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Formative Evaluation of Uni Connect Phase Two

Summary of findings

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1 Introduction

This summary report presents findings from the **ongoing formative evaluation of Phase Two of Uni Connect**, focusing on the programme's outreach hubs. The full report can be found on the [OfS website](#).

Uni Connect offers events, impartial advice and information on higher education (HE) to young people in Years 9 to 13. The programme is led by the OfS and delivered by 29 partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners across England. It aims to support access and participation in HE through multi-agency collaborative work. Key features of the programme are its **highly collaborative nature** and **sustained and progressive approach** to supporting young people. There have been two phases to the programme:

- **Phase One: January 2017 to July 2019** – involved delivery of targeted outreach focussed on 997 specific wards in England where HE participation was lower than might be expected given the GCSE results of the young people who lived there.
- **Phase Two: August 2019 to July 2021** – an additional strand, outreach hubs, was added to the ongoing Phase One activity. Each region in England is covered by a hub.

Outreach hubs were developed based on feedback from Uni Connect partnerships and local stakeholders about the need to support underrepresented learners in schools and colleges outside those located in Uni Connect targeted outreach wards. Uni Connect partnerships have the flexibility to deliver outreach activity through the hubs based on local need so that a range of local contexts can be accommodated.

Overview of the evaluation

At the time of the data collection for this formative evaluation (June 2020 to March 2021), the outreach hubs **continued to develop both conceptually and operationally**. Funding decisions on the programme were pending, as was new guidance for the operation of the hubs, and the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing.¹ These internal and external factors impacted both on how the remit of outreach hubs was perceived and their implementation, and, in turn, on how the findings of this report should be interpreted.

This report focuses on **how the hubs are developing and learnings to support and enhance their ongoing delivery**, rather than the impacts of the programme. It is based on:

- a desk review of Uni Connect programme documentation
- nine scoping consultations with Uni Connect staff and the Department for Education (DfE)
- 29 interviews with partnership leads conducted by the OfS in June 2019
- a light-touch review of programme monitoring and evaluation data provided by partnerships in their summer 2020 and winter 2020 returns to the OfS
- 40 in-depth interviews conducted between October and November 2020, of which 29 with partnership leads and 11 with stakeholders who have been working closely with partnerships²
- a workshop with 28 partnership leads/representatives.

¹ At the time of the report, the targeted outreach element of Uni Connect had been confirmed until 31 July 2021, whilst funding for the outreach hubs has been agreed in principle until 2024-25 (in line with the current cycle of Access and Participation Plans).

² The wider stakeholder interviews included delivery organisations and strategic partners, such as career guidance services, local authorities, employers, LEPS, local careers hubs, careers leaders and opportunity areas.

2 Findings and recommendations

Understanding the remit and delivery of outreach hubs

Partnerships' understanding of the remit of outreach hubs and their approaches to delivery **varied significantly**. Some level of variation was to be expected due to the intention to allow partnerships flexibility in their approach, enable room for innovation and align hub activities to regional needs. However, variation was found to be mainly due to **differing interpretations of what constitutes hub activities**.

The intentionally **broad definition** of what hubs were expected to achieve created challenges for partnerships in clearly articulating the **purpose, aims and objectives** of the hubs. This was due to the perceived:

- wider focus of the hubs, which were covering **regions** rather than supporting specific schools/colleges or cohorts of young people (as per targeted outreach)
- lack of a clear and comprehensive view of the expected **scale** of hub activities and approach to the three hub activities (signposting, proactive support and strategic engagement)
- lack of **measurable outputs and outcomes** combined with some monitoring and evaluation requirements that partnerships perceived as not meaningful and/or burdensome.

Collectively, these issues created challenges for partnerships in developing a **clear “narrative” about the purpose of the hubs** which made it difficult to secure buy-in from some partnerships, governing boards and wider stakeholders. It also contributed to some governing boards and steering groups being less likely to challenge approaches to hub activities proposed by partnership leads.

The evaluation explored differences in hubs' implementation in relation to context and partnership characteristics, including region, geographical classification of the schools/colleges served, size of partnerships defined by their funding levels and, in a lighter touch way, staffing structures. This analysis found **no strong patterns in terms of implementation**, except for some differences in the practices applied by large partnerships. However, there were **indications that approaches to implementation could be influenced, by size³**, the number of schools/colleges they served and stage of progress.

To improve their own understanding and implementation of hubs, partnership leads have initiated monthly meetings during which they exchange practice and learn from each other. The creation of a 'community of practice' by leads is highly commendable given work and time pressures; they are passionate about their work and keen to improve their practice through peer-to-peer support. Unsurprisingly then, leads valued these meetings highly and indicated a desire for more peer-to-peer practical support, which could improve the effectiveness of the hubs and encourage greater consistency. Partnerships also reported that monitoring and evaluation data collected by the OfS could form a key part of continuous improvement processes, but were unclear on how the data currently being collected was being used or what lessons were being learned from it.

³ Size was calculated based on the level of funding partnerships received.

Recommendations

For the Office for Students

1. To further support the development of a **clear ‘narrative’** for future signposting and strategic outreach activity, the OfS could consider:
 - Providing further **guidance on expected practices or a minimum level of practices expected**
 - Liaising with partnerships to **derive** some **measurable outputs** for signposting and strategic outreach
 - **Defining expected outcomes**, as well as who would be evaluating progress towards these.
2. Despite the lack of clear patterns in terms of implementation between partnerships, there are indications that some partnership characteristics influence implementation – **partnership size, number of schools/colleges/learners served and stage of progress**. To support further consistency and continuous improvement, the OfS could consider:
 - Encouraging partnerships to **assess** their **signposting and strategic outreach** practices **using the above characteristics and further test** their **usefulness**
 - **Providing** partnerships with **analysis of the monitoring and evaluation data based on such characteristics**. Such analysis would enable partnerships to benchmark themselves against other partnerships with similar characteristics, identify potential areas for improvement and seek targeted peer support as and when needed.

For the OfS and partnerships

1. Partnerships could work with the OfS to **define measurable outputs and expectations of progress** based on their contexts so that expectations are in line with their characteristics and local needs. Measurable outputs could account for partnerships’ size, the numbers of schools/colleges/learners engaged and stage of progress. This means that some expectations might differ between different groups of partnerships, but that their progress will be reflected more accurately.

For partnerships

1. **Partnerships could explore further structures and approaches to facilitate more peer to peer support** for partnership leads and other roles. Peer-to-peer support needs to be **structured around indicative factors influencing implementation**, such as partnerships size and other identified in this report. Partnerships should also seek the support of the OfS, e.g. in terms of organisation, administration and/or facilitation of these meetings to reduce their workload.

Partnerships' operating models and infrastructure for the outreach hubs

Changes to partnerships' operating models for embedding the hubs are **fit-for-purpose**. Operating models were becoming: **a) more unified** than before, with regional needs playing a bigger role in the development of outreach activities than activities tailored to the needs of specific schools/colleges – this shift is more evident in smaller partnerships; and **b) more outward-looking**, engaging with more stakeholders more frequently through the use of technology.

Partnerships had also made **good progress in governance and staffing** in order to deliver the hubs. This was attributed to being able to build on existing targeted outreach structures, which partnerships reported had taken at least a year and a lot of staff time and effort to establish. Thus, most partnerships extended their existing structures to support hub activities rather than create new or separate structures.

Most partnerships had **expanded their existing governing boards to include further education colleges (FECs)**, which, overall, were found to be more challenging to engage. At least four reported that they had created separate governing boards for outreach hubs. Most partnerships' staffing structures **had not changed significantly from those created for targeted outreach** and did not seem to need to, particularly given that targeted outreach continued to account for the majority of partnerships' activity. The most common approach involved appointing a dedicated hub officer within the central team. In a few cases, two or three officers were appointed, usually, but not exclusively, based on the number of schools/colleges served. In some smaller partnerships, staffing remained the same with existing staff taking on additional hub responsibilities. **Staff numbers and roles varied considerably** even amongst partnerships of the same size.

Interviewees valued governing boards who set strategic direction for the partnership, although at least five partnerships reported that their governing boards were **not as engaged and were "simply rubber stamping"**. This was attributed to a perceived lack of clarity relating to the hubs and the short-term nature of the funding. Effective boards viewed Uni Connect as a priority, were focused on strategy, met at least four times a year and were relatively small in size.

Retaining staffing structures was key to effective delivery, and the main cost and concern for partnerships. Some partnerships suggested that their staffing structures had only recently stabilised, although some had been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic due to provider recruitment freezes. Smaller partnerships were impacted more negatively when staffing issues occurred.

Uni Connect staff **based in schools/colleges** were particularly helpful in engaging and continuing communications with schools/colleges during the pandemic. The fact that many of these staff were serving schools/colleges based on their geographical characteristics (i.e. urban/metropolitan or urban and coastal), meant that they were developing expertise on how best to support different student populations, potentially enabling partnerships to better meet the different needs of these learners.

Some partnerships suggested that the **uncertain funding environment** had led to **lower morale and some staff leaving for other jobs**. Overall, most partnerships were **expecting funding to be reduced** and some had started seeking ways to streamline their structures in anticipation of this. There was consensus that losing staff equated to losing valuable infrastructure and expertise, as well as potentially some relationships with schools/colleges. Some partnerships also believed that the impact of losing staff would be wider; that it would reduce the impartiality of advice available to young people and put at further risk the needs of students, regions and the economy at a critical time due to the pandemic.

Recommendations

For the Office for Students

1. Governing boards and the engagement of key stakeholders, including that of senior Access and Participation Plan (APP) leaders, are crucial to the strategic direction and sustainability of the hubs. The OfS could engage/support **national and regional communications to further champion the work of the hubs.**
2. Staffing structures are both a key cost for partnerships and critical to the sustainability of the hubs. To support sustainability of infrastructures, the OfS could consider:
 - **Hybrid funding models**, including the OfS, partnership/partner and match funding
 - Incorporating targeted outreach into the hubs
 - Providing **information** to enable **partnerships to benchmark** themselves **against other similar sized partnerships**, especially as **regards staffing costs.**

For partnerships

1. **Aligning hub targets with APPs** could facilitate further engagement of governing boards and wider regional stakeholders, which could in turn enable a more strategic approach to delivery, as well as, potentially, increase the likelihood of match funding. Partnerships could consider:
 - Intensifying efforts to **engage Pro Vice Chancellors, school headteachers and college principals** to their governing boards
 - **Applying processes** relating to **effective governing board engagement**, e.g. those identified in this evaluation and share examples of good practice.
2. Given that staffing structures are key to sustainability and that decisions on Uni Connect's funding are imminent, partnerships could re-think staff structures and operating models for further effectiveness and efficiency by:
 - **Assessing governance structures**, operating models and staffing structures **against similar sized partnerships** and those sharing similar regional goals for improvement and efficiencies/streamlining, particularly differences identified in staffing numbers and roles in some similar sized partnerships
 - **Sharing** practices on effective **succession planning processes**
 - **Sharing** practice on **how best to engage FECs** given that they are harder to engage.

Strategic engagement

Key strategic partners for Uni Connect include **local authorities, the Careers and Enterprise Company and Local Enterprise Partnerships**. Almost all partnerships reported that they are working with these organisations on outreach hub activities. Most partnerships were also working with employers and the NCS (National Citizen Service) and around half were working with the Student Loans Company and NHS Trusts. Beyond that, partnerships reported working with a broad range of local and regional partners, including Opportunity Areas, housing associations, and community and third sector organisations.

Whilst the profile of partners engaged through outreach hubs was broadly similar to that for targeted outreach, there has been a notable shift in the **nature** of this engagement. Hubs have provided a catalyst for partnerships to **broaden and deepen** existing relationships with partners as they are now able to work with them in a more holistic way, no longer restricted to only working with those schools and colleges eligible for targeted outreach. The hubs are also contributing to more **strategic engagement** with existing partners, with less of a focus on delivery and more focus on identifying strategic priorities, sharing intelligence and coordinating provision. In addition to refocusing relationships with existing partners, some Uni Connect partnerships have engaged a wider range of partners through hub activities, including employers and community organisations.

The **depth, nature and effectiveness of strategic engagement with partners varied across outreach hubs**. At a basic level, most outreach hubs were found to be meeting with local partners on a regular basis. In some cases, these meetings were convened by outreach hubs and in others they were led by partners and attended by representatives from outreach hubs. The next level of strategic engagement with partners involved sharing information on local needs and existing provision. In some areas, partnerships undertook mapping exercises in collaboration with local partners to identify schools and groups of learners who were not eligible for targeted outreach but who needed support. Partnerships used a range of different approaches to identify schools/colleges for both signposting and proactive support, with some using multiple methods. There was no consistency identified in the approach and measures being used for this.

Some outreach hubs worked with partners to deliver tailored interventions aimed at addressing key local challenges or gaps in existing provision. These interventions were typically campus visits and skills/careers events, targeting of specific cohorts, or the development of shared resources and guidance (e.g. labour market information) for teachers and others working with young people.

Uni Connect partnerships have made **some progress in securing match funding** during Phase Two of the programme. They had secured a combined total of £1.8 million in match funding by July 2020, accounting for 3% of their overall funding. The **majority of this was in-kind**, including digital support, the provision of venues for events and staff time. All partnerships referenced the financial constraints faced by partner organisations as the main challenge in securing match funding. Other challenges included the pandemic, which had resulted in longer-term strategic planning and collaboration becoming less of a priority for partners, and **some partnerships' lack of understanding of what constituted match funding**. Several partnerships said they would welcome greater clarity and direction from the OfS about their expectations.

The strategic **relationships established between Uni Connect and local partners were seen as sustainable**. In most areas, relationships had been established over the four years since Uni Connect was launched; a sense of trust and shared endeavour had been developed over this time and partnerships felt an obligation to local partners to deliver on commitments made. The complex and

fragmented landscape of outreach provision at a local level points to a role for an impartial, trusted broker to help facilitate better coordination and alignment of provision; the impartial nature of outreach hubs was considered key to their sustainability.

Recommendations

For the Office for Students

1. Consider **developing guidance for partnerships on which databases and eligibility/threshold criteria to use in order to identify learners/schools/colleges for outreach hub activities**. This should not be as specific as for targeted outreach, which was very focused on one cohort of learners, but would help bring some alignment and consistency to the approaches being taken to this and would further contribute to a more 'coherent' narrative about the purpose, aims and objectives of the hubs.
2. **Provide greater clarity and direction on what constitutes match funding and how best to monitor and report on this**, particularly for in-kind investments.
3. The key role of **outreach hubs as an impartial trusted broker of outreach activities should be highlighted in communications at a national and regional level** to help raise awareness of the added value they bring, **and** support schools/colleges navigate the existing landscape of provision.

Proactive support

Partnerships' determination to continue delivering outreach activities and support schools during the pandemic is admirable. **Proactive support activities** enabled schools/colleges to access the outreach activities they needed, and were seen as more effective when activities were **well aligned with analysis and information** gathered through strategic engagement.

Partnerships' approach to proactive support varied; this was due to a **lack of clarity** about what they were expected to deliver and how this should differ from targeted outreach. In practice, the majority of activities on offer were **tailored versions of those already offered through targeted outreach**, which were designed to meet needs identified through strategic engagement and could also be delivered at pace by building on existing provision. A few partnerships delivered activities which were focused on the needs of underrepresented groups, such as care leavers and military service children.

There were mixed views on whether proactive support should offer, or in some cases continue to offer, activities related to **raising attainment**. Arguments in favour suggested that attainment programmes help with engaging schools/colleges, as attainment is their 'core business'. Some also argued that learners need the right grades to progress to HE and so a combination of outreach activities and attainment programmes would be appropriate. Overall, some partnerships, especially larger ones, reported **difficulties in engaging schools with their outreach offer**, especially due to the saturation of interventions taking place in schools/colleges, and at times they worked with schools to create more 'bespoke' interventions.

The impact of COVID-19 on proactive support was considerable, and very disruptive for some partnerships. The strong relationships that staff located in schools/colleges had developed were instrumental in continuing to deliver proactive support activities, especially in targeted outreach schools which were also hub schools. Partnerships responded to COVID-19 by **accelerating innovative solutions and virtual delivery**. Partnerships suggested that online and blended delivery was something they wished to continue, since it enabled flexibility in delivery at no additional cost.

To support sustainability, partnerships suggested that proactive support should prioritise the most impactful activities for hub schools/colleges and focus on underrepresented groups at a regional level. This way efficiencies could be made without losing impact. Partnerships noted that COVID-19 seems to have resulted in the needs of schools/colleges in different regions becoming more similar. This could enable **further collaboration and sharing of practice between regions**, alignment of goals and greater efficiencies across partnerships.

Interviewees suggested that development and delivery of **continuing professional development (CPD) programmes** could help support the development of a cadre of careers advisors and teachers within schools/colleges with the knowledge and skills to undertake outreach work, which would reduce the burden on hub teams. It was noted that outreach delivery is not the same as careers advice or teaching and that such programmes would need to use the right pedagogy to have maximum impact.

Recommendations

For the Office for Students

1. Provide **further clarity on the differences between targeted outreach and proactive support**.
2. Further consider the **sustainability** of proactive support activities, balancing the quantity of support offered to schools/colleges versus quality and ensuring activities meet beneficiary needs. To support this, the OfS could consider:
 - Focusing activities on **schools/colleges and underrepresented groups in the region**, instead of having a wider regional focus
 - Focusing proactive support on the **most impactful activities** and ensure that **more sustained/longer-term support** is provided to students through such activities
 - Encouraging partnerships to continue developing activities which **align with key priorities of school/colleges, including attainment**. Although funding is available for learning recovery due to the pandemic, consideration could be given to proactive support also playing a role given that: a) attainment is the prime concern for schools, thus could support engagement; and b) attainment gaps have widened due to the pandemic and seem to be widening. This means that access of underrepresented groups to HE could be more challenging in future as it requires students to gain relevant grades. Thus, the OfS could consider whether attainment initiatives might be beneficial as part of proactive support, in what format and in which circumstances, as well as how such programmes could be best evaluated.

For partnerships

1. Partnerships could further enhance their delivery by:
 - Exchanging examples of effective practice on how to **avoid duplicating outreach activities** in their areas, as well as how to best **engage schools/colleges** where **saturation of relevant interventions is noted**
 - Exploring similar school/college challenges and groups of underrepresented learners in HE across regions so that they **exchange practical solutions and resources**
 - Further enhancing their technology infrastructures to enable **high quality virtual delivery**
 - Continuing to offer **online and blended learning programmes** and assess their impact relative to face-to-face support
 - **Developing CPD programmes to create a cadre of career advisors and teachers** able to deliver outreach activities in order to increase capacity and potentially reach.

Signposting

Of the three main hub activities, signposting was **most varied in its interpretation and delivery**. Partnerships targeted their signposting activities at different audiences including: teachers, learners, parents and carers in targeted outreach schools/colleges; hubs' 'cold spot' schools/colleges; or all schools/colleges in their region. Partnerships also took different approaches to delivery including national signposting, signposting to targeted outreach schools, signposting to 'cold spot' schools, or a combination of these.

There was also **variation in the number and combination of methods used to signpost**, both between partnerships and for different audiences. Overall, pro-active signposting was considered **more effective, with face-to-face/direct signposting to schools/colleges** particularly favoured by some medium and smaller size partnerships.

Signposting strategies were designed based on whether partnerships aimed to become a central point of contact for outreach in their area. Partnerships aiming to become the **'signposting' hubs** for outreach in their region **referred to the hubs' websites as an opportunity to create a 'one-stop-shop'** for outreach to support schools/colleges. Others pointed to the plethora of information already available and to the importance of existing relationships with schools/colleges and other outreach providers.

All partnerships had a communications strategy, and many spoke about the different campaigns and activities they had planned to promote the hubs and signpost. Most of these were already taking place as part of targeted outreach and tailored to include information on the hubs. However, hub-specific activities were also mentioned, including hub launch events, animations explaining the hubs, the use of social media and communications campaigns using live chat. Once more, promotional efforts differed significantly based on the target audience as well as on partnership size and stage of development; for example, whether the partnership had an established brand in the region and/or existing relationships with the 'cold spot' schools.

Whilst some partnerships viewed signposting as **central to their hub's strategy** and an opportunity to reach more schools/colleges, **others were more sceptical**. There were **mixed views regarding the hubs' websites** in particular; all 29 partnership websites were up and running, but views differed on the relative importance and impact of these compared to proactive support and strategic engagement, as well as other signposting methods. This meant that only a minority of partnerships systematically promoted their websites, typically those who had placed signposting relatively central to their overall hub strategy and whose websites enabled the live delivery of outreach activities online. Overall, partnerships' websites varied considerably in terms of how comprehensive and up-to-date the information provided was.

Many partnerships **did not record monitoring and evaluation data about signposting to the extent or comprehensiveness expected by the OfS** and expressed a lack of appetite to do so. This was because they considered requirements to be unclear in what exactly was to be recorded or unfit for purpose, believed the burden of collecting this information outweighed the potential benefits or lacked the ability to collect relevant, accurate data from their websites. The lack of clarity and perceived burden of the monitoring and evaluation requirements for signposting activities contributed to lower buy-in as well as to the relatively low reliability and validity of the monitoring and evaluation returns, which can hinder the OfS's and partnerships' learnings and improvement. Overall, there was a belief that meaningful monitoring and evaluation for signposting was difficult to achieve.

Recommendations

For the Office for Students

1. Provide **further clarity** on signposting expectations, including identifying **minimum expected levels** for signposting delivery and hub websites.
2. Further **communicate and exemplify**, i.e. through cases studies, the **benefits of creating a 'one-stop-shop'** for outreach activities in regions and the role of the hubs' websites in achieving this.
3. Reduce the level of monitoring and evaluation data required for signposting, especially the items that most partnerships find burdensome, e.g. tracking queries made via phone or in person.
4. Further explore how to best **evaluate the impact of signposting activities**.

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