England. From January 2017 to July 2020, at least 1,600 schools and colleges and 765,389 young people, of whom 348,290 lived in target areas, took part in higher education outreach through the Uni Connect programme. Over 68,000 activities have taken place and almost 2.5 million contact hours have been delivered across 28 of the 29 partnerships. This represents an average of 3.88 contact hours per learner taking part in Uni Connect, in line with the 3-6 hours found to be associated with increased expectations of applying to HE in HeppSY's recent study⁷.

⁷ HeppSY Cohort Evaluation: Contact Hours and Expectations of Applying to HE Aged 18 or 19. October 2020. Daniel Fletcher and Greg Brown.

Around half of the activities on widening participation databases in 2018/19 and 2019/20 were recorded by Uni Connect partnerships. Data from the HEAT⁸ database (incorporating 24 of the 29 partnerships) indicate that Uni Connect outreach work represents as much as 42% of the outreach work recorded on the database. Just over half the activities recorded on the East Midlands Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Partnership (EMWPREP) database (54%) in the same time period related to outreach by Uni Connect partnerships.

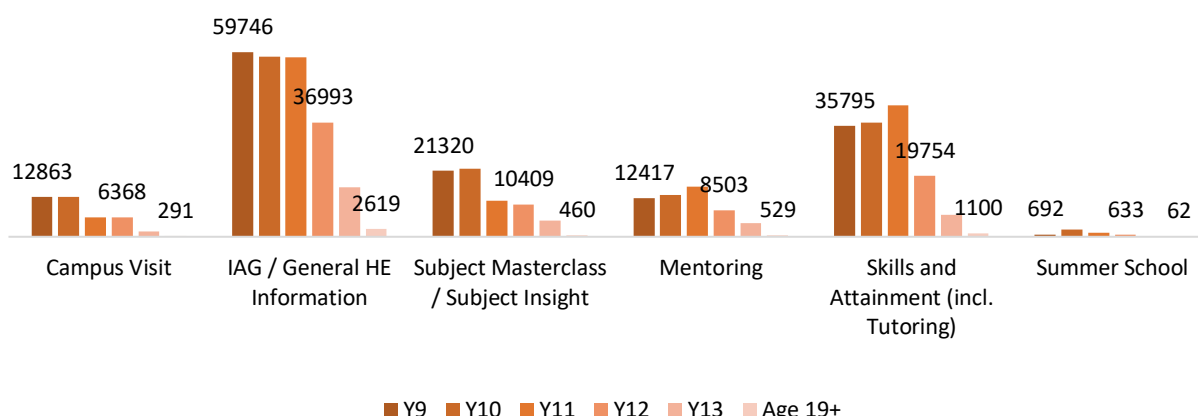
Data from 28 of the 29 partnerships indicates that the most common type of activity delivered by Uni Connect partnerships was mentoring, with skills and attainment-related activities representing the largest number of contact hours delivered. Across all activity types, Key Stage 4 students were the most likely to participate⁹, and Information, Advice and Guidance/General HE information activities engaged the highest number of unique learners.



⁸ Higher Education Access Tracker

⁹ Note, some learners may be counted several times in this graph if participating in multiple activity types

Unique learners participating by activity type and year group



What progress has Uni Connect made towards its aims?

Aim: Reducing the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups

The HEAT-Member Uni Connect Partnership Aggregate HESA Tracking Report 2018/19 (October 2020) examines rates of higher education (HE) progression amongst students who engaged in outreach activities delivered by 24 out of 29 Uni Connect Partnerships. The analysis samples participants who were at least 18 years of age and therefore ready to enter HE in 2018/19, and who had been recorded on the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) database as having participated in at least one outreach activity; this sample was then matched to those on the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) entrants' database. This data matching allowed tracking of participants, to reveal how many had entered HE as first-time entrants since participating in outreach. Progression rates were then analysed according to which POLAR 4 Quintile¹⁰ students participating in outreach lived in, and compared with rates for all students aged 18 or 19 across England¹¹.

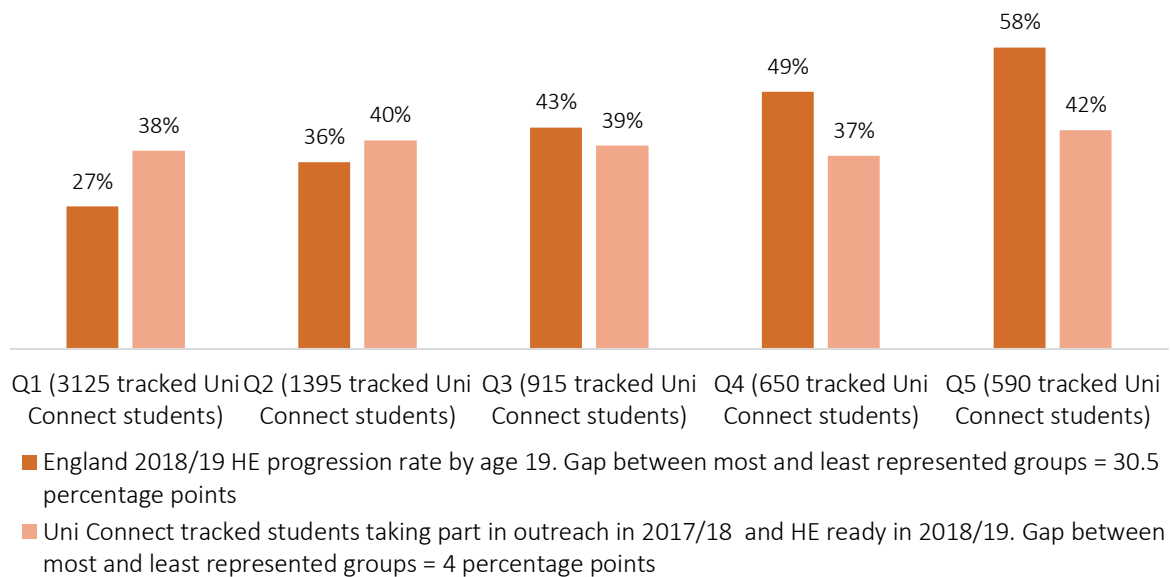
The analysis found HE progression rates to be 11 percentage points higher among the students from underrepresented groups who had participated in Uni Connect outreach by 2018/19, compared with all students aged 18 or 19 in England (38% compared with 27% for POLAR 4 Q1), with a smaller gap between the most and least represented groups (4 percentage points,

¹⁰ The participation of local areas (POLAR) classification groups areas across the UK based on the proportion of young people who participate in higher education. POLAR classifies local areas into five groups - or quintiles - based on the proportion of young people who enter higher education aged 18 or 19 years old. Quintile one shows the lowest rate of participation. Quintile five shows the highest rate of participation. For more details please see the Office for Students website: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/about-polar-and-adult-he/>

¹¹ From Table showing HE Progression Rate for 'All Characteristics' for Q1 - Most Disadvantaged, Q2, Q3, Q4 and Q5 - Most Advantaged from 'Widening participation in higher education' in England between 2009/10 and 2018/19 on Gov.uk website: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/f0b41c52-4acb-459d-a91d-8c5718fc422d>

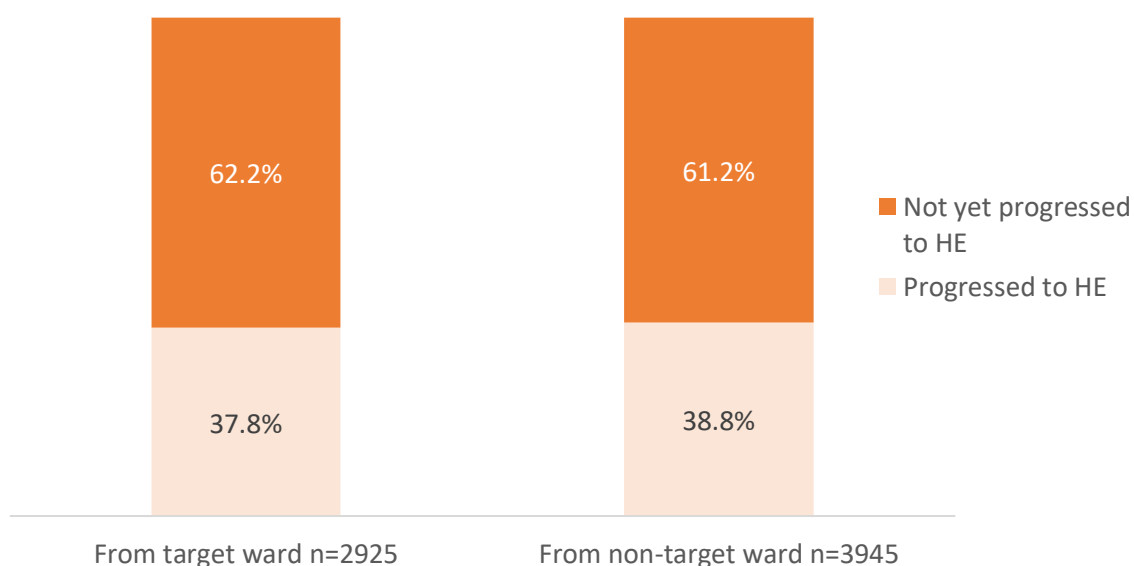
compared with 31 percentage points across England). The lower progression rates amongst tracked students in Quintiles 3 to 5 when compared with students across England may be the result of selection bias. The Uni Connect programme targets students from underrepresented groups, so there are smaller numbers of participants from Quintiles 3 to 5. Those students from Quintiles 3 to 5 who have participated in Uni Connect activities may be more likely to be disadvantaged in other ways.

2018-19 progress to HE rates by POLAR 4 Quintile



Examining the proportion of Uni Connect learners who took part in outreach and were subsequently eligible to progress to HE in 2018/19, and who entered higher education as first-time entrants, reveals close to parity between students from target wards (those identified on the basis of low participation rates) and non-target wards.

% tracked cohort accessing HE in 2018/19



The HEAT research team conducted an analysis of the HESA data showing progression to higher education. They compared students who had participated in Uni Connect outreach with a comparator group matched on gender, ethnicity, POLAR Quintile, IMD¹² Quintile, Key Stage 4 prior attainment of students and the average HE Progression rate for the school. A small positive difference was observed; the progression rate to HE was 2.3 percentage points higher amongst Uni Connect outreach participants. However, due to the small sample size and effect size, the results were not statistically significant. The analysis carried out by HEAT noted:

“Due to the time lag in HE entry, most participants tracked so far received outreach whilst in Year 13 only. Effect sizes are expected to increase as further tracking data becomes available for younger participants of more sustained and progressive activities.”¹³

Progress in the North West Midlands

New research undertaken by Higher Horizons+, led by Keele University and working across Staffordshire, Cheshire and Shropshire, East Midlands Widening Participation Research, and UCAS STROBE, has tracked the educational outcomes of 1,400 young people who engaged with Higher Horizons+.

It has revealed that 50.5% of those that participated with the programme had applied to university in 2018 or 2019, with a year-on-year increase in the numbers opting for higher education. This is in contrast to the regional average progression rate of just 18%.

The outcomes of a further 3,300 students from the local area were tracked and indicate that young people from both groups are more likely to progress to local universities than non-local, with over 300 learners accepting a place to study at Keele University and a further 300 at Staffordshire University.

Rising applications at Queen Katharine Academy, Peterborough

Damon Lewis is Director of Sixth Form and Assistant Principal at Queen Katharine Academy in Peterborough: *“There is often a disconnect between student aspirations and backgrounds – it is not unusual for 100% of our cohort moving on to university to be the first generation to do so.”*

Working with neaco’s Take Your Place programme *“has added additional capacity and voice to the message that students can have very significant trajectories and educational outcomes... University admissions from the school are now 2-3 times higher than they were 6 years ago – a remarkable success which Take Your Place has undoubtedly contributed to.”*

¹² Index of Multiple Deprivation – for more details see:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/464430/English_Index_of_Multiple_Deprivation_2015_-_Guidance.pdf

¹³ HEAT, “What can HEAT data tell us about the impact of Uni Connect so far?” (November 2020)

CFE Research's 2020 Evidence Meta-Review¹⁴ also identified encouraging signs for progression:

"Although it is not possible to measure the impact of Uni Connect on longer-term outcomes such as the actual rate of progression to HE at this stage, the signs are encouraging. Sustaining these impacts is, therefore, essential and will help to ensure the long-term goal of equality of opportunity in HE is achieved".

Evaluating the impact of Aimhigher West Midlands on HE progression rates

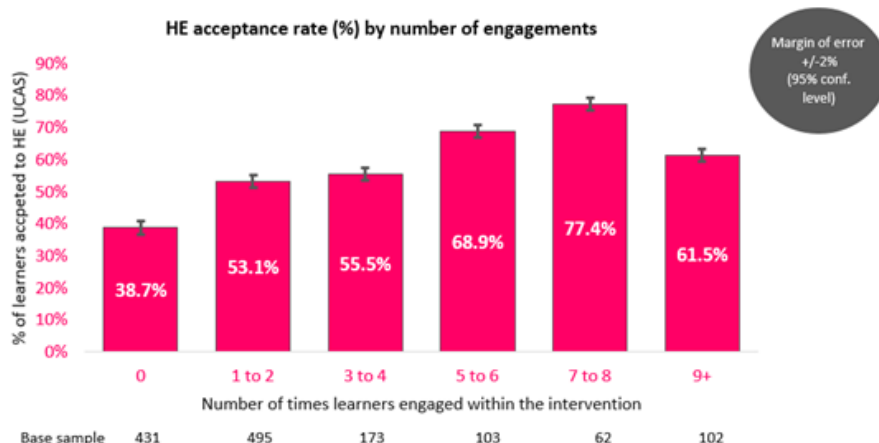
In 2019, Aimhigher Plus conducted a quasi-experimental, mixed methods study comparing HE progression outcomes (UCAS acceptances) for learners that had and had not engaged in their programme activities. All learners were enrolled on full-time level 3 courses and were attending schools / FE colleges targeted by Aimhigher. UCAS data was supplemented by in-depth learner and school case studies, which helped to provide context to the quantitative data and an understanding of the enabling factors to support learners' HE progress.

The study, considered an example of Type 3 (causal) evidence by TASO and CFE Research, found that Aimhigher target learners who engaged with one or more interventions were 1.5 times more likely to be accepted to HE than a comparison group of learners that did not engage at all. A positive association (up to a critical point) between increased engagement and an increased likelihood of progressing to HE was observed, suggesting optimal engagement was 7-8 activities, after which there was a slight fall in progression rates. School and learner case studies found interventions have helped to address many barriers learners face through improving HE knowledge and attitudes. Wider benefits were reported to learners' behaviour, school attendance, confidence, motivation and school attainment, with a potential impact on progression.

Impact on attainment

As well as the intended aims above, there is evidence from the HEAT database¹⁵ of Uni

Connect outreach participants¹⁶ showing slightly increased levels of Key Stage 4 attainment when

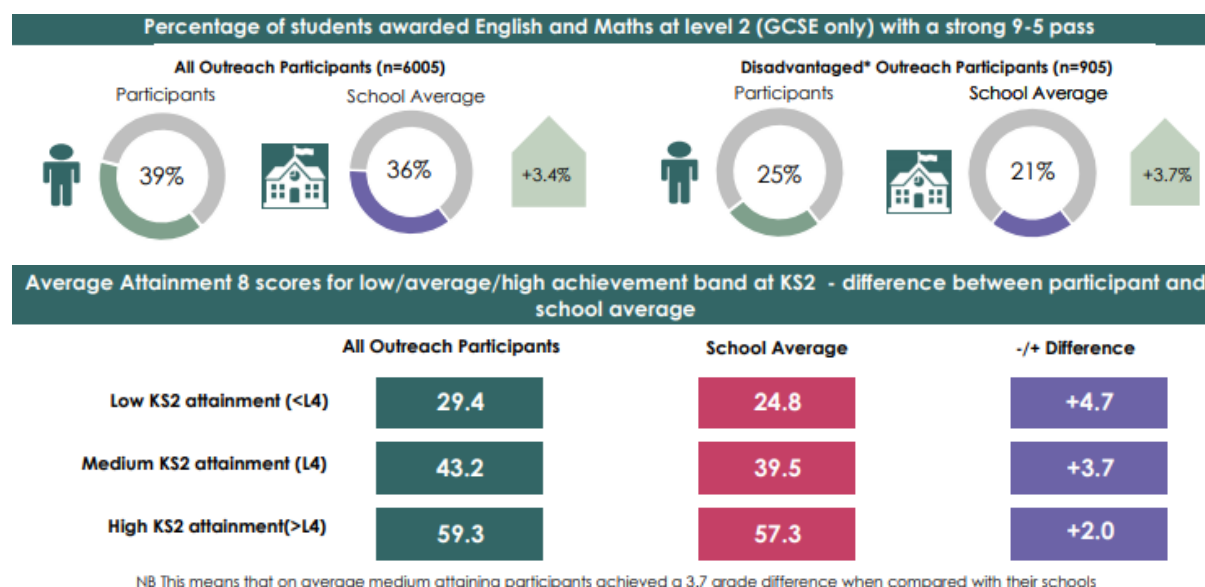


¹⁴ Uni Connect: Evidence Meta- Review. A report for the Office for Students on the findings from the second call for local evaluation evidence (October 2020). P23.

¹⁵ HEAT Aggregate Report: Key Stage 4 Performance 2017/18. January 2020.

¹⁶ All participants included in the analysis engaged in an intensive package of outreach before sitting their KS4 exams in 2017/18. In total, 6,005 outreach participants were included in the analysis.

compared with the average for students in target schools. This is the case for all levels of Key Stage 2 attainment.



Improving study skills at Aldworth School, Basingstoke

The secondary school in Hampshire has twice run a Year 11 Revision Weekend with support from Southern Universities Network.

"We wanted our learners to be able to identify areas where they could improve to ensure they succeed with their level 2 exams, and to create a revision plan suited to each individual. The idea is that the facilitation of this is helped by being in a new space, away from home or school."

The school observed increases of at least 1 grade in English and Maths between predicted and actual GCSE results.

Although in 2019/20 learners did not complete GCSE examinations in the usual manner, results of a pre & post survey found that all learners reported positive change in confidence to identify areas to improve to ensure success at Level 2, and in creating a revision plan. 100% of students would recommend the residential course to others.

A student's Attainment 8 score is calculated by adding up their points for their eight subjects and dividing by 10 to get their Attainment 8 score. Students don't have to take eight subjects, but they score zero for any unfilled slots.

Using KS4 data to track progress in attainment

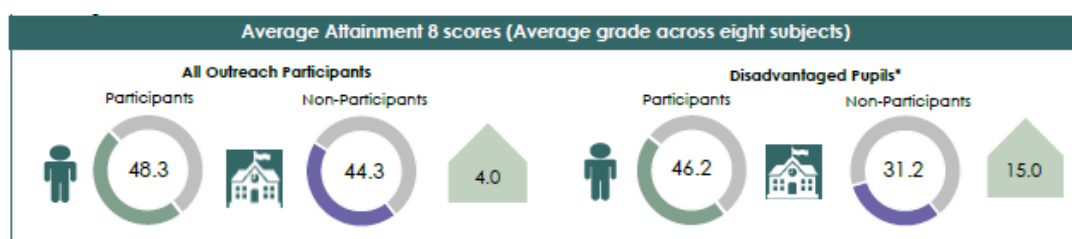
Make Happen were keen to understand whether two of their pre-16 activities had an impact on participants' KS4 exam attainment. These activities were run in partnership with two external providers. First, *Fix Up*, which offers a range of sessions related to providing support with motivation and exam preparation. Second, *Positively Mad*, which runs whole day workshops in schools focused on exam and revision skills.

The results of the study showed that, for *Fix Up* participants (n=165) Attainment 8 Scores were on average +6.1 grades higher than the average scores for the schools the participants came from. This remained true after breaking down by prior attainment at Key Stage 2: participants with low prior attainment (n=20) demonstrated the greatest positive difference, achieving on average +5.7 grades higher across eight GCSEs than their similarly low attaining classmates. The *Fix Up* result was not significant at the 5% significance-level, likely due to the small observed effect size of 1 grade increase combined with the sample size available for analysis.

Positively Mad participants (n=130) also demonstrated higher Attainment 8 Scores than their schools' average scores, achieving on average +6.6 grades higher. Participants with medium prior attainment (n=70) demonstrated the greatest positive difference, achieving on average +5.5 grades higher across eight GCSEs than their classmates from the same attainment band. The *Positively Mad* result was statistically significant ($p=.019$).

The analysis above uses the school average as a comparator group against which to compare the outcomes of activity participants. For this reason it can be considered strong Type 2: Empirical Evidence, according to the [OfS Standards of Evidence](#). Uni Connect Partnerships may be in a better position than individual higher education institutions using the HEAT database when it comes to sourcing data for a comparator group. Many partnerships have been baselining, and tracking, all pupils within year groups as part of the Uni Connect national evaluation, providing a comparator group for such analysis.

From the HEAT website: [A Case Study with the Uni Connect Partnership Make Happen](#)



Positively Mad participants' attainment scores compared with non-participants

Aim: Supporting young people to make well-informed decisions about their future education

CFE Research's 2020 Evidence Meta-Review¹⁷ found:

"Overall there is evidence from both the local and national evaluations to strongly indicate that a sustained, progressive and collaborative approach to outreach has a positive impact on short- to medium-term outcomes, including knowledge and awareness of higher education (HE) and learners' confidence to make informed decisions, as well as on their intentions towards HE."

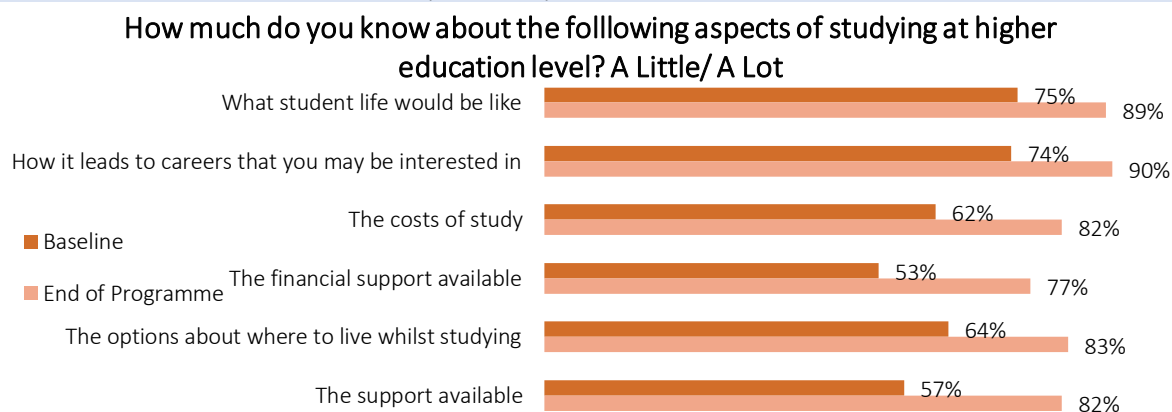
"Reflecting the findings from Phase 1 of the national impact evaluation, the local evaluation evidence strongly indicates that multi-interventions delivering a coherent programme of activities to learners over time have a positive impact on learners' knowledge and awareness of HE. They are also found to contribute to learners having higher levels of confidence in their decision-making abilities."

DANCOP annual survey analysis

DANCOP in Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire matched baseline and 2018/19 survey responses of 1,090 learners from 55 wards, with year 9 and 10 students representing 71% of the sample; data was collected as part of the CFE national annual survey of Uni Connect partnerships.

Responses showed evidence of an increased desire to continue studying, increased self-belief that they could go to University if they wanted to, and an increased likelihood to apply to do a higher education qualification in the future (up from 45% fairly or very likely at baseline to 59% in 2018/19). Learners were also asked how much they knew about a range of aspects related to applying to higher education. The results indicate that engagement with DANCOP activity had a positive impact on the levels of knowledge learners feel they have about applying to higher education, with increases across all questions at end of programme stage. There was also an increase in the percentage of learners who agreed with several positive statements about their attitudes towards higher education between baseline and end of programme stage.

DANCOP 2018-19 Evaluation Report, Vicky Cotterill, December 2019.



¹⁷ Uni Connect: Evidence Meta- Review. A report for the Office for Students on the findings from the second call for local evaluation evidence (October 2020). P1.

Impartial Information, Advice and Guidance - Next Steps South West

Next Steps South West (NSSW) and partner student ambassadors delivered impartial, interactive, age-specific Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) to 6,500 students in 2019/20. Tailored, year-group specific workshops provide sustained, progressive outreach through successive years, targeted at addressing a lack of knowledge of higher education and a lack of transferable skills. Differentiated Skills Mapping sessions delivered to Year 10, 12 and 13 groups resulted in students being able to identify their transferable skills, with 95% being able to give two or more examples. Students reported an average 40% increase in intention to progress into HE.

HeppSY Cohort Evaluation: Contact Hours and Expectations of Applying to HE Aged 18 or 19

As highlighted by Anders and Micklewright (2015), expectation of HE progression at age 16 is a strong predictor of actual progression. Research was undertaken by HeppSY to determine whether higher levels of engagement with the HeppSY programme between Year 10 and 11 (using contact hours as an indicator) maintained or increased student expectation of progression to HE at age 18 or 19.

For students in Year 10 during the first wave of the CFE annual survey in 2017, the study found a moderate, positive association between contact hours and Wave 2 expectations of applying to HE, after controlling for Wave 1 responses (amongst other predictors). This association was statistically significant when school and motivation were included as further predictors.

This suggests that the more a Year 10 student interacts with the HeppSY programme, the greater the odds are that they will maintain or increase their expectations of progression to HE study at age 18 or 19 – a significant focus of the programme as whole.

Further, the exploratory analysis undertaken sought to identify a 'saturation point' at which further interaction with the programme offered little or no benefit against the outcome of interest. The exploratory model highlighted that students with 3-6 contact hours were more likely to have higher expectations of applying to HE than students with fewer than three hours, and contact hours greater than six did not increase the likelihood any further.

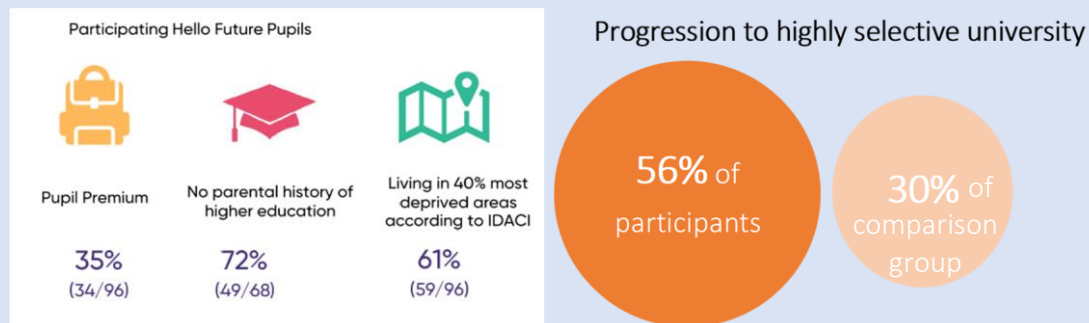
Full report published October 2020.

Authors: Daniel Fletcher and Greg Brown



Exploring the impact of The Scholars Programme

The Scholars Programme is a collaboration between Hello Future in Cumbria and the Brilliant Club, a university access charity, focused on students in years 9 to 12. A total of 96 Hello Future pupils took part in the programme, receiving 133 teaching hours and Launch Trips to Lancaster and Durham University.



Students on the programme reported increased levels of university preparation at the end of the programme compared with before the programme, and baseline and endline assessments by tutors showed improved written communication and critical thinking skills.

For three years in a row, independent UCAS analysis showed that pupils on The Scholars Programme are significantly more likely to apply to, receive an offer from and progress to a highly-selective university than pupils with similar socio-demographic background and GCSE attainment.

The UCAS analysis estimates that 56% of Y12 pupils who completed The Scholars Programme progressed to a highly selective university, compared with only 30% of pupils with similar backgrounds. This is a sizable and statistically significant difference.

"This is definitely one of the best experiences of my academic life and I couldn't be more thankful. This programme has ensured my desire to go to University and nurtured my love for learning. I am beyond pleased with everything that followed this programme."

Key stage 4 pupil on The Scholar's Programme

"It has been a fantastic opportunity for my daughter to partake in and it has inspired my child to aim for a university education. She loved her trip to Durham University and it has raised her expectations of her own achievement possibilities."

Parent of student on The Scholar's programme

Aim: Supporting effective and impactful local collaboration by higher education providers working together with schools, colleges, employers and other partners

The Uni Connect (formerly National Collaborative Outreach Programme or NCOP) End of Phase 1 report for the national formative and impact evaluations (October 2019)¹⁸ noted that:

“The collaborative approach is successfully addressing ‘cold spots’ in outreach provision. As a result of NCOP some schools and further education colleges (FECs) are engaging in outreach for the first time ever, or after a number of years.”

The report also found that “the unique and highly-targeted nature of NCOP has ... meant that established partnerships have had to broaden their membership by engaging new partners and stakeholders from inside and outside the education sector... [T]here is evidence that through cross-partnership working and synergies with other programmes and initiatives, NCOP is showing its potential to contribute to wider social, cultural and economic goals in the medium-to long-term, by boosting qualification and skill levels. These, in turn, could lead to improved social mobility and enhanced productivity.”

For example, a programme for looked after children was launched by ThinkHigher in Coventry and Warwickshire in 2017. This programme is funded by two local authorities and two university partners; however the collaboration was made possible as a result of ThinkHigher’s infrastructure.

Qualitative research commissioned by Greater Manchester (GM) Higher partnership found strong evidence that GM Higher has enabled successful collaborative working between schools, colleges, universities and other organisations through: adding careers capacity; engaging with other agencies in the locality and region supporting young people; the breadth of offer and range of contacts; a developed and proven infrastructure; and complementing the work of schools.

¹⁸ Report prepared by CFE Research, Sheffield Institute of Education at Sheffield Hallam University and the Behavioural Insights Team.

Building relationships on the Castleford Housing Project

29 students took part in an exciting project co-delivered by Go Higher West Yorkshire and national house builders Keepmoat Homes. Throughout a series of classroom sessions, students worked in teams to create their own housing company. In addition to these technical sessions, students had the opportunity to visit a current Keepmoat Homes housing development in their local area. During the post-project evaluation, students reflected on their successes throughout the experience and spoke of developing both their confidence and relationships with students from a different school. Feedback from staff and parents was also excellent, with all agreeing that the project and presentation evening had been a huge success. Watch the video here:

https://www.gohigherwestyorks.ac.uk/impact?mgi_200=11533/castleford-housing-project#dfliip-df_11528/7/

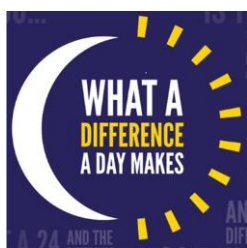
Fast Trackers project

Network Rail and Mott MacDonald worked together with Uni Connect and its partnerships in the North West to offer the 'Fast Trackers' project to 140 young people in their target areas, addressing increased demand for engineering skills in the workforce.

Fast Trackers was designed to give young people studying Level 3 engineering courses an insight into university level study and graduate level jobs within the engineering industry. It included a three-day residential stay at University College London, where the groups of BTEC and Apprenticeship Engineering students explored topics related to engineering under the guidance of a group of graduate engineers.

97% of the young people who participated in the London activity rated their experience as good or excellent, with learners more likely to view higher education as a realistic and viable route. There are early indications that attendance at college increased for those who participated, with learners showing a real desire to progress to Level 4 study and beyond. The programme won a national award for 'Graduate Initiative of the Year' at the CN Talent Awards in November 2018.

Supporting transitions to Further Education during the Covid-19 pandemic through partnership



During summer 2020, neaco worked with the Norwich and Ipswich Opportunity Areas to support the transition of over 30 students from Year 11 to further education through the What A Difference A Day Makes programme. To address the impact of the Covid-19 school closures on students' transition to further education, neaco Higher Education Champions ran wellbeing sessions with students alongside a programme which supported numeracy, literacy, study skills and provided mentoring.

At the end of the eight week programme, an increased proportion of students reported they were likely to apply to higher education aged 18/19 than at the start of the programme (after 69% fairly, very likely or definitely would apply, compared with 39% before). Student feedback was extremely positive:

"This programme was enjoyable, extraordinary and relaxing. Everything was perfect! The environment! The people! The Teachers/Mentors were absolutely astonishing and remarkable! Thank you for this programme!!!" *"Brilliant course!"*

Working with young men in the North East

Engaging young men in the North East to consider and apply to higher education is one of the challenges facing the Uni Connect programme in the region. In response, the partnership created an Enterprise Challenge to capture learner voice and enable young men to develop their own ways of communicating what higher education means to them through an innovative 12 week structured programme, in partnership with local football club education teams (Foundation of Light, Middlesbrough FC Foundation and Newcastle United Foundation).



It utilises the Premier League Enterprise Programme to inspire young people, increase their aspiration and skills, and support informed decisions about higher education.

The programme was underpinned by a competition in which boys create their own storyboard for a digital/media advertisement aimed at encouraging their male peers to consider higher education in the North East. In 2019, the winning team had their storyboard turned into a 30 second YouTube advertisement (viewed 46,937 times) and each area winner had their storyboard adapted into a comic book now used in schools across the region. This advertisement was launched on North East Live and broadcast on Tyne and Wear TV. Evaluation focused on skills gained by the participants and the shift in attitude to consider higher education. 84% of students participating in the programme stated they were now considering higher education. Teachers commented on the "engaging" and "high-quality" content of the programme.

Collaboration in response to the COVID-19 pandemic

The Future Me programme was developed at pace during the COVID-19 lockdown in response to the lack of meaningful encounters with employers and higher education students available for secondary school-aged students. The programme was developed collaboratively between Uni Connect Pathways, the Leicester and Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership and the University of Leicester outreach team. Complete Careers were commissioned to write the content.

The Future Me programme comprised 12 bi-weekly one-hour virtual sessions using the Zoom platform and provided information and advice about local growth sectors and the employment skills students will need to develop to become successful in the workplace. Along with this information and advice from the Future Me delivery team, guest employers also presented at one of the weekly sessions, and undergraduate students presented at the other, with both sessions providing opportunities for attending students to ask questions. Weekly employer challenges were set for students to complete voluntarily, and individual and school prizes were awarded to the winners.

A mixed methods evaluation concluded that Future Me successfully protected students' experiences of careers and higher education during lockdown, and that Uni Connect and local companies collaborated successfully. Students' reports were extremely positive, including praise for the variety and usefulness of the content, the interactive delivery methods, the weekly employer challenges, and the additional resources such as worksheets and website links. Whilst most students would have preferred a face-to-face experience to a virtual one, they were very pleased with the online delivery; indeed some preferred it.

Aim: Contributing to a stronger evidence base around 'what works' in higher education outreach and strengthen evaluation practice in the sector

Evaluation

Uni Connect national evaluator CFE Research examined 52 sources of evidence submitted by Uni Connect partnerships in the first Phase 2 call for evidence. It concluded that this "represents a significant step forward in the development of the evidence base."¹⁹



¹⁹ Uni Connect: Evidence Meta- Review. A report for the Office for Students on the findings from the second call for local evaluation evidence (October 2020). P1.

At the start of the Uni Connect programme, robust experimental studies were extremely rare in the widening participation sector. A 2017 systematic review on the effectiveness of interventions and strategies for widening participation in higher education “found no robust evaluations of UK-based interventions”, and identified “a pressing need for evidence on widening participation interventions in the UK context”²⁰.

Examples of Type 3 evidence²¹ generated by partnerships include Hello Future’s The Scholars Programme. Three Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) were designed and implemented by five partnerships with the support of CFE and the BIT during Phase 1, which evaluated both light-touch and more intensive outreach activities²².

Data collection

The annual survey of students in schools working with Uni Connect has generated three waves of over 60,000 responses about future plans, knowledge of and attitudes towards higher education, representing a considerable data set of almost 230,000 survey responses for analysis. This includes a cohort of students who participated in all three surveys. A fourth wave of the annual survey is taking place in Autumn/Winter 2020/21.

Areas where more evidence is needed

- Which outreach interventions work most effectively at different stages of the learner journey and the relative impact of individual activities that comprise multi-intervention programmes.
- Whether the immediate, positive impacts achieved as a result of outreach interventions are sustained in the longer term.
- The impact of outreach interventions on sub-groups.
- The causal relationship between outreach interventions and outcomes for learners.

²⁰ Kirsty Younger, Louise Gascoine, Victoria Menzies & Carole Torgerson (2019) A systematic review of evidence on the effectiveness of interventions and strategies for widening participation in higher education, *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 43:6, 742-773, DOI: 10.1080/0309877X.2017.1404558

²¹ The Office for Students’ three types of evaluation can be found at <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation/standards-of-evidence-and-evaluation-self-assessment-tool/>

²² BOWES, Lindsey, TAZZYMAN, Sarah, SANDHU, Jatinder, MORETON, Rachel, BIRKIN, Guy, MCCAIG, Colin, MADRIAGA, Manuel, KOZMAN, Eliza and WRIGHT, Hazel (2019). The National Collaborative Outreach Programme. End of phase 1 report for the national formative and impact evaluations. Project Report. Office for Students.

Furthermore, all partnerships have engaged with tracking students engaged in activities using

“Anglia Ruskin University began using the HEAT database in 2017 through the Uni Connect programme. As a result of our experience, and with support from the neaco evaluation team, we are now using HEAT to evaluate the widening participation work we undertake through our Access and Participation Plan.”

Paul Dunton, Head of Schools & Colleges Engagement at Anglia Ruskin University.

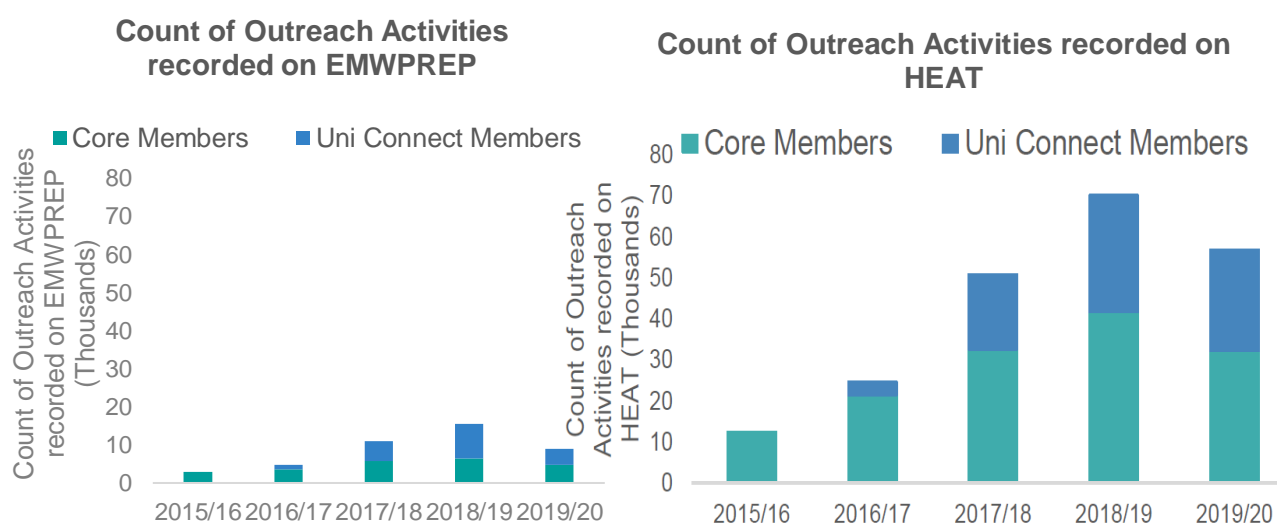
databases, to facilitate research into the impact of outreach activity of different types and intensities and to track the educational journeys of the over six hundred thousand students engaging with Uni Connect.

A virtuous circle of increased data collection and use has been established, with Uni Connect partnerships facilitating the sharing of good practice between institutions.

Uni Connect partnerships have

benefitted from some universities’ experience in tracking students, whilst also supporting institutions whose data systems were less well-established at the start of the programme.

The concomitant increase in data collected by Uni Connect partnerships and individual Universities and Colleges can be shown in the graphs below of activities recorded in the EMWPREP and HEAT databases.



Using and sharing data

The data generated are also being widely used to inform decisions around programme design and implementation and are being shared with practitioners and partner organisations. Overall, at

least 12 partnerships have shared data with schools and colleges, through formats such as meetings, reports and data dashboards.

Examples of using and sharing data

Kent and Medway Collaborative Outreach Programme used the findings of their quasi-experimental evaluation of the Future You programme with FE college students to inform the design and delivery of future work with FE colleges; baseline survey data was provided to colleges participating in a dashboard format.

The Southern Universities Partnership have shared an interactive PowerBI dashboard with schools to enable access to anonymised data on engagement with their work as well as survey results, whilst HeppSY have done this using Tableau.

Participatory research approaches - SUN Young Researchers

SUN Young Researchers is a group of young people who are interested in understanding issues important to young people. These young people are recruited from youth clubs, schools and voluntary organisations. They live in areas across the South Coast and are aged between 13 and 19 years of age. The project is delivered in collaboration with the Participation People, youth engagement specialists.

A key objective of this project is for SUN partner Universities to take over responsibility for it and continue to embed youth voice within their outreach programmes and evaluation frameworks.



Over the past two academic years, the SUN Young Researchers have led three research projects. The recommendations from the SUN Young Researchers' projects have played a pivotal role in the development of the SUN outreach offer across the partnership. Wellbeing has become a core aspect of SUN's evaluation framework under the theoretical underpinning of Possible Selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986).

In addition to this, in 2020/21 SUN are embedding Young Researchers as strategic impact evaluation support. Due to restrictions on external visitors to schools, young researchers will be trained to lead interviews and focus groups with students, staff and senior leadership teams within their own schools and colleges. They will also support the SUN Research and Evaluation team in creating an impact report outlining recommendations for the legacy of Uni Connect post-July 2021.

Conclusion

During the final year of Phase 2, there is evidence of significant progress towards each of Uni Connect's four objectives, providing strong support for the continuation of sustained and progressive outreach through the Uni Connect programme beyond July 2021. Building on the momentum gained during the first two phases of the programme - a skilled workforce and specialist knowledge developed within each Partnership, and hard won relationships with schools and colleges to become trusted providers – Uni Connect would be well placed in Phase 3 to continue and accelerate these achievements. Maintaining Uni Connect outreach is particularly pertinent given the disruption caused to the education sector by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, and the anticipated negative effects on social mobility due to the loss of learning time and economic impact of the crisis.