

## SUN Flagship Evaluation Summary

**ARE UNI CONNECT TARGET STUDENTS MORE  
LIKELY TO PROGRESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IF  
THEY ENGAGE IN AT LEAST ONE 1:1 SESSION  
WITH A SUN PROGRESSION MENTOR?**

The SUN Research and Evaluation Team

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## Executive Summary

- **1,725 students in further education and sixth-form colleges have engaged in at least one 1:1 in the 2021-2022 academic year**
- **SUN Progression Mentors have provided 1,591 contact hours with students via 1:1s in the 2021-2022 academic year**
- **All students who engaged in at least one 1:1 engaged in sustained and progressive outreach activity which supports progression to higher education<sup>1</sup>**
- **18 out of 20 SUN target further education and sixth-form colleges engaged in the evaluation of 1:1 provision**

## Background

The Southern Universities Network (SUN) is a collaborative partnership comprising higher education (HE) providers in Hampshire, Dorset, and the Isle of Wight. The SUN provides outreach activities for schools and colleges as part of the [Uni Connect Programme](#) – an Office for Students (OfS)-funded project. The Uni Connect Programme is a national initiative helping teachers and careers advisers to encourage young people to take advantage of opportunities in higher education.

The SUN fund Progression Mentors in 20 further education (FE) colleges and sixth-form colleges across the partnership. The SUN Progression Mentors support target students in their college in accessing support and advice about higher education options. This includes activities such as workshops, taster sessions, and bespoke 1:1 support.

1:1 activity is a requirement of SUN Progression Mentors within target colleges across the SUN region. 1:1s offer direct personal advice for target Uni Connect students and are delivered by the SUN Progression Mentors. Information, advice, and guidance (IAG) have been identified as an area where target Uni Connect students need additional support (Huband-Thompson, Joshua and Mulcahy, 2020; Southern Universities Network and Participation People, 2020). This is linked to 'hot' and 'cold' knowledge acquired by students from their family/friends and/or school or college provision. [TASO](#) outline that there is emerging evidence in this area of outreach work, but further causal evidence needs to be undertaken (Bickle, Humphries-Smith and Hunt, 2019).

1:1 support includes a variety of topics depending on student needs. Sessions could include signposting to relevant student support services within or external to the college, general higher education information, or advice about applying to higher education or student finance.

This flagship evaluation project took place over the 2021-2022 academic year and sought to understand if, and how, the 1:1 support provided by SUN Progression Mentors had a positive impact on the likelihood of target students applying to higher education.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/c4adf20d-5451-4018-9888-d7ef5c7c76b7/uc-w3-impacetevaluation-w3-survey.pdf>

## Methodology

The SUN Research and Evaluation team used the TASO evaluation guidance and specifically the pre to post-test toolkit for the evaluation of this project. The SUN has full ethical approval from the University of Southampton to undertake the evaluation of this project. A theory of change was developed to support and direct our approach to evaluating this intervention. Our approach to evaluation for this project included a pre to post-test design, supported by qualitative data gathered from focus groups and interviews with students who received 1:1 support.

A total of 1,725 students received at least one 1:1 during the 2021-2022 academic year. 404 pre-surveys were collected, this reduced to 117 post-survey. A total of 88 students completed pre and post surveys with 45 students who had received at least one 1:1 and 41 students who had not engaged in a 1:1. The results outlined in this evaluation summary, and detailed report, analyse data from matched pre and post surveys completed by students who have engaged in at least one 1:1 with a SUN Progression Mentor. Thematic analysis was conducted on qualitative data gathered from student focus groups and interviews. All students who engaged in qualitative data had engaged in at least one 1:1 with the SUN Progression Mentor at their college.

## Key Findings

- Overall, there is a positive impact of students engaging in at least one 1:1 with a SUN Progression Mentor and their likelihood to progress to higher education.
- Students are already considering applying to higher education before engaging in a 1:1 however, they still require support in developing knowledge about higher education and increasing their confidence in making informed decisions.
- Students who engage in 1:1 support are more likely to understand where to find information on higher education and how to apply.
- Students who engage in 1:1 support are more likely to understand how their education choices link with career choices.
- Students who engage in 1:1 support are more likely to understand the qualifications and grades needed for different types of higher education qualifications.
- Students found the SUN Progression Mentor a vital resource in providing information and advice about higher education.
- Students who engage in at least one 1:1 also engage in sustained and progressive outreach which increases the likelihood of progressing to higher education (CFE,2021).

## Key Recommendations

- SUN Progression Mentors should continue to provide 1:1 support for Uni Connect target students.
- The SUN's FE Project Leaders and Research and Evaluation team should work in collaboration with SUN Progression Mentors and respective line managers, where relevant, to develop a consistent way of identifying which students may need additional 1:1 support to ensure that resources are directed to students most in need e.g. those who are unsure about higher education or have not yet considered it.
- SUN Progression Mentors should seek advice from their relevant careers team to identify key transferable skills from subject areas/courses which contain large proportions of Uni Connect target students and explore alternative career opportunities to provide as examples to students.
- SUN Progression Mentors should continue to make strong connections with student support, careers and advice teams, and subject staff within their college to ensure links are made across further education colleges and awareness of the SUN Progression Mentor role is increased for Uni Connect target students.

## Student Quotes

***"The SUN Progression Mentor gave me some pointers for my personal statement to go off of and just got my head down one time back home and went off the notes and got it done. And I got offers from all five places"***

***"I just show up. And if she's available, fine. If she's not available, I'll come back tomorrow. it's nice to know that she's actually just always in the office and that I can just go there when I need to go there and that she'll be there."***

***"I think it's good guidance because it's a stressful process, you know, applying for money for the future, especially if you don't know like it sucks. So, you know, you need support in some way most of the time."***

***"She is very accessible, she's positive, and then she's always like willing to go all out to just help you, which I find is very nice. And she's always smiling as well."***

## Contact for further information

Please contact the SUN Research and Evaluation team via [SUN@soton.ac.uk](mailto:SUN@soton.ac.uk)