Office for Students

A new approach to the Uni Connect programme from 2021-22 to 2024-25

Analysis of consultation responses

Contents

Introduction

1. The Office for Students (OfS) is the independent regulator for higher education in England. We aim to ensure that students from all backgrounds have equal opportunities to access higher education.

2. Since 2017 we have provided funding of £60 million per year to support collaborative outreach through the Uni Connect programme. This funding aims to improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented students to access higher education and is intended to complement the commitments individual providers make through their access and participation plans. Uni Connect was initially constituted as a four-year programme running until July 2021.

3. This document presents the analysis of responses to the consultation on a new approach to the Uni Connect programme from 2021-22 to 2024-25, held between 15 December 2020 and 19 January 2021.

4. The proposals in the consultation focused on how we could:

   a. Invest in collaborative outreach that creates pathways to further and higher education, helping remove the perceived academic, financial and cultural barriers to progression and supporting underrepresented learners to achieve their ambitions.

   b. Support activity that complements the commitments providers themselves make and the outcomes they agree with us through their access and participation plans.

   c. Give greater focus to all possible routes into and through higher education, including through further education and among adult learners.

   d. Ensure that the engagement with schools and colleges in local areas is efficient and targeted, does not place unnecessary burden on schools and colleges, provides impartial information and advice, and ensures coverage across all parts of the country.

5. The consultation document[1] set out our proposals to continue supporting the Uni Connect programme from academic years 2021-22 until 2024-25, which would enable Uni Connect partnerships to work in tandem with the five-year access and participation plans agreed with universities and colleges. The proposals suggested a new approach to targeting schools and colleges and outlined how the programme could have a greater focus on the varied pathways which would lead to progression into and through higher education, including through higher level apprenticeships and Level 4 and 5 technical education and among adult learners. The consultation provided an opportunity for Uni Connect partnerships, schools, colleges and other stakeholders to consider and respond to our proposals in order to inform our future approach.

6. In this document we identify and discuss the issues raised by respondents in their responses to the consultation, and we have taken these into account in deciding how to move forward with our proposals.

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[1] The consultation document is available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-new-approach-to-uni-connect/.

7. In principle, phase three of the Uni Connect programme will start in academic year 2021-22 and run through to the end of academic year 2024-25, although funding for the scheme is subject to confirmation on an annual basis.

8. Our investment in phase three of the Uni Connect programme aims to:

    a. Contribute to reducing the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups.

    b. Equip young and adult learners from underrepresented groups to make an informed choice about their options in relation to the full range of routes into and through higher education and to minimise the barriers they may face when choosing the option that will unlock their potential.

    c. Support a strategic local infrastructure of universities, colleges and other partners that can cut through competitive barriers, offer an efficient and low-burden route for schools and colleges to engage, and address outreach 'cold spots' for underrepresented groups.

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

9. Through the programme we will invest in a network of Uni Connect partnerships with coverage across England. These partnerships will support a strategic local infrastructure to deliver programme goals.

10. Our decisions are set out in full in Annex A and are discussed through subsequent sections of this document and highlighted in yellow boxes. In Annex B we set out the details of how we propose to distribute programme funding between partnerships in academic year 2021-22.

Background

11. This was a public consultation and stakeholders were invited to share their views on 13 consultation questions by using an online survey to submit written responses. Respondents were asked to feedback on various elements of our proposals by saying whether they tended to agree, strongly agreed, tended to disagree, strongly disagreed, didn't know or preferred not to say. Respondents were also asked whether they had any comments on the proposals. They were prompted to consider if the proposals would have unintended consequences and how they might affect individuals with one or more of the characteristics protected from discrimination under the Equality Act 2010.

12. The consultation was published on the OfS website. All Uni Connect partnerships and access and participation strategic contacts at higher education providers which are registered with the OfS were notified of the consultation by email.

13. The consultation closed on 19 January 2021. All responses were submitted using the online form. A small number of responses were submitted shortly after the deadline closed. We considered all responses carefully, even those received after the deadline closed, before making our decision.

14. We received 352 responses to the consultation. Of these:

- 88 were from providers registered with the OfS

- one was from a non-registered provider of higher education

- five were from non-registered providers of further education

- 86 were from Uni Connect partnerships

- 60 were from schools

- 11 were from third party outreach providers

- five were from sector representative bodies

- five were from local authorities

- four were from local enterprise partnerships

- 20 were from charities or third sector organisations

- 36 were from other organisations

- 31 respondents did not provide a response when asked about what type of organisation they represent.

15. Through the consultation we asked 13 questions of which 7 asked respondents to provide a Likert-type response.[2] That is, they were asked to indicate whether they strongly agreed, tended to agree, tended to disagree, strongly disagreed, did not know or preferred not to say. We outline detail of the numerical analysis of responses where appropriate through this report.

16. Most respondents also provided comments and several included qualifying details. For example, some of those who expressed agreement nevertheless highlighted challenges or concerns about some aspects of the proposals or sought further clarity on some issues.[3] By contrast, some of those who expressed disagreement supported some aspects of the proposals. We undertook a qualitative analysis of the comments and we considered all responses carefully before making our decision.

17. Our response focuses on the qualitative analysis and not solely on the simple numerical analysis of responses.

18. In the next section we discuss the different elements of the programme in turn, outlining:

- what the proposals we consulted on were

- which of those proposals we have decided to take forward and why

- whether we have adapted the proposed approach that we consulted on in any way and why

- a numeric and thematic analysis of consultation responses relevant to these decisions and our response, including discussion of any alternative options suggested by respondents.

19. Our response to the thematic issues focuses on the policy intent, rationale and proportionality of the proposals. However, many respondents also sought clarification on specific aspects of the proposals and we have addressed these as appropriate in this document. Where appropriate these are reflected in the detail of our proposed approach as set out in Annex A and B, including identifying where further consultation is intended.

20. In reaching our final decision about these matters, we have had regard to the OfS's general duties as set out in section 2 of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA), including the general duty for the OfS to have regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity in connection with access to and participation in higher education under s.2(1)(e). Our decisions in respect of the future funding of the Uni Connect programme are carried out under the OfS's powers under section 39 of HERA, specifically the function of providing grants to registered higher education providers.

21. We have also had regard to Schedule 1, paragraph 21 of HERA, which extends the Equality Act 2010, and therefore the Public Sector Equality Duty, to the OfS. This requires the OfS to have due regard to eliminating unlawful discrimination, foster good relations between different groups and take steps to advance equality of opportunity. A discussion of the potential impacts

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[2] A Likert Scale is a type of rating scale used to measure attitudes or opinions. With this scale, respondents are asked to rate items on a level of agreement.

[3] Most respondents who sought further clarity did so in relation to our proposals for programme funding and targeted outreach from 2022-23. We intend to consult further on these matters in 2021 and so respondents will have an opportunity to comment and respond after receiving further information.

of the proposals on learners with protected characteristics[4] and those from underrepresented groups[5] is included in a specific equality, diversity and inclusion section in this document (paragraph 283).

22. The OfS is independent of government. However, section 2(3) of HERA requires us to have regard to statutory guidance given to us by the Secretary of State and we have done so in formulating our approach. Specifically, we have had regard to the following guidance:[6]

   a. Guidance to the OfS: Secretary of State's strategic priorities (February 2021)

   b. Guidance to the OfS: Allocation of higher education teaching grant funding in the 2021-22 financial year (January 2021).

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[4] Protected characteristics are defined in Part 11 of the Equality Act as: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. See www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/part/11/chapter/1.

[5] 'Underrepresented groups' are the focus of access and participation plans and include all groups of potential or current students for whom the OfS can identify gaps in equality of opportunity in different parts of the student lifecycle. In determining the groups falling within this definition, the OfS has given due regard to students who share particular characteristics that are protected under the Equality Act 2010. For more information, see 'Regulatory notice 1: Access and participation plan guidance' (OfS 2020.25), available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-access-andparticipation-plan-guidance/.

[6] See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/guidance-from-government/.

Overarching approach

What we proposed in the consultation and our decisions

23. In the consultation document we proposed the following:

> **Original proposal 1: Funding of Uni Connect**
>
> The OfS's current commitment to Uni Connect is to July 2021, when phase two is scheduled to end. Subject to funding levels, we propose to provide funding for the Uni Connect programme through to the end of academic year 2024-25, a timeline that brings the hubs into line with the duration of the 2020-21 to 2024-25 access and participation plan cycle.

Decision taken

> **Our decisions 1: Support for the Uni Connect programme**
>
> In principle, phase three of the Uni Connect programme will start in academic year 2021-22 and run through to the end of academic year 2024-25, although funding for the scheme is currently subject to confirmation and consultation[7] on an annual basis.

24. There is no change between original proposal 1 and our decisions.

25. We also proposed[8] that our investment in phase three of the Uni Connect programme aims to:

   a. Contribute to reducing the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups.

   b. Support young and mature learners from underrepresented groups to explore their options and make well-informed decisions about tertiary education, including considering pathways from further education into higher education and exploring non-traditional routes into and through higher education.

   c. Support a strategic local infrastructure of universities, colleges and other partners that can cut through competitive barriers, offer an efficient and low-burden route for schools and colleges to engage, address outreach 'cold spots' and offer different routes to progression into higher education.

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

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[7] The OfS is currently consulting on the approach to recurrent funding for 2021-22, see www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-recurrent-funding-for-2021-22/.

[8] See paragraph 32 of the consultation document at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-new-approach-to-uni-connect/.

Decision taken

Our decisions 2: Aims of the Uni Connect programme

Our investment in phase three of the Uni Connect programme aims to:

a. Contribute to reducing the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups.

b. Equip young and adult learners from underrepresented groups to make an informed choice about their options in relation to the full range of routes into and through higher education and to minimise the barriers they may face when choosing the option that will unlock their potential.

c. Support a strategic local infrastructure of universities, colleges and other partners that can cut through competitive barriers, offer an efficient and low-burden route for schools and colleges to engage, and address outreach 'cold spots' for underrepresented groups.

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

26. We have amended our proposed ambitions slightly. In (b) we have decided to use the term 'adult learners' rather than 'mature learners' as this is likely to be more attuned to how these learners, who may be aged 19 or above, may identify. We have also moved away from the term 'non-traditional routes' to describing 'the full range of routes' through higher education seeing this as more equitable and inclusive. Within (b) we have also strengthened our expectations from enabling learners to 'explore their options' to instead equipping them to 'make an informed choice' and 'minimising barriers'. We feel this better reflects our ambitions and intended outcomes for the programme. In (c) we have removed references to offering 'different routes to progression into higher education' to avoid duplication with the revised language in (b).

27. We also proposed the following:

Original proposal 2: Approach to Uni Connect

Through the programme we will invest in a network of Uni Connect hubs with cross-England coverage. These hubs will work strategically and collaboratively to address programme goals, providing clear and efficient routes through which schools and colleges can find out about and access the higher education outreach available in each area.

We will identify the highest priority schools and colleges and work with them to provide programmes of sustained and progressive higher education outreach for their underrepresented pupils and students, as well as supporting learners who have already begun their Uni Connect journey during phases one and two of the programme and who would benefit from ongoing outreach and support.

> We will continue to invest in a robust approach to the evaluation of the Uni Connect programme to understand and improve impact.

Decision taken

> **Our decisions 3: Overarching approach**
>
> Through the programme we will invest in a network of Uni Connect partnerships with cross-England coverage. These partnerships will support a strategic local infrastructure to deliver programme goals.
>
> We will continue to invest in a robust approach to the local and national evaluation of the Uni Connect programme to understand and improve impact.

28. With respect to what is outlined in 'our decisions 3' there is no change to our proposed approach.

29. To avoid duplication the decisions included above in 'our decisions 3' do not include the details of our proposals for the activity that Uni Connect partnerships will undertake, or our proposals for identifying the highest priority schools and colleges, or our proposals for supporting learners who have already begun their Uni Connect journey. These are considered in more detail in subsequent sections of the document.

30. We set out below what we heard from respondents to the consultation and our response, including where applicable how this influenced our decisions.

Numerical analysis of responses relevant to these decisions

31. We asked 'to what extent do you agree with the proposed approach to phase three of the Uni Connect programme?'

32. There were 340 responses to this question. Of these:

- 88.2 per cent agreed (strongly agreed or tended to agree) with our proposed approach

- 6.5 per cent disagreed (strongly disagreed or tended to disagree) with our proposed approach

- 5.3 per cent were neutral (did not know or preferred not to say).

33. Further comments were provided by 286 respondents with several qualifying their responses to the question. Our response focuses on the qualitative analysis, considering the numerical analysis set out above. Many respondents provided comments on our overarching approach across multiple questions and so we have also considered relevant responses to other questions. This includes question 13 of the consultation that asked 'in your view, are there ways in which the objectives of this consultation could be delivered more efficiently or effectively than proposed here?' to which 155 respondents provided further comments.

Thematic analysis of responses relevant to these decisions and our response

Extension of the Uni Connect programme to 2024-25

34. Of all respondents, 88 per cent agreed with the proposal to extend the programme. Just under a third of those who provided further comments expressed support for the proposed approach to align funding for Uni Connect with access and participation plan timescales to reinforce the strategic importance of access programmes and the complementarity Uni Connect could provide to plans. Around 20 per cent expressed support for a collaborative approach to outreach delivery. Several respondents commented on the success of the current programme as a reason for supporting its continuation, and some felt it was important to maintain the current strategic infrastructure that had been developed.

35. Around 10 per cent of those who commented on question one welcomed the increased focus on further education colleges[9] with around 15 per cent commenting positively on the inclusion of adult learners. A small number of respondents expressed support for an increased focus on the full range of routes into and through higher education.

36. Just over 10 per cent of respondents explicitly expressed support for the evidence-based approach and continued focus on evaluation of the programme and its impact. When asked if there were any aspects of our proposals that were unclear, a small number of respondents mentioned uncertainty around the lack of detail of the evaluation process in phase three. With the importance of evaluation in securing resource and providing evidence, respondents stated that the evaluation process should follow the format of phase two or the new process should be set out clearly.

37. When asked about alternative mechanisms for delivering the objectives of the consultation more efficiently or effectively than proposed, around 20 per cent of all respondents provided alternative suggestions. These were predominately suggestions that supported the broad thrust of our proposals but sought to change particular elements, for example around programme targeting. On this, a small number of respondents suggested that programme targeting should be expanded to include younger learners or a wider cohort of adult learners. However, a small number felt that tighter targeting could be more effective and that the programme's aims were currently too broad in scope. A very small number of respondents felt that the outreach provision provided by the programme is required across all learners and were therefore opposed to targeting support to particular groups of students. Several respondents suggested that greater local flexibility around targeting would be beneficial. Others suggested that changing programme targeting in any way risked inefficiency as changes would take time.

38. Other comments relating to aspects of our proposals that could be delivered more efficiently and effectively, which were raised by very small numbers of respondents, included:

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[9] Question 3 of the consultation asked specifically about an increased focus on further education colleges within the programme with over 80 per cent of respondents saying they agreed or strongly agreed. See paragraph 219 for more information.

- taking a national approach to some elements of the programme, such as engagement with certain target groups or around a web resource for signposting

- providing direct funding through the lead provider to schools

- providing more online or blended provision

- ensuring stronger alignment of local, regional and national monitoring and evaluation

- supporting subject specialist collaborations, for example around the arts and agriculture, to strengthen information, advice and guidance (IAG) provision across the programme

- undertaking some innovation pilots based on the new approach, to allow learning from practical application

- supporting smaller, specialist or highly selective higher education providers to engage more effectively with the programme.

39. Several respondents highlighted the staff turnover caused by programme funding uncertainty and said that this was a major cause of inefficiency within the programme.

Our response

40. We were pleased to receive high levels of support for our proposals for extending the Uni Connect programme through to 2024-25 in order to build on the local infrastructure that has been developed in phases one and two of the programme. We believe that this is the most effective way to deliver on the ambitions we set out in paragraph 4 for the reasons set out below.

41. Programme resources are limited and need to be targeted to ensure best use of this investment. This requires us to structure the programme in a way that supports partnerships in directing their efforts to where their IAG and outreach activities can have the most impact. By seeking to target support to the students, or groups of students, who are most likely to benefit from this engagement,[10] we can ensure the most efficient, effective and economic use of these limited resources and value for money. Our proposals, outlined below, for signposting, strategic outreach, targeted outreach and outreach with existing Uni Connect learners are designed to do this in a way that balances national direction with local flexibility. We explore the comments related to these different elements, and our response to them, in the respective sections below.

42. Some respondents highlighted the benefits of greater national coordination across the programme, while continuing with a local partnership approach. We recognise that there are benefits of greater collaboration and coordination of partnerships' work, for example around:

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[10] For example, our proposals for strategic outreach will involve activities to address identified IAG and outreach 'cold spots' for underrepresented groups.

- engaging with particular groups, including small, underrepresented groups[11] and adult learners

- common activities, such as evaluation

- subject specialist pathways, such as the arts or agriculture

- pathways involving higher education providers which might take a national approach to their recruitment, such as highly selective providers and those whose focus is on distance learning.

43. Where it is appropriate for us to encourage greater collaboration and coordination across partnerships we intend to do so. See paragraphs 104, 125, 132, 256 for more information.

44. We discuss programme funding and the timing of decisions below.

Programme funding

45. The most frequently raised challenge, which was highlighted by around 10 per cent of those who commented on question one, related to the level of funding that might be available to support the OfS's ambitions for the programme. Although most respondents supported the proposed approach, they highlighted that a minimum level of funding would be required to deliver all the proposed elements effectively. Around 5 per cent of those who commented expressed concerns that reduced funding could dilute the impact of the programme. Just under 10 per cent of those who commented highlighted, in particular, the potential risk to programme staff based within schools and colleges.

46. Around 5 per cent of those who commented on question one specifically expressed their support for the scalable approach to phase three of Uni Connect and felt this was important given the uncertainty over funding. However, around 10 per cent of respondents said it was unclear or found it difficult to determine how the proposals could be scaled effectively. Most who commented on relative priorities for the programme given limited resources, preferred programmes of sustained and progressive targeted outreach for underrepresented students. They also questioned the sustainability, viability, and impact of other elements of the proposals.

47. The timing of funding decisions was raised by around 5 per cent of those who responded to question one. Respondents highlighted the instability created by a year-by-year approach to the allocation of funding and said that this posed risks to the programme for 2021-22 and in the longer term around staff retention, partnership planning, and school and college engagement. Around half of those who raised the timing of funding decisions indicated a strong desire for a multi-year funding settlement.

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[11] 'Small underrepresented groups' in this context refers to groups of students where the OfS can identify gaps in equality of opportunity for access to higher education and who may benefit from regional or potentially national partnership engagement alongside other local stakeholders. This includes: care leavers, carers, people estranged from their families, people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, refugees, and children of military families.

48. Around 10 per cent of all respondents reported that they lacked clarity on the level of funding that would be available or how it would be distributed. When asked about whether there were any aspects of our proposals that were unclear, a small number of respondents raised timescales and resources as key areas in need of clarification. Some requested a clear timeline of when decisions will be made and clarity on when funding would be confirmed for each year. Related to this, a few respondents stated that they needed clarity around the job security of current employees working on Uni Connect in their respective institutions.

Our response

49. Many respondents commented that greater clarity on future funding for the programme would help planning and staff retention. We acknowledge that this would likely be helpful, but overall funding levels depend on decisions which are taken annually, which means we can currently only confirm funding on an annual basis.

50. Two stages determine the amount of funding for Uni Connect partnerships. These are (i) the funding that is available to support the programme, as a whole, in any given year, and (ii) the methodology for sharing available funding among the Uni Connect partnerships. These stages do not necessarily happen in a particular order, though decisions around both are required before partnership funding can be confirmed.

51. We discuss our approach to allocating the funding that will be available to the programme in 2021-22 below in 'Distribution of programme funding'. We intend to consult later in 2021-22 on our proposed methodology for distributing the funding allocated to the programme for 2022-23 through to 2024-25.

52. The government sent a statutory guidance letter[12] to the OfS on 19 January 2021, setting out its funding priorities for the allocation of recurrent funding in the 2021-22 financial year, including guidance that the OfS should reduce the allocation for the Uni Connect scheme by £20 million to £40 million. We are currently consulting on this and other options for the future funding of the programme in 2021-22. Decisions in respect of the level of funding that will be made available to support the programme during 2021-22 will be taken by the OfS later in 2021, subject to the outcome of our current consultation on the approach to recurrent funding for 2021-22.[13] In reaching our funding decision in due course, we will have regard to the government's guidance letter and other relevant statutory guidance, as required by virtue of s.2(3) of HERA, our general duties under s.2 of HERA and the public sector equality duty (PSED), as well as taking into account the total recurrent funding available to us each year, consultation responses, and any other relevant considerations.

53. Future decisions on the scope of and funding for Uni Connect for future years will need to be made, taking into account the context and relevant considerations at the time, including but not limited to any further statutory guidance received from the government; our general duties

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[12] See Guidance to the OfS: Allocation of higher education teaching grant funding in the 2021-22 financial yar (January 2021) at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/guidance-from-government/.

[13] See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-recurrent-funding-for-2021-22/.

under s.2 of HERA; the PSED; the outcomes of future spending reviews; and/or any future stakeholder engagement, including any future consultations.

54. Given the nature and timing of decision-making around overall programme funding levels we have sought to develop an approach to the programme that is scalable and can adapt to a number of different funding scenarios. Within our proposed scalable approach:

- We expect partnerships to deliver all the programme elements during phase three, which will include supporting a local partnership infrastructure. See figure 1.

- The amount of activity that can be supported within each element will vary depending on the funding that is available. Where this relates to strategic outreach, targeted outreach or outreach with existing Uni Connect learners this might impact on the type or amount of engagement that is undertaken.

- The OfS will provide guidance to partnerships on its expectations each year once funding levels are confirmed.

- Funding and activity for outreach with existing Uni Connect learners is expected to reduce over time, as the learners engaged through the earlier phases of the programme progress through their education.

Figure 1: Elements of the Uni Connect programme in phase three

55. We anticipate that our proposed approach to the programme will help to align the outreach work of the programme with the work of others, including higher education providers. We expect it will also lead to economies of scale with respect to targeted outreach in schools and colleges. This should contribute to increased efficiency and effectiveness across the programme. However, in the event of a significantly reduced level of overall programme funding, we would expect a reduction in the scale and intensity of the outreach provided and also expect the number of learners engaged by the programme to reduce. Once we can

confirm programme funding for 2021-22, we intend to provide partnerships with guidance on our expectations.

Addressing the impact of the coronavirus pandemic

56. Around 12 per cent of those who commented on question one suggested that the proposed approach might benefit from a greater focus on the issues caused by the impacts of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (for example, by providing greater support for students whose studies have been disrupted or missed out on opportunities as a result). A few respondents suggested that the OfS should prioritise activities relating to mental health and wellbeing as part of such a response.

57. A small number of respondents suggested that Uni Connect partnerships could play a role in gathering evidence about the impact of the pandemic and the consequent loss of education on underrepresented students.

58. A few respondents commented that there would be significant benefits to working more closely with adult learners now, not least as the pandemic might result in a greater need for re-training or developing new skills. The disproportionate impact of the pandemic on different groups was also cited by a number of respondents, particularly in respect of further education colleges, as they were thought likely to have high proportions of students from the groups most adversely affected. Ensuring that these learners were able to continue engaging with Uni Connect was therefore considered important.

Our response

59. We recognise the impact the pandemic has had on young and adult learners and their families, particularly those from more socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and ethnic minority communities. Schools, colleges and universities have faced – and still face – challenges in continuing to deliver teaching to their pupils and students, adapting their delivery to online and/or blended learning modes, and trying to meet and support students' needs.

60. In phase three, Uni Connect will continue to provide long-term, coordinated outreach to support student progression to further and higher education. Providing coordinated, high-quality and relevant outreach and IAG to schools and colleges will mean they can focus their resources on the academic performance of young and adult learners from underrepresented groups who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

61. Since March 2020 we have issued guidance[14] on our expectations of how the programme can support learners, particularly those who are likely to have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, for example, those in transition years (Years 11 and 13). We supported the shift to digital approaches to outreach, which were critical to the delivery of the programme during the initial national, and subsequent local and national lockdowns. Recognising that while wholly online activity presents challenges, there have also been demonstrable advantages to digital delivery. We will, therefore, continue to support and encourage the development of online

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[14] See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/uni-connect-programme-an-update-from-the-office-for-students/.

activity as part of a blended approach to outreach in phase three. This will facilitate greater access to targeted and strategic IAG and outreach activity for underrepresented students.

Alignment with provider outreach and recruitment activity

62. Around 5 per cent of those who responded to question one expressed concerns that the proposals would lead to duplication and overlap of activity between Uni Connect partnerships and individual provider outreach delivered through a provider's access and participation plan commitments. A small number of these respondents sought more guidance and clarity from the OfS on how targeting for Uni Connect activity will be different and add value to the provider-level outreach planned through access and participation plans. A small number of others wanted the OfS to place stronger expectations on higher education providers that they collaborate in support of programme goals.

63. Similarly, a small number of respondents indicated that they thought the proposed approach did not give enough focus to outreach at higher education providers, suggesting that funding might be better aligned to providers' access and participation plan targets. These respondents highlighted that this would enable a more cohesive and sustainable provision of outreach to a larger group of underrepresented learners and reduce any duplication of provision in local areas.

64. One respondent highlighted that providers may have built assumptions about the programme ending in 2021 into their access and participation plans and may have envisaged a more significant provider role with the Uni Connect target group which again may lead to duplication or competition.

65. A small number of respondents commented that delivering collaborative impartial support can be challenging given the competition between providers and the potential conflict with individual provider recruitment activity. Around 5 per cent of those who responded to question one highlighted the positive role the programme can play in ensuring the delivery of impartial IAG and outreach. A few of those respondents noted that this is particularly appreciated by schools.

Our response

66. By investing in impartial collaborative outreach, we aim to make an efficient contribution to the national effort to close gaps in access to higher education for underrepresented groups that cannot be addressed through provider-level regulation alone. Our aim is to support activity that complements the commitments providers make and the outcomes they agree with us through their access and participation plans. This is why, in principle, subject to funding levels, we propose to align the timelines for the programme with the five-year access and participation plans agreed with universities and colleges through to the end of 2024-25.

67. Partnerships are expected to work collaboratively, drawing on local intelligence from within and outside the partnership, to develop their approaches. This will include understanding what outreach is being delivered through providers' access and participation plan commitments. We have set out below our expectations for the different strands of the programme. We expect partnerships to work with relevant stakeholders to ensure they understand what IAG and outreach is already offered in the local area for both young and adult learners. This will enable

partnerships to shape their targeted and strategic outreach offers as well as informing their signposting work.

68. Providing impartial IAG and outreach is learner-centred, equipping underrepresented learners with the guidance and experiences they need to make informed decisions for their futures. The strong focus on impartiality through the Uni Connect programme plays an important role in securing collaboration from a range of partners that could otherwise be in competition for recruitment in a local area. The provision of impartial IAG and outreach will continue to be a strong expectation of the Uni Connect programme and all its partners throughout phase three.

An increased focus on alternative routes through higher education

69. A small number of respondents suggested that the OfS should provide more support to help partnerships engage with a wider variety of partners and non-traditional routes. Comments also noted the importance of aligning with Institutes of Technology, especially with respect to promoting Higher Technical Qualifications and the reforms of level 4 and level 5 technical education.

70. Less than five respondents commented that the term 'Uni Connect' did not reflect all learning pathways or the increased focus on further education that the OfS had proposed.

Our response

71. Through phase three of the programme, we intend to prioritise activity which supports different learner journeys through further and higher education, including vocational and technical higher education. This aligns with the suggested heightened role for the Institutes of Technology, Higher Technical Qualifications and the technical education reforms. We will consider this further as we develop future programme guidance.

72. Uni Connect is the rebranded name for the collaborative outreach programme formerly known as NCOP (national collaborative outreach programme) and was launched in January 2020. The decision to re-brand the programme was based on evidence from the independent programme evaluation[15] and other commissioned research on the perceptions of higher education and outreach activity,[16] which identified that the NCOP name did not adequately explain what the programme is about and therefore, did not sufficiently support the marketing and delivery of the work to schools and colleges, learners and their parents and carers. We recognise the concerns about the term 'Uni' in the branding, particularly that it does not reflect the wider membership of the partnerships and the different routes available to learners. We considered both these concerns carefully at the time of making decisions about the new brand for the programme and following the comments in the consultation. However, we remain of the view that Uni Connect is the clearest way of describing the programme to an external audience based on the research we commissioned. The accompanying strapline to the brand – 'Impartial advice and information on college, university and degree apprenticeships' – helps to reflect the diversity of choice and provision that the programme offers.

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[15] See: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/ncop-end-of-phase-one-evaluation-report/.

[16] See: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/perceptions-of-higher-education-outreach-and-access-activity/.

Signposting

What we proposed in the consultation and our decisions

73. In the consultation document we proposed the following:

> **Original proposal 6: Providing a joined-up local outreach offer (quoted in part)**
>
> The Uni Connect hubs will provide a joined-up local outreach offer across OfS and non-OfS funded activities, to provide clear routes through which all state schools and colleges can find out about and access the higher education outreach available in each area. They will do this through:
>
> - acting as a point of contact and information for all secondary schools and colleges in their geographic remit, facilitating access to existing outreach provision, either locally or nationally
>
> - hosting a website with details of the local outreach offer and other information to support schools and colleges.

74. The remaining parts of original proposal 6 are discussed in the 'strategic outreach' section of this document.

Decision taken

> **Our decisions 4: Signposting**
>
> From 2021-22 the Uni Connect partnerships will provide signposting to help teachers and advisers find out about the outreach activity available in the area.
>
> Within such an approach:
>
> a. The partnerships will act as a point of contact for all state secondary schools and colleges. They will signpost to local outreach provision, where such provision exists and is available.
>
> b. The partnerships will host a website providing contact information and details of their Uni Connect offer to support their 'point of contact' role. This will mean the programme microsite can link to all partnerships. It will also help schools and colleges (including teachers and advisers), learners and parents and carers to access appropriate resources and support.
>
> c. The partnerships will work with relevant stakeholders to ensure their signposting offer is coherent with other IAG and outreach offered in the local area for both young and adult learners.

75. There are a number of changes between original proposal 6 and our decisions. These are that:

a. We will no longer require partnerships to signpost outreach outside their local area. More information on our reasons for this are given in paragraph 88 below.

b. We have scaled back our expectations around partnership websites. More information on our reasons for this are given in paragraph 96 below.

c. We expect greater collaboration and coordination between the partnerships around the coherence of their IAG and outreach offer. More information on our reasons for this are given in paragraph 104 below.

76. We set out below what we heard from respondents to the consultation and our response, including where applicable how this influenced our decisions.

Numerical analysis of responses relevant to these decisions

77. We asked 'to what extent do you agree with our proposals to provide routes through which schools and colleges can find out about and access local outreach provision?'

78. There were 337 responses to this question. Of these:

- 85.5 per cent agreed (strongly agreed or agreed) with our proposed approach

- 8.6 per cent disagreed (strongly disagreed or tended to disagree) with our proposed approach

- 5.9 per cent were neutral (did not know or preferred not to say).

79. Further comments were provided by 256 respondents with many qualifying their responses to the question. Our response focuses on the qualitative analysis and not solely on the simple numerical analysis set out above.

Thematic analysis of responses relevant to these decisions and our response

Taking a joined-up approach to information for schools and colleges

80. Of all responses, 86 per cent agreed with the proposal to provide routes through which schools and colleges can find out about and access local outreach provision. Around a third of those who commented suggested that a single point of contact would help schools and colleges navigate the complex and varied outreach landscape, supporting effective engagement and simplifying communications. Respondents also noted that the impartial nature of the advice available through the partnerships was important.

81. Just over a third of respondents suggested that the programme should continue to build on existing signposting activities. A few respondents referred to their own experience of working with the Uni Connect partnerships, citing that the current mechanisms for signposting worked well and were effective.

82. In other responses, 12 per cent highlighted concerns that signposting activity is overly reliant on websites. A few commented that having someone 'on the ground' to facilitate information

about outreach provision for schools and colleges worked well in the current phase of the programme. Several respondents expressed concern that existing relationships with schools could be lost if partnerships placed too great a focus on their 'point of contact' activity compared with other forms of engagement, such as basing Uni Connect staff within individual schools and colleges.

83. A small number of respondents argued that a point of contact was not required and told us that:

- many providers have long-standing and effective relationships in place with schools already

- simply providing lists of available outreach could be overwhelming for schools and colleges

- it is not clear that schools actually want a single point of contact

- having tailored communications for parents, learners, and teachers would be more effective as it could appeal to their individual needs.

84. A few respondents were interested in understanding how to preserve the legacy of a coordinated local outreach offer if Uni Connect partnership funding changes in the future. A similar number argued that funding for this work should not be prioritised over the provision of more targeted support for high priority schools and underrepresented students.

Our response

85. We welcome the high levels of support received for our proposals, recognising the benefits of a joined-up approach to information for schools and colleges.

86. The OfS introduced signposting activity for phase two of the programme. Our proposals therefore build on existing Uni Connect activity and aim to help teachers and advisers access existing outreach provision by using the partnership infrastructure to join up the local outreach offer, minimise duplication and ensure that, as far as possible, all areas of the country are covered.

87. Uni Connect partnerships should prioritise their engagement with schools and colleges to focus the most effort where they can have the greatest impact. This means focusing on the schools and colleges they are working with to provide targeted and strategic outreach. Signposting activity should therefore be a relatively small part of a partnership's activities, recognising that other aspects of the programme will deliver the most impactful engagement with schools and colleges.

88. The programme infrastructure is well-suited to identifying and signposting locally available outreach. We expect partnerships to work with relevant stakeholders to ensure their signposting offer coheres with other IAG and outreach offered in the local area for both young and adult learners. This understanding of what outreach is available locally will enable partnerships to shape their targeted and strategic outreach offers. We consider that signposting existing local outreach creates minimal administrative burden. However, we recognise that signposting to outreach available in other parts of the country is more likely to require additional resources and is at higher risk of duplicating activity across partnerships. We have therefore amended our proposals and will no longer require partnerships to signpost outreach outside their local area.

89. The role of signposting activity beyond 2024-25 was not in scope for the consultation.

90. We do not expect signposting to comprise mainly posting material online, as outlined in more detail in paragraph 96 below.

91. To date, where partnerships have placed staff in schools and colleges, their aim is to provide additional in-school capacity to support their targeted outreach activity. We therefore do not consider that our decisions on signposting will affect the decisions partnerships take about these staff placements.

92. We recognise that many schools and colleges have existing relationships with universities and other outreach providers. Where these links exist, we do not expect partnerships to duplicate this engagement through their signposting activity.

Duplication of effort in the provision of local websites

93. Respondents were most frequently concerned about duplication of effort across partnerships in developing and maintaining local approaches to signposting – especially across different partnership websites. There were a few responses that referred to the administrative burden of keeping information up-to-date, as well as monitoring and reporting on this activity.

94. Multiple local websites were deemed to be inefficient and risked significant duplication across partnerships, particularly with respect to outreach activity outside the local area. Respondents also cited a risk of duplication with information already available via local careers hubs and other external sources and platforms.

95. Around one in ten respondents suggested that a joined-up national approach would be preferable and would provide better value for money, with the OfS taking a stronger lead in coordinating signposting activity to ensure co-operation and collaboration. Many of these respondents suggested that the OfS should explore a national web offer to minimise the risk of duplication across multiple local websites and enable schools and colleges to access outreach from across the country. A small number of respondents highlighted that a unified approach presented additional opportunities, including the ability to:

- provide one central source of information on outreach provision across England

- push data onto existing national platforms

- support consistent reporting

- allow sharing of cross-geographical information

- enable a link to learner tracking information.

Our response

96. Emerging findings from the programme evaluation show that partnerships use direct one-to-one communications, social media, newsletters and their website to signpost. Although a minority of partnerships use their local website as an integral part of their online outreach delivery, for most it is not seen as central to their signposting operations. This evidence, coupled with the feedback through the consultation, creates a compelling case for scaling back

what we expect from local partnership websites. We have therefore modified our proposals and will no longer expect partnerships to provide details of other local or national outreach via their website. We do however want partnerships to maintain a basic website to support their 'point of contact' role and enable us to provide appropriate links from national websites to individual partnership information.

97. We recognise that digital approaches, both to signposting and outreach delivery, have taken on a more significant role within Uni Connect because of the pandemic. Where partnerships have a more extensive website offering this is welcomed, if a local need is identified and resource allows. However, this will not form part of our expectations for Uni Connect signposting.

98. We have considered the arguments made by several respondents that we develop a national web offer to enable schools and colleges to access outreach from across the country. While we recognise that there could be benefits from such an approach we do not believe that this is the best use of limited programme resources at this time. A national web offer would risk duplicating existing websites, including Discover Uni and UCAS. It could also detract from our focus on supporting a strong local infrastructure that understands the landscape of outreach provision, aligns activity working to minimise duplication, and creates routes through which schools and colleges can access the outreach they need where possible.

Quality, consistency and alignment

99. Around 5 per cent of those who commented were concerned about the ability of the partnerships to signpost effectively either because of a lack of appropriate local outreach provision or due to limited resources. It was noted that there could be challenges in bringing together a consistent offer from all providers. Several respondents highlighted that individual provider access and participation plans may not align with the expressed needs of schools and colleges, which could result in there being relatively little activity for some of the partnerships to signpost. A few indicated that competitive pressures could inhibit collaboration.

100. A small number of respondents commented that many universities recruit nationally and that the COVID-19 pandemic had led to an increased use of online outreach methods. This has meant that providers are better equipped to connect with schools across the country and so there were concerns that local platforms would not efficiently align with such activities.

101. A few respondents wanted further information on what the success criteria would be for this element of the programme and how we would measure impact.

Our response

102. Concerns were expressed that there may be times when school or college outreach needs cannot be met through existing provision, either within the programme or externally. Where this highlights a systemic gap or 'cold spot' in outreach provision for underrepresented groups, we would expect the partnership to explore this further as part of its strategic outreach activity. However, where this is not the case, we acknowledge that signposting may not always lead to a school or college sourcing the outreach they were hoping for. Within the limited resources available to the programme, we consider this an appropriate and proportionate outcome.

103. A few respondents sought more clarity on our approach to signposting, including success criteria and understanding impact. We intend to issue further guidance for phase three of the programme which will include more detail on our expectations and aspirations in this area.

104. We intend to encourage greater coordination, collaboration and the sharing of effective practice between partnerships in support of signposting activity, particularly around the provision of information.

Strategic outreach

What we proposed in the consultation and our decisions

105.   In the consultation document we proposed the following:

> **Original proposal 6: Providing a joined-up local outreach offer (quoted in part)**
>
> Uni Connect hubs will undertake strategic activity to align and support activity and engagement to address local outreach gaps for underrepresented groups, including for learners from underrepresented groups that, based on their small size, may be more appropriately tackled across the whole local partnership area than at school or college level.
>
> They will do this through:
>
> - drawing on local and national data to understand the extent of local IAG and outreach gaps ('cold spots') for different underrepresented student groups in their geographic remit
>
> - engaging strategically with schools, colleges, local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, employers and others to prioritise activity to address these outreach gaps, taking into account available resources and local context
>
> - working collaboratively to help develop new or expanded outreach provision to address these priorities, drawing in additional funding to support this where hub resources allow.

106.   The remaining parts of original proposal 6 are discussed in the 'signposting' section of this document.

Decision taken

> **Our decisions 5: Strategic outreach**
>
> The Uni Connect partnerships will provide strategic outreach to address IAG and outreach 'cold spots' for underrepresented groups in their local area.
>
> Within such an approach:
>
> a. Partnerships will undertake an assessment of local IAG and outreach gaps for underrepresented groups in the geographical area covered by the partnership, including with adult learners.
>
> b. Partnerships will engage with local stakeholders to consider what they want to achieve from their strategic outreach, reflecting on the gaps identified in their assessment, where collaborative activity can add most value, and taking into account local context and available resources.

c. Partnerships will determine which interventions and activities are likely to be most effective in achieving its ambitions, taking account of evidence in making these decisions, including from the Uni Connect evaluation.

We will encourage match funding for strategic outreach activity from local partners.

We will outline stronger expectations that partnerships collaborate with each other and with other networks to share approaches, resources and good practice relating to engagement with different underrepresented groups, including with adult learners.

2021-22 will be a transition year during which the partnerships will develop their strategic outreach plans and review any existing activity against their strategic outreach ambitions.

107. There are a number of changes between original proposal 6 and our decisions. These are that:

a. We clarify our expectations of the approach that partnerships should take in developing their strategic outreach plans, though our underlying approach has not changed.

b. We clarify our expectations of partnerships during 2021-22, recognising that this is a transition year and that it will take time for partnerships to develop their strategic outreach plans.

c. We expect greater collaboration and coordination between the partnerships around their work with different underrepresented groups. More information on our reasons for this are given in paragraph 125 below.

108. We set out below what we heard from respondents to the consultation and our response, including where applicable how this influenced our decisions.

Numerical analysis of responses relevant to these decisions

109. We asked 'to what extent do you agree with our proposals to support strategic activity to address local outreach gaps for underrepresented groups?'

110. There were 337 responses to this question. Of these:

- 91.7 per cent agreed (strongly agreed or agreed) with our proposed approach

- 2.7 per cent disagreed (strongly disagreed or tended to disagree) with our proposed approach

- 5.7 per cent were neutral (did not know or preferred not to say).

111. Further comments were provided by 227 respondents, with many qualifying their responses to the question. Our response focuses on the qualitative analysis and not solely on the simple numerical analysis set out above.

Thematic analysis of responses relevant to these decisions and our response

Benefits and challenges of strategic activity to address outreach 'cold spots' for underrepresented groups

112.   Most respondents – 92 per cent – agreed with the proposal to support strategic activity which addresses local outreach gaps for underrepresented groups. Around 20 per cent of those who provided comments indicated that the proposals would help to reach smaller underrepresented groups and address 'cold spots' of outreach provision. A few respondents also indicated that the proposals could help improve social mobility.

113.   Around 20 per cent of those who provided a response supported the Uni Connect partnerships engaging strategically with schools, colleges, local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, employers, and others to prioritise activity which addresses outreach gaps and takes into account available local resources and context. Several respondents noted that the proposal reflects some of the existing work that has been undertaken by Uni Connect outreach partnerships to date.

114.   Around 10 per cent of respondents expressed concerns about the competing demands on funding and priorities within the programme, particularly if funding is reduced.

115.   The potential for overlap and duplication of activity in relation to access and participation plans was raised by around 5 per cent of respondents highlighting that care should be taken not to replicate existing offers and activities. However, a few respondents commented that the proposal is important to avoid duplication at local levels and to have an overarching strategy for all organisations to work under.

116.   Around 7 per cent of respondents cautioned that there may be risks and difficulties in identifying and addressing cold spots of outreach provision. Although there was support for drawing on local and national data to identify outreach gaps, a few respondents suggested a need for clear data sharing agreements and expectations that take a country-wide approach to data collection.

117.   A small number of respondents suggested that Uni Connect partnerships could deliver coordinated national projects to target learners from smaller underrepresented groups and that this may be a more effective and efficient alternative approach.

118.   A couple of respondents suggested that strategic outreach should include broader infrastructure support to help schools and colleges to develop their careers programmes with good quality activities delivered by those with career guidance and experience. A similar number commented that that there is a need to ensure that outreach activity is relevant to students and that they have access to the right support to help them achieve their aims.

119.   Around 8 per cent of respondents indicated that they would like further support and guidance from the OfS on this element of the programme in areas such as partnership building, strategic activity delivery, and further clarification on the expectations of match funding.

Our response

120.   We welcome the very high levels of support for our strategic outreach proposals, which aim to address outreach 'cold spots' for underrepresented groups and through this help reduce gaps in higher education participation. In shaping our proposals, we have drawn on our experience of phase two of the programme. Partnerships in phase two have worked collaboratively and strategically to understand the landscape of educational disadvantage, high-level skills needs and joined-up careers advice in the area, and to shape locally tailored approaches to address these challenges. Responses to the consultation suggested that strategic outreach activity must be collaborative, avoid duplication with existing activity, and take account of the local context and available resources. This is in line with our expectations for this activity.

121.   Analysis of the 2020-21 to 2024-25 access and participation plans suggests that there may be some student groups whose needs may not be adequately addressed through the activity outlined in the plans and that this may lead to 'cold spots' of access activity.[17] Through a focus on addressing outreach gaps and local prioritisation, we expect to minimise the risk of duplicating activity set out in a provider's access and participation plan. Interventions might involve new activity but can also involve activity which aligns with existing outreach and strengthens or extends its impact. Not all activities and interventions supported by the partnerships will involve the delivery of IAG or outreach, but we expect there to be a clear link between any activity that is funded by the programme and the closing of gaps in local IAG and outreach for underrepresented groups.

122.   Our proposals for strategic outreach are intended to address outreach gaps for underrepresented groups, including learners from underrepresented groups that, based on their small size, may be more appropriately tackled across the whole local partnership area than at school or college level. In doing this they will make an important contribution towards our strategic aims and therefore we consider this an important strand of activity within the programme. However, we recognise that Uni Connect resources are limited and our proposed approach is designed to be proportionate, allowing for local flexibility to target investment. We do not expect partnerships to work with all underrepresented groups or seek to close all local IAG and outreach gaps. Partnerships will need to engage with local stakeholders to prioritise their efforts, considering where they can add most value by working collaboratively and taking into account local context and available resources.

123.   Our approach is designed to be scalable (see paragraph 54). In the event of a significant reduction in the level of overall programme funding, we would expect a reduction in the scale and intensity of the outreach provided. This would be likely to reduce the number of learners engaged by the programme.

124.   Some respondents suggested consideration of a national approach to targeting learners from smaller underrepresented groups. While we recognise the benefits of greater collaboration and coordination of partnerships' work with particular groups, we have decided not to establish any national funded projects focused on these groups as part of Uni Connect. We consider these outside the scope of the programme and, if they were to be taken

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[17] See Transforming opportunity in higher education (OfS 2020.06), available at:
www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/transforming-opportunity-in-higher-education/.

forward, would be most appropriately developed as part of a separate funding call, which would ensure that such activity is evidence-led, has the necessary stakeholder engagement, and is given appropriate scrutiny.

125.   We intend to issue further guidance for phase three of the programme, which will include more detail on our expectations and aspirations for strategic outreach. Through our guidance we will increase our expectations around collaboration between partnerships and with other networks. This will aim to share approaches, resources and good practice, to support economies of scale and minimise the risk of duplication. It will also include guidance on the use of data to inform strategic outreach.

126.   We will also provide guidance on match funding. Strategic outreach activity is intended to be designed and delivered in collaboration with local higher education providers, schools, colleges, local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, employers and others. Match funding is one way in which we can gain assurance that a project has support and engagement from local partners. It also contributes to the project's sustainability. We will continue to encourage match funding for strategic outreach activity.

Targeted outreach

What we proposed in the consultation and our decisions

127.   In the consultation document we proposed the following:

Original proposal 3: Targeting of the highest priority schools and colleges

Uni Connect hubs will deliver programmes of sustained and progressive outreach to address outreach gaps for underrepresented pupils and learners in the highest priority schools and colleges encompassing activity funded by Uni Connect, as well as interventions that are not OfS-funded, such as provider, third sector or other provision.

We will develop a new approach to identifying the highest priority schools and colleges. This will replace the current area-based targeting and will be used to direct programme funding and targeting from academic year 2022-23 onwards. We will consult further on our approach to identifying the highest priority schools and colleges.

We will work closely with the Department for Education to develop our methodology for identifying the highest priority schools and colleges, which will draw on higher education participation rates and contextual information examining participation with regard to Key Stage 4 attainment. In doing this our approach will mirror that taken to identify the original Uni Connect target areas.

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128.   We also proposed that:

Original proposal 7: (quoted in part)

Academic year 2021-22 will be a transitional year for the provision of sustained and progressive programmes of outreach with the highest priority schools and colleges. Partnerships will use the existing Uni Connect target areas, supplemented by their knowledge of local context, to identify the highest priority schools and colleges. Overall programme funding levels will shape expectations around how many schools and colleges can be prioritised.

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129.   The remaining parts of original proposal 7 are discussed in the 'distribution of programme funding' section of this document.

130.   We also proposed that:

Original proposal 4: Work across different age groups and types of provider (quoted in part)

We will continue to focus on early engagement and will fund targeted outreach in the highest priority schools and colleges with young people from Year 9 upwards.

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131.   The remaining parts of original proposal 4 are discussed in the 'an increased focus on further education colleges and adult learners' section of this document (see paragraph 209).

Decision taken

Our decisions 6: Targeted outreach

The Uni Connect partnerships will provide sustained and progressive targeted outreach to help recipients make well-informed decisions about their future education and to reduce gaps in higher education participation for the least represented groups.

2021-22 will be a transition year during which time the partnerships will deliver targeted outreach to learners in Years 9 through to 13, who live in the phase two Uni Connect target areas.

From 2022-23, we will adopt a new approach to identifying target learners within targeted outreach. These learners will be in Years 9 through to 13.

We have deferred a decision on the approach we will take to directing targeted outreach from 2022-23. We intend to consult in 2021-22 on whether we maintain an area-based approach or move to a new schools-based approach to identify the learners we intend to direct activity towards through the programme from 2022-23 onwards.

Partnerships will use local intelligence to identify which post-16 destinations to work with to support sustained engagement with target learners.

We will outline stronger expectations that partnerships collaborate with each other and with other networks to share approaches, resources and good practice relating to subject specialist pathways.

For our decisions on targeted outreach with adult learners, see 'An increased focus on further education colleges and adult learners' below.

132.   There are a number of changes between original proposals 3, the relevant part of 7 and our decisions. These are that:

a.   We do not expect partnerships to identify priority schools and colleges for targeted outreach during 2021-22. Instead, during this transition year, they will continue to use phase-two targeting. More information on our reasons for this are given in paragraph 152 below.

b.   We have deferred a decision around whether to adopt a schools-based or area-based approach to directing targeted outreach. More information on our reasons for this are given in paragraph 156 below.

c.   We intend to consult in 2021-22 on whether we maintain an area-based approach or move to a new schools-based approach to identify target learners from 2022-23 onwards. Stakeholders and interested parties will have an opportunity to submit responses to the proposals set out in a second consultation in due course, and we will take those responses

into account before finalising any decisions in respect of the specifics of our approach to targeted outreach from 2022-23 onwards.

d. Whether we adopt an area-based or a school-based approach to targeted outreach from 2022-23, we do not propose to take a national approach to identifying which further education colleges should be included in targeted outreach activity. Uni Connect partnerships will use local intelligence to identify which post-16 destinations they should work with to support sustained engagement with target learners. More information on our reasons for this are given in paragraphs 168 – 175 below.

e. We expect greater collaboration and coordination between the partnerships around their work relating to subject specialist pathways. More information on our reasons for this are given in paragraph 42.

133. We set out below what we heard from respondents to the consultation and our response, including where applicable how this influenced our decisions.

Numerical analysis of responses relevant to these decisions

134. We asked 'to what extent do you agree with our proposal to change programme targeting from an area-based approach to one based on identifying the highest priority schools and colleges?'

135. There were 337 responses to this question. Of these:

- 79.2 per cent agreed (strongly agreed or agreed) with our proposed approach

- 14.2 per cent disagreed (strongly disagreed or tended to disagree) with our proposed approach

- 6.5 per cent were neutral (did not know or preferred not to say).

136. Further comments were provided by 286 respondents with many qualifying their responses to the question. Our response focuses on the qualitative analysis and not solely on the simple numerical analysis set out above.

137. We also considered relevant responses to other questions, including 'to what extent do you agree with the proposed approach to funding and targeting Uni Connect during academic year 2021-22?'

Thematic analysis of responses relevant to these decisions and our response

Considering moving from an area-based to a school-based targeting model

138. Most respondents – 79 per cent – agreed with our proposal to change programme targeting from an area-based approach to one based on identifying the highest priority schools and colleges. Of those who provided further comments just under half expressed a preference for an approach based on priority schools and colleges, with around 14 per cent indicating that it would encourage a more effective and fair method of targeting.

139. Other perceived benefits from the change in approach indicated:

- partnerships would be able to work more efficiently

- increased engagement in the programme from schools and colleges

- a reduction in the stigma surrounding students accessing the programme

- a sensible way of using limited resources.

140. Around 5 per cent of those who commented indicated a preference for an area-based approach to targeting, with some also noting that they believe the current targeting approach works well. A similar number felt that it would be more effective to target individual learners or groups. A couple of responses suggested a blended approach through which partnerships would have the flexibility to adopt schools-based targeting or continue with the area-based approach depending on local context.

141. Around a quarter of those who provided additional comments were concerned that some students and specific groups will miss out on support from the programme due to not attending target schools and colleges. For example, there was concern that some groups (such as disabled students or some black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) groups) are likely to be dispersed across many schools and colleges and might be more effectively engaged through non-school routes, such as through community groups. Some respondents also expressed concern that learners from underrepresented groups or with protected characteristics who attend schools with generally high participation levels might miss out on support that could be beneficial to them, as the programme might not prioritise their schools. Some respondents wanted a stronger focus and consideration on some smaller underrepresented groups within targeted outreach and argued that a move to priority school and college targeting would affect engagement with these groups. A small number of responses indicated that younger learners should be engaged as part of the programme.

142. Around 8 per cent of those who commented raised concerns about schools in rural and coastal areas potentially not being eligible for support, or losing existing support, from Uni Connect partnerships. A small number of respondents raised similar concerns that the selection process might miss smaller schools and colleges or schools in cities. A few respondents focused on the need for alternative and specialist schools and colleges to be included in the targeting criteria.

143. Around 14 per cent of respondents commented on the data that the OfS might use to inform its approach. Within this a variety of views were shared:

- Some respondents highlighted that an approach that used POLAR might exclude many schools, despite the disadvantages experienced by some of their students.

- Some other respondents suggested that the OfS should draw on area-based measures of participation, such as TUNDRA and POLAR in developing its approach.

- A small number of respondents suggested the method should use pupil premium and free schools meals data.

- It was also noted that any data that was used should be up-to-date and shared with partnerships.

144. Around 8 per cent of respondents were concerned about the changes damaging existing relationships. A similar number noted that exit strategies would need to be put in place for the schools that will no longer be engaged. A small proportion of these respondents also expressed concerns about losing the level of support they currently receive from the programme. A small number of respondents noted the risk that loss of access to Uni Connect would be especially damaging for schools or colleges that do not have prior relationships with individual higher education providers outside their Uni Connect partnerships.

145. Other respondents expressed a concern that high priority schools could be targeted by several different higher education providers, in addition to being targeted by Uni Connect, leading to outreach opportunities being concentrated on a smaller number of schools.

146. Around a quarter of respondents noted that more information on the methodology that would be used to identify priority schools and colleges would be required to fully inform their comments. Some respondents wanted guidance on which underrepresented groups would be considered a priority.

147. Around 10 per cent of respondents, when considering our question about whether they had found any aspects of the proposals unclear, highlighted a lack of clarity around which schools will be funded and the level of funding available. Around 5 per cent, in response to the same question, highlighted that they found the proposals for changes to targeted outreach unclear.

148. A small number of respondents were worried that the new proposals may create some duplication in outreach, with suggestions that greater alignment is required with access and participation plans and institutional targeting.

149. The need to consider the impact of the coronavirus pandemic was raised by several respondents, with concerns around the timing of new proposal being the most common.

Our response

150. We are pleased that there was broad support for our proposed changes to targeted outreach. Targeted outreach is intended to help recipients make well-informed decisions about their future education, thereby reducing gaps in higher education participation for the least represented groups.

151. In shaping our proposals, we drew on our experience of phases one and two of the programme. In these phases, partnerships have delivered sustained and progressive targeted outreach within local areas, where higher education participation is lower than might be expected given the GCSE results of the young people who live there. Evidence from the programme evaluation has strongly supported the importance of outreach being delivered in a sustained and progressive way.[18] This usually means providing tailored multi-intervention approaches with a learner through their educational journey. Engagement of this kind requires

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[18] See 'NCOP: end of phase one report for the national formative and impact evaluations', available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/ncop-end-of-phase-one-evaluation-report/.

considerable investment and therefore it is essential that targeted outreach is directed to where it can have the most impact to make best use of public investment in the programme.

152.   Our current targeting approach draws on analysis undertaken in 2016 when the programme was set up. Therefore, if we were to continue to use an area-based targeting approach we would need to update the original analysis, which would likely lead to changes in the areas to be targeted. Consequently, we consider it timely to explore alternative options. Recognising that it will take time to transition to any new targeting approach, we are delaying introducing changes until 2022-23 to better support partnerships, schools and colleges to manage this transition.

153.   Programme targeting in phases one and two has been on an area-basis. This worked well in facilitating engagement with some learners, and some schools and colleges, who might not traditionally have been involved with outreach initiatives. The programme evaluation for phase one highlighted that establishing effective working relationships with the schools and colleges attended by Uni Connect target learners is integral to the success of the programme.

154.   Several respondents from Uni Connect partnerships told us through the consultation that the time and cost of delivering outreach is more strongly associated with the number of schools they engage with, rather than the number of learners. However, the uneven distribution of target learners across these institutions in an area-based approach to targeting means that some partnerships need to work across many more schools and colleges than others to reach the same number of programme target learners. This dilutes the programme offer to some schools and colleges in some areas and may also result in a higher proportion of non-target learners receiving programme activities.

155.   We therefore consider that moving to a schools-based targeting approach, rather than an area-based one, would lead to:

- a better match between programme resources and activity across the Uni Connect partnerships

- a greater depth of engagement with targeted schools and colleges, concentrating resources to help facilitate their successful participation in the programme

- a greater share of programme outreach activity taking place with target learners, as opposed to non-target learners.

156.   We were pleased that almost 80 per cent of respondents indicated that they agreed with our proposal to change our approach to directing targeted outreach from an area-based approach to one based on identifying target schools and colleges. However, some respondents to this first stage consultation suggested that they could not comprehensively comment on changes to targeted outreach without further information on how any new targeting methodology might operate in practice. We have therefore decided to defer a decision on the approach we will take to directing targeted outreach. We intend to consult in 2021-22 on whether we maintain an area-based approach or move to a new schools-based approach to identify the learners we intend to direct activity towards through the programme from 2022-23 onwards. Stakeholders and interested parties will have an opportunity to submit responses to the proposals set out in a further second stage consultation in due course, and we will take

those responses into account before finalising any decisions about the specifics of our approach to targeted outreach from 2022-23 onwards.

157.   We also note the concerns expressed by some respondents about the potential risk of changes to programme targeting on schools in rural and coastal areas, in cities, or for smaller schools. We do not consider that moving to an approach that identifies the highest priority schools presents a greater inherent risk to engaging learners in rural, coastal, urban or smaller schools than an area-based approach. As we progress with our development work to support a second stage consultation, we will conduct further analysis that will allow us to assess the impact of our changes in more detail. Similarly, we will consider the comments raised regarding different metrics, including POLAR, TUNDRA, pupil premium and free school meals, as well as comments relating to different school contexts, as we move towards the next stage of consultation.

158.   Some respondents to the consultation argued that we should target younger learners, for example in Years 7 and 8 or in primary schools. While we recognise the value of early engagement with young people, the targeted outreach delivered through Uni Connect needs to be sustained, progressive and focused on making sure that young people can make well-informed decisions about their post-16 and post-18 educational pathways. Subject to funding consultations, it is our intention to fund the programme through to 2024-25; it therefore has both limited time and resources and for this and reasons of proportionality, we have decided to retain its focus on Years 9 through to 13, regardless of the approach we take to directing targeted outreach.

159.   We acknowledge that area-based or school-based targeting approaches might not be the most appropriate approach to reach some groups of underrepresented students or students with protected characteristics, including those from smaller underrepresented groups. We recognise that engagement with these groups might be more appropriately tackled across the whole local partnership area than within small geographies or at school or college level. Our proposals for strategic outreach (outlined above) are intended to help to address local IAG and outreach gaps for smaller underrepresented groups. Through such an approach the partnerships will assess the extent of these gaps and work with stakeholders to consider where they can add most value by working collaboratively, taking into account local context and available resources.

160.   We recognise that any changes to programme targeting could result in some learners no longer being in scope for targeted outreach. We have therefore put in place proposals (see 'outreach with existing Uni Connect learners' in paragraph 176) that will provide sustained and progressive outreach to learners who have already begun their Uni Connect journey.

161.   We discuss alignment with provider access and participation activity in paragraphs 62 to 68.

162.   We discuss how the pandemic has shaped our thinking around the programme in paragraphs 56 to 61.

Other comments relating to school engagement

163.   A small number of respondents highlighted the challenges and barriers faced by schools and colleges in engaging with available outreach and the need to ensure that burden on

schools is reduced. Several of these respondents felt that the role of Uni Connect staff based in schools as part of the current programme was crucial to enabling successful engagement with the programme and raised concerns about whether this would continue under the new proposals. Some of these respondents also commented on the need for a flexible approach to the programme to support the specific needs of individual schools and colleges.

164. A small number of comments indicated that communication could be stronger and suggested that the OfS should work with the Department of Education to support the communication with schools and partners, particularly around engaging senior leadership teams and with schools in academy chains. This would also help to increase buy-in for the programme from schools and colleges and help the programme succeed.

165. A few respondents commented on the burden that data collection puts on schools and colleges, urging the OfS to discuss this with the Department for Education and encourage sharing of data, which would aid tracking and evaluation. Comments noted that there should be clear data sharing agreements in place.

Our response

166. We acknowledge that schools and colleges can face challenges engaging with the programme and note the positive approaches many partnerships have developed to support them to do so. We will consider this further as we proceed to a second consultation on our approach to targeted outreach.

167. With respect to data, the OfS is working closely with the Department for Education across a range of areas including Uni Connect and we are constantly reviewing what we do support tracking and evaluation. Through the programme we require partnerships to engage with a tracking service which enables the longitudinal tracking of learners engaged in the programme. Tracking these learners and their post-18 decisions is essential for programme monitoring and evaluation.

Targeted outreach within post-16 education

Our response

168. When we initially framed our proposals for consultation, we outlined plans to direct targeted outreach to learners in target schools and colleges and to consult on a methodology for identifying these schools and colleges nationally.

169. Through the consultation, respondents highlighted the benefits of more local flexibility in programme targeting to avoid duplication and enable partnerships to consider local context. Additionally, we have gained further insight into the implications of our initial proposals as we have developed our approach.

170. Targeted outreach is intended to be sustained and progressive and to follow learners through their educational journey from Year 9 through to Year 13. It is critical that partnerships can continue to target learners (whether identified through an area-based or a school-based approach) who might change their school or colleges for their post-16 education. There is a risk that a nationally identified set of colleges, particularly one using historic data, might not align with the destinations of the learners in receipt of Uni Connect targeted outreach.

171.   Similarly, with respect to adult learners there are considerable challenges with identifying priority colleges using national data. The spectrum and mode of qualifications vary significantly for adult learners and they are also likely to have very different motivations for study. This makes it difficult to draw inferences from the data about the likely benefits of targeted outreach for adults within these institutions.

172.   Whether we adopt an area-based or a school-based approach to targeted outreach from 2022-23, we do not propose to take a national approach to identifying which further education colleges should be included in targeted outreach activity.

173.   Uni Connect partnerships will instead use local intelligence, including information from their tracker, to identify post-16 destinations for target learners. They will determine where to focus their targeted outreach for young learners in Years 12 and 13, taking account of local context, available resources and the need to ensure sustained and progressive engagement for learners engaged in targeted outreach. For adult learners they will consider local context, including local skills needs, in determining their priorities.

174.   We intend to provide guidance to partnerships to help inform their approach to prioritising which post-16 destinations to engage with. This will include giving due consideration to avoiding duplication with outreach delivered by individual universities or colleges or through third parties.

175.   As outlined in the consultation, given the different aspirations of learners in school sixth forms compared with colleges, we anticipate an increased focus on learners in Years 12 and 13 in further education colleges.

Outreach with existing Uni Connect learners

What we proposed in the consultation and our decisions

176.   In the consultation document we proposed the following:

> **Original proposal 5: Engaging learners who have already been involved in the programme**
>
> Uni Connect hubs will facilitate access to sustained and progressive outreach to support learners who meet all the following criteria:
>
> - they live or have lived in the existing Uni Connect target areas
>
> - they have already received targeted outreach through phase one or two of the programme
>
> - they would benefit from ongoing engagement with the programme
>
> - they are unlikely to receive higher education outreach appropriate to their needs without this intervention.

Decision taken

> **Our decisions 8: Outreach with existing Uni Connect learners**
>
> From 2022-23 partnerships will deliver sustained and progressive outreach to support learners who were targeted by the programme in phases one and two but are not in scope for targeted outreach in phase three. Within such an approach:
>
> a) Partnerships will identify which schools and colleges to engage for this support based on the number of young people within the institution who have been in receipt of Uni Connect targeted outreach in phases one and two.
>
> b) Partnerships will then identify target learners within these schools and colleges who:
>
> (i)   live or have lived in the Uni Connect phase one and phase two target areas, and
>
> (ii)   are in a year group that was eligible for Uni Connect targeted outreach in phase one or two (Year 10 through Year 13 in 2022-23, Year 11 through Year 13 in 2023-24).

177.   There are a number of changes between original proposal 5 and our decisions. These are that:

a. As we are no longer expecting to change our approach to targeted outreach until 2022-23 we clarify that these arrangements for outreach with existing learners will follow a similar timeline.

b. We have revised how we expect partnerships to target these learners. More information on our reasons for this are given in paragraphs 202 - 208 below.

178. We set out below what we heard from respondents to the consultation and our response, including, where applicable, how this influenced our decisions.

Numerical analysis of responses relevant to these decisions

179. We asked 'to what extent do you agree with our proposal that Uni Connect partnerships will facilitate access to programmes of outreach for target learners who have already been involved in the programme and would benefit from ongoing engagement?'

180. There were 338 responses to this question. Of these:

- 84.3 per cent agreed (strongly agreed or agreed) with our proposed approach

- 8.9 per cent disagreed (strongly disagreed or tended to disagree) with our proposed approach

- 6.8 per cent were neutral (did not know or preferred not to say).

181. Further comments were provided by 261 respondents with many qualifying their responses to the question. Our response focuses on the qualitative analysis and not solely on the simple numerical analysis set out above.

Thematic analysis of responses relevant to these decisions and our response

Benefits of ongoing engagement with learners previously targeted by the programme

182. Of all respondents, 84 per cent agreed with the proposal to provide access to outreach for target learners who have already been involved in the programme. Most respondents who provided further comments were broadly supported this proposal, citing the need to provide continuity for students and the benefits of multiple sustained interventions. Many respondents acknowledged the evidence which indicates that multiple sustained interventions are the most impactful in improving access to higher education. Others expressed similar sentiments, citing the benefits of a progressive, sustained programme of outreach.

183. A small number of respondents supported the proposal due to the role that ongoing engagement plays in 'filling gaps' for learners that would not be supported otherwise. These respondents noted that this provision may not be met by other local outreach provision, and that particularly for students progressing to further education, IAG may not always be available.

184. Around a third of those who provided comments cited the importance of providing continuity and familiarity for learners who have already been involved in Uni Connect programmes. This includes keeping learners engaged, maintaining relationships that have been built over time and providing continuous support. Several of these respondents noted that abandoning these positive relationships with learners would mean risking the impact of activities that learners had engaged in so far and could waste the investment already made in the programme.

185.   Alongside protecting existing investment, a few respondents noted the potential reputational damage that could be caused by stopping ongoing engagement. These respondents also noted that continuing this work would support the ongoing evaluation of Uni Connect.

186.   A few respondents cited the pandemic as a reason for continuing work with learners who have already engaged with Uni Connect. They also thought that the programme could support learners who have faced disruption during the pandemic. However, a few of these respondents noted that the pandemic could act as a potential barrier to continued engagement with schools due to the additional pressures caused by school closures.

187.   However, several respondents raised concerns about the impact of this approach on other learners, noting that continuing this work should not be at the expense of learners who have not already engaged.

188.   A small number of respondents, when asked if anything was unclear about our proposals, said that more clarity was needed on what would happen with phase two learners at the end of the current programme and the support mechanisms for learners who were previously engaged with Uni Connect. Respondents were not always clear about how partnerships would continue to work with target learners over the 2021-22 period and beyond.

Our response

189.   We are pleased that there was broad support for our proposed approach. Our proposals for outreach activity with existing Uni Connect learners aim to help recipients make well-informed decisions about their future education thereby reducing gaps in higher education participation for the least represented groups.

190.   We recognise the value of sustained and progressive approaches to higher education outreach. Any changes to programme targeting carry the risk that some individuals currently in scope for the programme will cease to be eligible. Our proposals for outreach with existing Uni Connect learners seek to provide routes through which we can continue to engage with learners who have already begun their Uni Connect journey, but who may not be in scope for engagement when our approach to targeted outreach changes in 2022-23.

191.   Ongoing engagement with existing Uni Connect learners met with broad support, but some respondents expressed concerns about how this might work in practice. This has led to some changes in our approach. We outline more details of this feedback and our proposed response below.

Practical challenges associated with providing outreach for existing Uni Connect learners

192.   The most frequently cited challenges were about funding and staff resource. Around 10 per cent of those who provided comments raised concerns about levels of funding and the feasibility of continuing to work with learners who have already engaged in the programme. Just over 5 per cent raised concerns about staff resource noting that continuing activity for previously engaged learners would only be possible if the programme is sufficiently resourced, particularly for staff in schools. Respondents noted that schools are under a great deal of time pressure and having staff placed in schools or dedicated staff resource to outreach activity is a significant help in organising outreach.

193. Several participants raised concerns about how continuing work with existing Uni Connect learners would affect relationships with schools. Comments on this topic demonstrated a diverse range of opinions between respondents. Some respondents felt that continuing this work would be vital to maintaining good relationships with schools, but others felt that it may be difficult to secure buy-in from the school if a partnership can only work with learners who have already engaged.

194. Several respondents from Uni Connect partnerships suggested that the time and cost of delivering outreach is more strongly associated with the number of schools they engage with, rather than the number of learners. They noted that OfS should not assume there would be economies of scale if partnerships worked with fewer learners in a school. Similarly, several respondents raised concerns about staff placed in schools and the economic feasibility of this model if partnerships are working with fewer learners over time.

195. A small number of respondents suggested that there should be a tiered approach to delivery with these learners where any newly targeted schools have access to the full programme, while original Uni Connect schools have access to a reduced offer.

196. One respondent suggested that there should be flexibility in how much partnerships are expected to prioritise continued engagement based on local context. Another respondent suggested that the number of existing learners to support should be factored into funding decisions. Several respondents indicated that they would welcome further guidance from OfS on how funding should be used to support these learners and when engagement should be stopped.

197. Around 5 per cent of respondents highlighted the challenges and possible negative impact of the proposals on learners currently engaged in the programme. They particularly highlighted the practical challenges of engaging with existing Uni Connect learners and raised concerns over learners missing out on provision. A similar number of respondents raised concerns about the impact of this approach on other learners, noting that continuing this work should not be at the expense of learners who have not already engaged.

198. A small number of respondents raised concerns about the tracking of learners including concerns about General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the ability to maintain relationships with learners who have already engaged. One respondent suggested that learner-level targeting should be more evidence-based, monitoring should be systematised and that tracking data should be used to more closely target learners who could potentially benefit the most from outreach. Respondents also raised issues around transition to Level 3 study. A few respondents noted the difficulty of tracking learners from Year 11 to Level 3 study when learners move to a different college or sixth form, and the added difficulty this would create if working with learners outside target schools and colleges.

199. Several respondents noted the importance of collaboration and information sharing between partnerships and university partners so that learners who were previously eligible for Uni Connect activity can be directed to relevant programmes delivered by a university partner.

200. Several respondents asked for more clarity over the eligibility criteria for learners who have already engaged in the programme.

201.   Several respondents thought the phase two outreach hubs model is well-placed to provide ongoing support for these learners. Regarding the benefits of the hub model, a few respondents expressed the view that hubs are a 'trusted' and knowledgeable source, which are well-placed to facilitate access activity.

Our response

202.   We recognise that there will be costs associated with continued engagement with existing Uni Connect learners. We will consult later in 2021-22 on our proposed methodology for distributing the funding allocated to the programme for 2022-23 through to 2024-25. We anticipate that this will include how funding is distributed to support outreach with existing Uni Connect learners. We expect the funding allocated to outreach with existing learners will decrease over time as the number of learners eligible for this engagement reduces.

203.   We acknowledge that while there was broad support for our proposals there was concern that targeting individuals on the grounds of learners' past engagement with the programme, as set out in the original proposal, could be difficult and may result in partnerships targeting very small cohorts of learners. Potential risks to school engagement and the delivery of approaches that have been shown to be effective could arise as a result. We also recognise the challenges identified around identifying learners with past engagement in the programme should they change school or college for post-16 education.

204.   We have therefore revised our proposed approach to concentrate activity into schools and colleges where there is a large enough cohort of eligible learners to support meaningful and cost-effective engagement. We have also removed the expectation that learners have past engagement with the programme. Instead, we place the focus on whether they live in an area targeted previously and are in the appropriate year group. This will aid targeting even in the event of learners moving to a new school or college for post-16 education.

205.   In our revised approach, the partnerships will determine which schools and colleges to prioritise for outreach with existing learners considering the available resource and local factors, including information from their tracker and past engagement. This flexibility is intended to support partnerships match their ambitions to available resources and the models of engagement within schools and colleges that they have found to be effective. Partnership decisions about prioritisation will be monitored by the OfS.

206.   Depending on available resources it may not be possible for partnerships to engage with all the schools and colleges that they worked with in phases one and two of the programme. However, we consider this a proportionate approach that concentrates activity where school and college support and economies of scale can be achieved.

207.   It was suggested that we adopt a tiered approach to school engagement. However, engagement with schools and colleges to deliver outreach with existing learners would not necessarily be any less intensive and we would not expect the quality of provision to reduce. Outreach to existing learners should continue to be sustained and progressive. It should aim to help recipients make well-informed decisions about their future education and to reduce gaps in higher education participation for the least represented groups.

208.   We also heard suggestions that we use the phase two 'hub' model to support engagement with existing Uni Connect learners. Some partnerships have a separate 'hub' within their

structures, but this is not the case for all partnerships, so it may not necessarily be appropriate in all cases. We do not have a view on how partnerships might choose to structure their activity to meet our expectations around engagement with existing learners.

An increased focus on further education colleges and adult learners

What we proposed in the consultation and our decisions

209.   In the consultation document we proposed the following:

Original proposal 7: (quoted in part)

Phase three of the Uni Connect programme will commence in academic year 2021-22 with a stronger focus on progression from non-traditional routes into and through higher education, including through further education and among mature learners.

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210.   The remaining parts of original proposal 7 are discussed in the 'targeted outreach' and 'distribution of programme funding' sections of this document.

211.   We also proposed that:

Original proposal 4: Work across different age groups and types of provider (quoted in part)

We want to see a greater focus on further education colleges in the programme – in partnership governance, as outreach delivery partners and through the delivery of outreach to learners in the highest priority colleges.

Uni Connect hubs will provide programmes of sustained and progressive outreach for mature learners studying at Level 3 in the highest priority colleges.

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212.   The remaining parts of original proposal 4 are discussed in the 'targeted outreach' section of this document.

Decision taken

Our decisions 9: An increased focus on further education colleges and adult learners

We will strengthen our expectations for the involvement of further education colleges in the programme. Through this we expect to see an increase in:

a. the involvement of further education colleges in Uni Connect partnership governance

b. the proportion of programme IAG and outreach directed towards learners in further education colleges

c. the proportion of programme IAG and outreach that relates to the routes through higher education that are particularly enabled by further education colleges.

From 2022-23, with respect to targeted outreach with adult learners:

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a. We will expand the eligibility for targeted outreach to include all learners aged 19 or above studying at a further education college that the partnership has prioritised for its targeted outreach work with younger learners.

b. Partnerships will be able to prioritise a further education college for targeted outreach activity where there are high proportions of adults that could benefit from engagement with the programme but where it might not be identified in terms of young learner progression.

c. We intend to set minimum expectations for the partnerships about the delivery of targeted outreach with adult learners.

For our decisions on signposting and strategic outreach with adult learners see the respective sections above.

213.   There are a number of changes between our original proposals and our decisions. These are that:

a. We are no longer limiting eligibility for targeted outreach to adult learners studying at Level 3. This will be expanded to include all learners aged 19 or above studying at a college that either the partnership has prioritised for targeted or strategic outreach. More information on our reasons for this are given in paragraph 254 below.

b. We clarify that we will set minimum expectations for targeted outreach with adult learners from 2022-23.

214.   We set out below what we heard from respondents to the consultation and our response, including, where applicable, how this influenced our decisions.

Numerical analysis of responses relevant to these decisions

215.   We asked 'to what extent do you agree with our proposals to strengthen the focus on further education colleges within the programme?'

216.   There were 337 responses to this question. Of these:

- 82.5 per cent agreed (strongly agreed or tended to agree) with our proposed approach

- 11.9 per cent disagreed (strongly disagreed or tended to disagree) with our proposed approach

- 5.6 per cent were neutral (did not know or preferred not to say).

217.   Further comments were provided by 282 respondents with many qualifying their responses to the question. Our response focuses on the qualitative analysis and not solely on the simple numerical analysis set out above.

218.   We also asked 'do you have any comments about what the OfS should consider in developing its advice to partnerships around engaging with mature learners studying at Level 3?' This question was completed by 267 respondents who provided further comments.

Thematic analysis of responses relevant to these decisions and our response

Benefits and challenges of more engagement with further education colleges and their students

219.   Over 82 per cent of respondents agreed with strengthening the focus on further education colleges within the programme. Around a quarter of respondents said this proposal offers recognition that there were very different learner journeys beyond the traditional entrance route into higher education and that it offers opportunities to work with learners who are interested in vocational or technical higher education. A few of these respondents also noted that this would align with the government's emphasis on reforming and improving technical education at Level 3 and beyond.

220.   We heard from many respondents that further education colleges were seen as an important next step for learners, whether this was leading them to higher education or into a career, and that this had been missing from the programme in the earlier phases. Just under 20 per cent of respondents highlighted that strengthening relationships with further education colleges would provide a good opportunity to work with a greater number of adult learners. Over a quarter of respondents indicated that this proposal offered an opportunity to engage with learners at a critical point in their lives when they were deciding their next steps, with many highlighting the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

221.   Around a quarter of respondents commented on the need for learners at further education colleges to be provided with good impartial IAG, as well as support, to enable them to make the best decisions for them as individuals. The advice should include opportunities in higher education (academic and technical) but also broader career prospects, whether for a first career or for a learner who would like to re-train. Additionally, many respondents advocated a differential and bespoke programme of outreach activities for learners in further education colleges, which recognises that their requirements and needs differ from learners based in schools and sixth form colleges.

222.   A lot of respondents were in favour of strengthening the focus on learners in further education colleges, but many also commented on how these learners should be targeted. Around 20 per cent of respondents requested greater flexibility to work with a more diverse range of learners in further education colleges, including targeting based on local and regional priorities. Several respondents found the area-based targeting model (for targeted outreach) too restrictive, particularly when involving learners in further education colleges where these numbers were often small and dispersed across providers.

223.   Around 20 per cent of respondents commented that this proposal would strengthen existing positive relationships and embed their position at the core of partnerships, including at a governance level. Some respondents explained that involving further education colleges from the beginning of the programme had been critical to their strategic approach and success.

224.   Around 5 per cent of respondents commented on the need for either more funding or specifically targeted funding to engage with further education colleges, recognising that many colleges had fewer resources to support learners.

225.   However, around 20 per cent of those who commented challenged the proposals and argued that the programme should retain its focus on learners in sixth form colleges. Some said that this might help address some regional disparities, particularly in areas of the country where sixth form colleges might remain the only feasible option for learners post-16. Others said that greater engagement with further education colleges should not be to the detriment of work with schools and other colleges. A small number of respondents raised concerns about how funding would be distributed and that if funding to further education colleges was increased it would dilute the funding that is currently available for school engagement.

226.   Around 10 per cent of respondents suggested that there was a tension in the dual role that further education colleges had in the programme. They are recipients and deliverers of outreach support and activity since many offer their own higher education programmes. Some respondents commented that strengthening the role of further education colleges was a positive opportunity to promote higher education provision in colleges. Other respondents commented that colleges might be focused on recruiting more learners onto their own provision through the programme and may not provide impartial advice on the range of higher education provision available to learners. Additionally, it was noted that competition between schools and further education colleges for post-16 learners could be exacerbated.

227.   A few respondents reflected on the challenges that their organisations had in either engaging directly with further education colleges or with learners based in these colleges. These challenges varied from finding it difficult to contact senior leaders at colleges, the college not having support staff in place who might support/be supported by the programme, and encountering problems identifying the small pockets of students who might have been targeted in the earlier phases of the programme.

228.   To help mitigate the challenge of engaging some further education colleges in the programme, a few respondents suggested that endorsement from the Department for Education, Association of Colleges or the OfS might provide some useful encouragement.

Our response

229.   We welcome the high levels of support we received for an increased focus on further education colleges within phase three of the programme. Our planned approach builds on our recognition of the greater role the programme can play in supporting different routes through and into higher education, including vocational or technical higher education, aligning with wider technical education reforms and skills agendas.

230.   Further education colleges also play an important role in engaging with adult learners. Their increased involvement in phase three of the programme will enable Uni Connect partnerships to reach a broader range of adult learners to provide impartial IAG and outreach at critical points, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

231.   To strengthen the role of further education colleges in phase three of the programme, Uni Connect partnerships will be expected to include representation from them on their governing board and associated structures. This will ensure they have an equitable voice in decision-making and can contribute to the strategic direction of the partnership. Representation of this sort will give colleges a stronger voice in each partnership and help the partnerships to improve their understanding of what learners in colleges need, identifying gaps in provision and developing relevant approaches to address those gaps.

232.   We recognise the concerns expressed by some respondents about the dual role of further education colleges as both recipients and deliverers of outreach and the tensions that this can play in ensuring impartiality. We also acknowledge the concerns raised by a small number of respondents about increased competition between further education colleges and schools for post-16 learners. To mitigate this, the governing boards of the Uni Connect partnerships should ensure that all partners and organisations involved in the programme (both those delivering and recipients), sign up to the principles of impartiality and collaboration. Robust governance, transparent decision-making and guidance for all partners and members should enable a clear line to be drawn between Uni Connect activity and the individual recruitment activities of further education colleges and other higher education providers.

233.   It was noted in some responses from Uni Connect partnerships that involving further education colleges from the beginning of the programme had been critical to their strategic approach and success. To maximise these successes and lessons learned, we will encourage the sharing of effective practice between the network of Uni Connect partnerships. We will also provide further insights on effective programme governance and collaboration from the programme evaluation as it emerges.

234.   With broad support from the consultation responses, we expect Uni Connect partnerships to increase the proportion of programme IAG and outreach directed towards learners in further education colleges.

235.   We have considered the comments of some respondents who were in favour of retaining the focus on learners in sixth form colleges and those who were concerned that an increased focus on further education colleges would be to the detriment of work with schools and other colleges, diluting the funding that is currently available for that activity. However, we think that increasing programme activity towards learners in further education is desirable and necessary. Evidence from the Uni Connect baseline learner survey highlights that Year 12 to 13 learners studying at further education colleges are more than twice as likely to aspire to full-time work rather than higher-level study compared with their peers in sixth form colleges. Further education colleges will also have larger populations of adult learners who Uni Connect partnerships will want to engage with in phase three, which will be discussed in more detail later in this section. We expect activity with further educations colleges to increase in phase three, but sixth form colleges and schools will still receive targeted outreach through the programme. Where sixth form colleges remain the only feasible option for learners post-16 in certain localities, they will be prioritised for engagement.

236.   A number of challenges were raised regarding the engagement of further education colleges and their students, including the limited resources and staff time they have to support programme activity as well as their strategic commitment to the programme. Our expectation to strengthen the role of further education colleges on the governance structures of Uni Connect partnerships, will help to secure the strategic commitment required to enable increased engagement in phase three. Our expectations for an increased proportion of Uni Connect activity to be delivered in further education colleges will also necessitate more funding and resources to be allocated to the colleges involved, to enable and support staff and learners to engage with the programme.

237.	A number of comments were made in response to this question regarding the targeting of learners in further education colleges. The targeting of post-16 learners is discussed in more detail in the previous section above on targeted outreach (paragraphs 168 – 175).

238.	There was broad support for the Uni Connect programme to increase the focus of activity on supporting different learner journeys through further and higher education, including vocational and technical higher education. To support this, we expect to see an increase in the proportion of programme IAG and outreach that relates to the routes through higher education that are particularly enabled by further education colleges.

239.	We heard from respondents that tailored programmes of outreach activities for learners in further education colleges are needed, recognising that they are likely to have different requirements and needs to learners based in schools and sixth form colleges. This would include high-quality impartial IAG and support, covering a broad range of opportunities in higher education (academic and technical) and also career pathways. We support this approach and will expect Uni Connect partnerships to work with local stakeholders, drawing on their knowledge and insights of local skills needs to develop and deliver relevant programmes of activity with the further education colleges in their regions. We will encourage Uni Connect partnerships to share any relevant research and effective approaches for successfully engaging further education learners as well as supporting different learner pathways. We will also provide further insights and case studies where possible from the programme evaluation as findings emerge.

Benefits and challenges of an increased focus on adult learners

240.	Around 15 per cent of respondents raised the importance of working more closely with adult learners, particularly in light of the pandemic, and highlighted the positive contribution further education colleges could make to engaging this group. Reasons for supporting the inclusion of adult learners included:

- recognition of the government's push to upskill adult learners and their new strategy that has a focus on lifelong learning

- meeting responsibilities in terms of equality and diversity to ensure an inclusive approach to the programme.

241.	A small number of responses in support of the proposal were also from respondents who identified as adult learners themselves and felt that this kind of support would have been helpful to them.

242.	Almost a third of respondents felt it was important that the OfS recognise the heterogeneous nature of 'adult learners' as a group, including considering intersectionality. Around a quarter of respondents specifically highlighted the importance of considering the specific barriers adult learners face and the pathways they take, as well as the additional support that is required by this cohort. Of these respondents, many also suggested that the OfS needs to consider the specialist IAG and signposting, including careers advice, that might be needed by adult learners.

243.	Around 10 per cent of respondents highlighted that activity to engage adult learners should be evidence-based and informed by best practice. A small number of respondents suggested

engaging with adult learners to inform the development of programme guidance and outreach activity that would best suit their needs. Just over 10 per cent of respondents commented on the need to consider the type of collaborative approaches required to engage adult learners. A similar number pointed to the need for activity to align with the access and participation work of higher education providers as well as other strategies and stakeholders.

244.   A small number of respondents explicitly stated that Uni Connect should not consider engaging with adult learners. These respondents tended to be from schools or higher education providers which were already engaging with adult learners through their outreach programmes. Reasons for not supporting this proposal included:

- Adult learners would not benefit with engagement from Uni Connect as they already have access to support from other areas, such as the National Careers Service.

- Adult learners would be better served by outreach programmes being delivered by higher education providers or through a separate programme.

245.   Around 5 per cent of respondents suggested that adding adult learners as an additional target group would be detrimental to the impact that the programme has on reducing the gap in access to higher education for younger learners and that this group should remain the programme's priority.

246.   Around 15 per cent of those who commented highlighted the challenge of engaging adult learners in the programme in terms of the additional resource, time, skills, and knowledge that will be required to do so effectively. The amount of funding required to support this group was also noted with some responses flagging the potential negative impact on engagement with younger learners if resource was diverted to engage with adult learners. Similarly, some respondents were concerned that additional expectations on Uni Connect partnerships without corresponding funding increases could reduce its impact.

247.   A couple of responses highlighted how outreach alone will not remove barriers and improve outcomes for adult learners and suggested considering how the approach of Uni Connect will complement other strategies and interventions and not duplicate work already taking place.

248.   Over a third of all respondents commented on the OfS' proposed targeting for adult learners suggesting that this might miss other adults who could benefit from engagement through the programme. Many respondents suggested expanding the definition to consider adult learners on other courses (such as Level 2) as well as those at Level 3 in further education. Several respondents also suggested considering engaging with adult learners outside further education settings. To have the most impact, respondents felt it was important to engage with adult learners before they re-enter education. A small number of respondents also suggested engaging with parents and carers of younger learners as potential adult students.

249.   A small number of respondents suggested considering a national approach to supporting adult learners as an alternative approach, including online resources and support. However, other respondents felt that local context was important to consider when engaging adult learners.

250. With respect to what was effective in engaging adult learners around five per cent of respondents highlighted that flexible approaches to both outreach delivery and programme guidance and expectations of engagement with this group of learners is an important consideration. A small number of respondents highlighted the importance of offering relatable role models and ambassadors when engaging with adult learners.

251. A few respondents questioned how success and impact would be measured for this group as timescales for the progression of adult learners are often different from younger learners.

Our response

252. We recognise and agree with the responses in the consultation that highlight the heterogeneous nature of adult learners as a group and that the specific barriers that they face and the pathways they follow are likely to be different to those of younger learners. Given the diverse nature of this group, we agree there is a need to consider the intersectionality of learners, as highlighted by some respondents. The provision of IAG and outreach for adult learners will therefore need to be more bespoke and will not be easily transferred from the outreach currently being delivered by the Uni Connect partnerships with younger learners.

253. Increasing engagement with adult learners will therefore take additional resources, time, skills and knowledge to deliver effectively. Recognising that the Uni Connect partnerships will need time to develop their approaches to delivering outreach to expanded groups of adult learners, we envisage the 2021-22 academic year as a transition year in terms of adult engagement. We do not intend to set any targets for adult engagement during this year and would encourage partnerships to collaboratively research and develop effective approaches that can be shared across the network. We acknowledge the small number of responses to the consultation that highlighted the difficulties in measuring success and impact for this group, as timescales for the progression of adult learners are often different from younger learners. We will consider these points when developing our approach to any targets or success measures for the 2022-23 academic year.

254. Our consultation proposals for engaging with adult learners were focused on those studying at Level 3 in further education colleges. Many respondents challenged this definition as too narrow and warned that the approach would miss other adult learners that may not already have ambitions to progress to higher education, for example those studying on other courses (such as Level 2) in further education. Several respondents also suggested considering engaging with adult learners outside further education settings, including engagement with parents and carers of younger learners as potential adult learners. We agree that our definition should be more inclusive. Therefore, for phase three of the programme, we will define adult learners as those learners aged 19 or above.

255. For targeted outreach, we expect Uni Connect partnerships to engage with adult learners in further education colleges. However, reflecting on the responses to the consultation we recognise there may also be a local need for outreach provision to be delivered to adult learners in community settings. Where a gap is identified in collaboration with local partners, Uni Connect partnerships can develop approaches to address this gap through their strategic outreach activity.

256. A small number of respondents suggested considering a national approach to supporting adult learners as an alternative approach, including online resources and support. However,

other respondents felt that local context was important to consider when engaging adult learners. Reflecting on the comments, we consider that a local approach to supporting outreach to adult learners through the existing Uni Connect infrastructure will be more effective than a separate, national approach, given regional differences and needs in the employment market. We will encourage greater coordination, collaboration and the sharing of effective practice between partnerships in relation to engaging with adult learners and will provide further guidance on national resources that are available to use (for example, Discover Uni resources for adult students).

257.   For phase three of the Uni Connect programme, we will expect partnerships to further expand their provision of targeted outreach with adult learners aged 19 or above studying in further education colleges. For the 2021-22 academic year, our expectations are that partnerships will engage with adult learners in further education colleges situated in existing Uni Connect target wards. For specific details on the targeting of adult learners from 2022-23, please see section above on 'targeted outreach'. The expansion of provision will need to be proportionate to the level of funding available for the programme each year.

258.   Many respondents recognised the importance of the programme increasing engagement with adult learners. Reasons included the impact of the pandemic on jobs and the need for adult learners to re-skill to fill local employment gaps, as well as the government's new 'Skills for jobs'[19] strategy with a focus on lifelong learning. A small number of respondents also highlighted the need to consider equality and diversity and that by including adult learners, the programme would be more inclusive.

259.   We have carefully considered the comments in opposition to expanding targeted outreach to adult learners through the programme. Concerns raised include the detrimental impact this focus may have on reducing the participation gap with younger learners and the need for this group to remain the programme's priority. Other concerns included the existing provision and support already available for adult learners through the National Careers Service, the potential of overlap and duplication of activity with the access and participation work of higher education providers, as well as other strategies and stakeholders. A further argument was that this group would be better served by a separate programme.

260.   While we will increase the focus on adult learners in phase three of the programme, we do not believe this will detract from the targeted outreach that will continue to be delivered with young people in schools and colleges. Reducing the participation gap will remain a focus for the programme as highlighted in our aims. The infrastructure the Uni Connect partnerships provide in the local area put them in a unique position to work collaboratively with local stakeholders to address the gaps in outreach for adult learners in their region without duplicating existing support and provision. Given the government focus on lifelong learning and the need to support local areas in re-skilling the workforce following the impact of the pandemic, there is a clear need to expand outreach to adult learners and we believe the existing Uni Connect infrastructure is best placed to deliver this.

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[19] See www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-for-jobs-lifelong-learning-for-opportunity-and-growth.

Distribution of programme funding

What we proposed in the consultation and our decisions

261.　In the consultation document we proposed the following:

Original proposal 7: Funding in 2021-22 (quoted in part)

It is proposed that programme funding for academic year 2021-22 will be allocated as outlined in Annex B.

262.　The remaining parts of original proposal 7 are discussed in the 'targeted outreach' and 'an increased focus on further education colleges and adult learners' sections of this document.

Decision taken

Our decisions 10: Distribution of programme funding

Programme funding levels remain subject to consultation, however, subject to that consultation, we intend to distribute the funding that is allocated to the programme for 2021-22 in line with the methodology outlined in Annex B.

We intend to consult during 2021-22 on our proposed methodology for distributing the funding allocated to the programme for 2022-23 through to 2024-25. This will include how funding is distributed to support all the different elements of the programme, including signposting and strategic outreach, targeted outreach and outreach with learners. This consultation will not cover programme funding levels for 2022-23 through to 2024-25.

263.　There are a number of changes between original proposal 7 and our decisions. These are that:

a. We have modified our proposed approach to distributing programme funding between partnerships to ensure that because of the minimum allocation no partnership receives a higher allocation overall for academic year 2021-22 than they did for 2020-21. More information on our reasons for this are given in paragraphs 279 - 281 below.

b. We clarify that we intend to consult on our approach to distributing funding within the programme for 2022-23 through to 2024-25. In the original consultation we outlined our intent to consult on our approach to targeting from 2022-23. This has implications for how the funding allocated to the programme is distributed to partnerships, and we will therefore consult on this as well.

264.　We set out below what we heard from respondents to the consultation and our response, including, where applicable, how this influenced our decisions.

Numerical analysis of responses relevant to these decisions

265.   We asked 'to what extent do you agree with the proposed approach to funding and targeting Uni Connect during academic year 2021-22?'

266.   There were 333 responses to this question. Of these:

- 72.4 per cent agreed (strongly agreed or tended to agree) with our proposed approach

- 10.5 per cent disagreed (strongly disagreed or tended to disagree) with our proposed approach

- 17.1 per cent were neutral (did not know or preferred not to say).

267.   Further comments were provided by 225 respondents with many qualifying their responses to the question. Our response focuses on the qualitative analysis and not solely on the simple numerical analysis set out above.

268.   Where responses to this question concerned programme targeting we have considered them in the 'targeted outreach' section above. Where responses dealt with the overall total of programme funding, the process of determining total programme funding, or the timeliness of funding information we have considered this in the 'overarching programme approach' section above.

Thematic analysis of responses relevant to these decisions and our response

Benefits and challenges relating to our proposed approach to distributing programme funding in 2021-22

269.   Most respondents – 72 per cent – agreed with the proposed approach to funding and targeting in 2021-22. Just under 20 per cent who commented indicated that they supported the policy of using a transition year for 2021-22. Many suggested that this was a sensible approach given the timing and uncertainty of the future funding arrangements and it at least provided some stability. Around a third of respondents highlighted the importance of ensuring continuity of existing provision to enable ongoing delivery of long-term projects.

270.   Around 5 per cent of respondents specifically welcomed the minimum allocation element of the proposed funding approach. They commented that this would give some security to smaller partnerships and would help maintain activity by recognising its static costs. However, a small number of responses indicated concern that the minimum allocation could lead to an inflexible funding model, which would in turn restrict the ability for the programme to direct money more effectively to target those areas most in need. A small number of responses expressed concern that a minimum allocation might lead to larger reductions in the funding to larger partnerships.

271.   A small number of respondents explicitly supported the use of a rural weighting measure within the funding approach.

272.   Just under 8 per cent of respondents indicated that the proposals would benefit from setting out more detail and information on the rationale and considerations that underpin the approach

to funding, particularly how the funding allocations might scale relative to the overall budget. A small number of respondents indicated that they thought there ought to be further consultation and development of the funding model.

273.   Around 3 per cent of respondents indicated that they had not fully understood the approach to funding in 2021-22 as laid out in the consultation, with some specifying that the approach was too complex.

274.   Several responses indicated that they did not support any approach that would lead to a reduction in funding.

Our response

275.   This response is focused on the approach to determining how we will distribute programme funding between the partnerships for academic year 2021-22 and we welcome the broad support shown for our proposals. Discussion of the overall total of programme funding, the process of determining total programme funding, or the timeliness of funding information is covered by the 'overarching programme approach' section above. Programme funding as a whole remains subject to consultation.

276.   We note that a very small number of respondents suggested that there was some lack of clarity around the rationale for our suggested funding methodology for 2021-22. However, we think that the rationale was clearly set out and most respondents were able to fully engage with our proposals. For the avoidance of doubt, we have sought to further clarify our approach and its rationale below.

277.   There are two elements of our proposed funding methodology for 2021-22 which, for continuity during what we consider to be a transitional year, draw on our phase two approach to the programme. The first of these is the targeted outreach methodology, which in phase two directed funding to support targeted outreach activity. During the transition year, we intend to use this methodology (with some modifications, as outlined below) to distribute funding to support targeted outreach activity.

278.   The second element of our proposed funding methodology draws on the method we used to allocate funding for what in phase two was referred to as outreach hubs. In phase two, outreach hub funding supported activity to help schools and colleges find out about the outreach activity available in their area. It also supported schools and colleges in areas of low participation to access higher education outreach, and provided a platform for other local collaborative activity. We will build on this activity as we move into phase three through our proposals for signposting and strategic outreach. During the transition year, we intend to use the phase two outreach hubs methodology (with some modifications, as outlined below) to distribute funding to support partnership core infrastructure, signposting, and strategic outreach activity.

279.   We outlined in the consultation our intention to introduce a minimum allocation into the funding methodology for 2021-22. We wanted to ensure that smaller partnerships remained viable in the event of potential overall programme budget reductions. There were a range of views from respondents, with a few specifically welcoming this proposal and others concerned that this could disproportionately impact larger partnerships or would inhibit directing funding to target the areas most in need.

280.   The benefits of protecting smaller partnerships and ensuring their viability during the transition year outweigh any risks that might arise from applying a minimum allocation. This will enable all partnerships to support a core infrastructure while reshaping their approach to adapt to our phase three expectations.

281.   Although, we want to protect smaller partnerships in the event of overall programme reductions, we do not consider that increasing their allocation while other partnerships face reductions would be appropriate or proportionate. Our proposals, as set out in the consultation document, might have resulted in some partnerships receiving a funding increase (compared with their 2020-21 allocation) in some circumstances. This was not our intention. Final allocations remain subject to consultation but, as set out in Annex B, we have amended our proposed funding methodology to ensure that partnership allocations are capped at the level of their 2020-21 allocation.

282.   We intend to consult in 2021-22 on our proposed methodology for distributing the funding allocated to the programme for 2022-23 through to 2024-25. This will include how funding is distributed to support all the different elements of the programme, including signposting and strategic outreach, targeted outreach and outreach with existing Uni Connect learners.

Equality, diversity and inclusion

283. In our consultation, we included specific questions asking respondents to comment on (i) any unintended consequences of our proposed approach (for example, for particular types of provider, schools or colleges, or for particular types of student) or (ii) the impact of our proposed approach on individuals on the basis of their protected characteristics. Around 200 respondents provided a substantive comment about unintended consequences. Around 100 respondents provided a substantive comment when asked about the impact of our proposed approach on individuals on the basis of their protected characteristics.

284. Some respondents referred specifically to the potential impact of the proposals on individuals with protected characteristics. However, many commented on equality, diversity and inclusion issues in a broader sense, referring to students from underrepresented groups rather than to specific protected characteristics. In this section and our response, we have been as specific as possible about whether we are referring to underrepresented groups[20] or groups with specific protected characteristics.[21]

Analysis of responses relevant to equality, diversity and inclusion

285. Over a quarter of those who responded when asked about the impact on individuals with protected characteristics said that they could not see any negative impact of our proposals on these individuals. Around 10 per cent of those who commented said that it was too early to tell if there might be negative effects for these individuals.

286. Around 20 per cent of those who provided a substantive comment were concerned that moving from an area-based to a schools-based targeting approach could make the programme less effective at reaching certain communities and groups of students with protected characteristics. Respondents mentioned disabled students, some BAME communities and Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, care experienced learners, carers and young people from military families, as groups that could potentially be negatively impacted by the change in targeting. The two main reasons given for these concerns were:

- that some groups are likely to be dispersed across many schools and colleges and might be more effectively engaged through non-school routes, such as through community groups

- that learners with protected characteristics who attend schools with generally high participation levels might miss out on support that could be beneficial to them as their schools might not be prioritised for programme engagement.

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[20] 'Underrepresented groups' are the focus of access and participation plans and include all groups of potential or current students for whom the OfS can identify gaps in equality of opportunity in different parts of the student lifecycle. In determining the groups falling within this definition, the OfS has given due regard to students who share particular characteristics that are protected under the Equality Act 2010. For more information see 'Regulatory notice 1: Access and participation plan guidance' (OfS 2020.25), available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-access-andparticipation-plan-guidance/.

[21] Protected characteristics are defined in Part 11 of the Equality Act as: age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation. See www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/part/11/chapter/1.

287. A few respondents indicated that by targeting a whole school there would be less disadvantage to learners with protected characteristics.

288. A very small number of respondents raised concerns around negative unintended consequences for learners outside the traditional education system, including those that are educated at home.

289. A couple of respondents highlighted the potential positive impact of the inclusion of adult learners, however questions were also raised about how adult learners not currently in education could benefit from the proposals.

290. Around 10 per cent of those who provided written comments when asked about protected characteristics were concerned that restrictions in funding could have a greater impact on those with protected characteristics. They highlighted that reductions in funding could mean that partnerships have reduced capacity to engage with certain groups, such as disabled learners.

291. Just over 10 per cent of those who commented highlighted the benefits of allowing partnerships local flexibility to tailor their approach to benefit those with protected characteristics.

292. Around 20 per cent of those who responded when asked about protected characteristics highlighted the importance of monitoring the number of learners engaged in the programme who have protected characteristics, with clear expectations on partnerships. A small number of respondents wanted clear guidance from the OfS on how to target learners with certain protected characteristics and on the use of data and monitoring of protected characteristics when engaging in Uni Connect work. It was suggested that the OfS could do more to support partnerships around data protection issues, relating to the use of data to target, monitor and evaluate.

293. There were a few respondents who felt unable to offer in-depth comments on this question without further details on the proposed targeting approach.

294. A small number of respondents wanted to see an equality impact assessment on the proposals.

295. A small number of respondents suggested that partnerships should be encouraged to work together to ensure that learners with protected characteristics were not disadvantaged and this approach would potentially offer economies of scale.

Our response

296. The OfS has legal duties under the Equality Act 2010 and the PSED, as well as a general duty under section 2(e) of HERA, to have regard to the need to 'promote equality and diversity in relation to student access and participation in higher education'.

297. We have explored the impact on equality, diversity and inclusion of our proposals. We consider, at this stage, that our proposed approach will make a positive contribution towards promoting equality and diversity in relation to student access for underrepresented groups and

those with protected characteristics. We discuss this below in the context of the different elements of our proposals.

Targeted outreach

298.   We note that some respondents expressed concerns about the potential impact of our proposed approach to targeted outreach on some groups of students.

299.   We have deferred a decision on the approach we will take to directing targeted outreach from 2022-23. We aim to consult in 2021-22 on how we identify the learners who will be the target for this activity. This will look at whether we maintain an area-based approach or move to a new schools-based approach. As we progress with our development work to support a second stage consultation, we will conduct further analysis that will allow us to assess the equalities impact of our changes in more detail. Stakeholders and interested parties will have an opportunity to submit responses to the proposals set out in a further second stage consultation in due course. We will take those responses into account before finalising any decisions about the specifics of our approach to targeted outreach from 2022-23 onwards.

300.   In formulating the proposals for that consultation, we will have regard to our statutory duties in section 2 of HERA, and the PSED set out in section 149 Equality Act 2010. Our consideration of these duties will be further informed by the responses to that consultation.

301.   We note the points made by a small number of respondents regarding the need for clearer guidance on how to target learners with protected characteristics. As mentioned above, we intend to consult further on our future approach to targeting for phase three of the programme. The outcomes of that consultation will inform our future approach and subsequent guidance to partnerships for targeting learners, including the targeting of learners with protected characteristics. Where partnerships are already effectively targeting learners with specific protected characteristics, we will encourage them through our guidance to share effective practice with the national programme through both the programme evaluation and directly with the other partnerships in the network.

302.   We acknowledge that area-based or school-based targeting approaches might not be the most appropriate approach to reach some groups of underrepresented students or students with protected characteristics, including those from smaller underrepresented groups. We therefore consider that our proposals for targeted outreach are neutral in terms of impact on groups with protected characteristics. However, coupled with the extension to programme targeting to include a stronger focus on adult learners and those in further education colleges, we consider that this reflects an overall positive impact on groups with protected characteristics and underrepresented groups.

Strategic outreach

303.   Strategic outreach is intended to address IAG and outreach 'cold spots' for underrepresented groups in each partnership area. This includes learners from underrepresented groups that, based on their small size, may be more appropriately tackled across the whole local partnership area than at a small area, school or college level. By investing in strategic outreach, in tandem with targeted outreach, we believe that we can increase the effectiveness of the programme's impact with underrepresented and groups with protected characteristics.

304.   Some partnerships are already delivering outreach activity with learners across their partnership area, as part of phase two outreach hubs activity. We consider that our proposals for strategic outreach, which outline that this work must be informed by an assessment of local gaps for underrepresented groups and prioritised with input from stakeholders, will strengthen the focus of this activity onto learners from groups with protected characteristics and underrepresented groups. We therefore consider that our proposals for strategic outreach will have a strong positive impact on protected and underrepresented groups.

Outreach with existing Uni Connect learners

305.   From 2022-23 partnerships will deliver sustained and progressive outreach to support learners who were targeted by the programme in phases one and two but are not in scope for targeted outreach in phase three. By continuing to provide engagement with these learners, who live in underrepresented areas, we consider that our proposals for outreach with existing Uni Connect learners will have a strongly positive impact on groups with protected characteristics and underrepresented groups.

Signposting

306.   From 2021-22 the Uni Connect partnerships will provide signposting to help teachers and advisers find out about the outreach activity available in the area. By providing routes through which schools and colleges can find out about and access local outreach provision, our proposals for signposting will have a positive impact on groups with protected characteristics and underrepresented groups.

Programme funding

307.   Several respondents raised concerns about the potential impact of funding reductions on those with protected characteristics. We acknowledge (paragraph 55) that in the event of a significantly reduced level of funding there could be a reduction in the scale and intensity of activity provided and that the number of learners engaged by the programme could reduce. In those circumstances we would consider the appropriate balance of funding across the different elements of the programme, and our expectations of partnerships within each element. This would examine what additional steps could be taken to mitigate the effect on those with protected characteristics.

Understanding the equalities impact of Uni Connect

308.   A small number of respondents highlighted the importance of conducting an equality impact assessment on the proposals. As outlined above, as we progress with our development work to support a second stage consultation we will conduct further analysis that will allow us to assess the equalities impact of our changes in more detail.

309.   We note the points made by a small number of respondents regarding the need for clearer guidance on the monitoring, use of data and subsequent evaluation of engagement of learners from underrepresented groups and with protected characteristics. We undertake regular monitoring as part of programme management which forms part of the evidence base through which we understand the impact of the programme, including on learners from underrepresented groups where that information is available. We intend to issue further guidance on our monitoring requirements for phase three in due course.

Annex A: Our decisions with respect to a new approach to the Uni Connect programme for 2021-22 to 2024-25

Overarching approach

1. In principle, phase three of the Uni Connect programme will start in academic year 2021-22 and run through to the end of academic year 2024-25, although funding for the scheme is subject to confirmation and consultation[22] on an annual basis.

2. Our investment in phase three of the Uni Connect programme aims to:

   a. Contribute to reducing the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups.

   b. Equip young and adult learners from underrepresented groups to make an informed choice about their options in relation to the full range of routes into and through higher education and to minimise the barriers they may face when choosing the option that will unlock their potential.

   c. Support a strategic local infrastructure of universities, colleges and other partners that can cut through competitive barriers, offer an efficient and low-burden route for schools and colleges to engage, and address outreach 'cold spots' for underrepresented groups.

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

3. Through the programme we will invest in a network of Uni Connect partnerships with cross-England coverage. These partnerships will support a strategic local infrastructure to deliver programme goals.

4. We will continue to invest in a robust approach to the local and national evaluation of the Uni Connect programme to understand and improve impact.

Signposting

5. From 2021-22 the Uni Connect partnerships will provide signposting to help teachers and advisers find out about the outreach activity available in the area. Within such an approach:

   a. The partnerships will act as a point of contact for all state secondary schools and colleges. They will signpost to local outreach provision, where such provision exists and is available.

   b. The partnerships will host a website providing contact information and details of their Uni Connect offer to support their 'point of contact' role. This will mean the programme microsite

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[22] The OfS is currently consulting on the approach to recurrent funding for 2021-22, see www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-recurrent-funding-for-2021-22/.

can link to all partnerships. It will also help schools and colleges (including teachers and advisers), learners and parents and carers to access appropriate resources and support.

c. The partnerships will work with relevant stakeholders to ensure their signposting offer is coherent with other IAG and outreach offered in the local area for both young and adult learners.

Strategic outreach

6. The Uni Connect partnerships will provide strategic outreach to address IAG and outreach 'cold spots' for underrepresented groups in their local area. Within such an approach:

    a. Partnerships will undertake an assessment of local IAG and outreach gaps for underrepresented groups in the geographical area covered by the partnership, including with adult learners.

    b. Partnerships will engage with local stakeholders to consider what they want to achieve from their strategic outreach, reflecting on the gaps identified in their assessment, where collaborative activity can add most value, and taking into account local context and available resources.

    c. Partnerships will determine which interventions and activities are likely to be most effective in achieving its ambitions, taking account of evidence in making these decisions, including from the Uni Connect evaluation.

7. We will encourage match funding for strategic outreach activity from local partners.

8. We will outline stronger expectations that partnerships collaborate with each other and with other networks to share approaches, resources and good practice relating to engagement with different underrepresented groups, including with adult learners.

9. 2021-22 will be a transition year during which the partnerships will develop their strategic outreach plans and review any existing activity against their strategic outreach ambitions.

Targeted outreach

10. The Uni Connect partnerships will provide sustained and progressive targeted outreach to help recipients make well-informed decisions about their future education and to reduce gaps in higher education participation for the least represented groups.

11. 2021-22 will be a transition year during which time the partnerships will deliver targeted outreach to learners in Years 9 through to 13 who live in the phase two Uni Connect target areas.

12. From 2022-23, we will adopt a new approach to identifying target learners within targeted outreach. These learners will be in Years 9 through to 13.

13. We have deferred a decision on the approach we will take to directing targeted outreach from 2022-23. We intend to consult in 2021-22 on whether we maintain an area-based approach or

move to a new schools-based approach to identify the learners we intend to direct activity towards through the programme from 2022-23 onwards.

14. Partnerships will use local intelligence to identify which post-16 destinations to work with to support sustained engagement with target learners.

15. We will outline stronger expectations that partnerships collaborate with each other and with other networks to share approaches, resources and good practice relating to subject specialist pathways.

Outreach with existing Uni Connect learners

16. From 2022-23 partnerships will deliver sustained and progressive outreach to support learners who were targeted by the programme in phases one and two but are not in scope for targeted outreach in phase three. Within such an approach:

    a. Partnerships will identify which schools and colleges to engage for this support based on the number of young people within the institution who have been in receipt of Uni Connect targeted outreach in phases one and two.

    b. Partnerships will then identify target learners within these schools and colleges who:

        i. live or have lived in the Uni Connect phase one and phase two target areas, and

        ii. are in a year group that was eligible for Uni Connect targeted outreach in phase one or two (Year 10 through Year 13 in 2022-23, Year 11 through Year 13 in 2023-24).

An increased focus on further education colleges and adult learners

17. We will strengthen our expectations for the involvement of further education colleges in the programme. Through this we expect to see an increase in:

    a. the involvement of further education colleges in Uni Connect partnership governance

    b. the proportion of programme IAG and outreach directed towards learners in further education colleges

    c. the proportion of programme IAG and outreach that relates to the routes through higher education that are particularly enabled by further education colleges.

18. From 2022-23, with respect to targeted outreach with adult learners:

    a. We will expand the eligibility for targeted outreach to include all learners aged 19 or above studying at a further education college that the partnership has prioritised for its targeted outreach work with younger learners.

    b. Partnerships will be able to prioritise a further education college for targeted outreach activity where there are high proportions of adults that could benefit from engagement with the programme but where it might not be identified in terms of young learner progression.

    c.   We intend to set minimum expectations for the partnerships about the delivery of targeted outreach with adult learners.

Distribution of programme funding for 2021-22

19. Programme funding levels remain subject to consultation however, subject to that consultation, we intend to distribute the funding that is allocated to the programme for 2021-22 in line with the methodology outlined in Annex B.

Future consultation

20. We intend to consult during 2021-22 on:

    a.   Whether we maintain an area-based approach or move to a new schools-based approach to identify the learners we intend to direct activity towards through the programme from 2022-23 onwards for targeted outreach.

    b.   Our proposed methodology for distributing the funding allocated to the programme for 2022-23 through to 2024-25. This will include how funding is distributed to support all the different elements of the programme including signposting and strategic outreach, targeted outreach and outreach with existing Uni Connect learners. This consultation will not cover programme funding levels for 2022-23 through to 2024-25.

Annex B: Technical information on the Uni Connect funding model for 2021-22

1. Decisions in respect of the level of funding that will be made available to support the Uni Connect programme during 2021-22 will be taken by the OfS later in 2021 subject to the outcome of our current consultation on the approach to recurrent funding for 2021-22.[23] In reaching our funding decision in due course, we will have regard to the government's guidance letter[24] and other relevant statutory guidance as required by virtue of s.2(3) of HERA, our general duties under s.2 of HERA and the PSED, as well as taking into account the total recurrent funding available to us each year, consultation responses, and any other relevant considerations.

2. Having determined the overall programme budget for 2021-22 (as set out in paragraph 1 above) this annex outlines how we intend to distribute this funding between the Uni Connect partnerships in 2021-22.

3. The proposed approach to funding Uni Connect for the 2021-22 academic year reflects the fact that this will be a transitional year. It uses the existing 'outreach hubs' and 'targeted outreach' funding methodologies from phase two of the programme. An indicative figure of £10 million is allocated through the 'outreach hubs' methodology, modified to ensure a minimum indicative allocation of £300,000 per partnership. The remaining balance of funding is allocated using the 'targeted outreach' methodology. This is adjusted to ensure that, as a consequence of the minimum allocation, no partnership receives a higher allocation overall for academic year 2021-22 than they did for 2020-21.

Outreach hubs

4. We propose to continue to allocate funding for the existing nationwide coverage of the 326 English Local Administrative Unit Level 1 (LAU1) regions[25] by Uni Connect partnerships.

5. Learner populations for each area are derived by summing the total number of 15-year-olds in the area using the Office for National Statistics single-year-of-age mid-year estimates[26] for 2014 and 2015, adjusted to the academic year 2014-15. The learner population in each area is split according to Participation of Local Areas (POLAR4) quintile. Learners in POLAR4 quintiles 1 and 2 are assigned a weighting of five, while those in quintiles 3, 4 and 5 are assigned a weighting of 1. A total weighted population for each area is calculated by summing the weighted learner numbers from each quintile together.

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[23] See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-recurrent-funding-for-2021-22/.

[24] See Guidance to the OfS: Allocation of higher education teaching grant funding in the 2021-22 financial yar (January 2021) at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/guidance-from-government/.

[25] For more details see www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/geography/ukgeographies/eurostat.

[26] See www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/datasets/lowersuperoutputareamidyearpopulationestimates.

6. Funding is allocated for each LAU1 region, pro rata to its share of the total weighted population for England as a whole. The allocation for each partnership is the higher of the sum of the allocations for the LAU1 regions covered by the partnership and the indicative figure of £300,000. The funding model is iterative, to keep the total cost within the indicative £10 million budget.

Targeted outreach

7. Partnerships will continue to focus outreach activities in the 997 target areas (Census Area Statistics wards) identified in phase one of the programme. These are geographic areas where young participation in higher education is low in absolute terms, and relative to attainment at Key Stage 4. The target areas are those assigned both to POLAR3[27] quintile 1 and to Gaps[28] quintile 1 or quintile 2, where the Gaps quintiles account for Key Stage 4 attainment only, or for Key Stage 4 attainment and ethnicity.

8. Learner populations for each target area are calculated by summing learner numbers for five young cohorts, as reported in school records of state-maintained education, aged 15 in academic years 2011-12 to 2015-16.[29] These cohorts form a proxy for the population in school Years 9 to 13 in the academic year 2013-14. A weighting of 1.5 is applied to areas in rural counties or combined counties according to the 2011 rural-urban classification,[30] by multiplying the learner population by 1.5. If a county or combined county has greater than 50 per cent of its total population (all age groups) from rural areas according to the classification, it is considered to be rural.[31]

9. Funding is allocated for each target area, pro rata to its share of the total weighted population for the 997 target areas. The allocation for each partnership is the sum of the allocations for each targeted area covered by the partnership, adjusted to ensure that as a consequence of

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[27] The POLAR classification groups areas across the UK based on the proportion of the young population that participates in higher education. POLAR classifies local areas into five groups (quintiles) based on the proportion of 18-year-olds who enter higher education aged 18 or 19 years old. Quintile 1 areas have the lowest rates of participation: quintile 5 areas have the highest. For more details see www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/.

[28] Gaps analysis looks at the level of young participation in higher education relative to the Key Stage 4 attainment by areas across England. This results in a classification of five groups (quintiles) that identifies low participation relative to school attainment. For more details see www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/.

[29] For more details see the 'NCOP phase two learner population estimates', available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/uni-connect/resources-for-partnerships/, which contains data sourced from the Department for Education's National Pupil Database. The Department for Education does not accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived from this data by third parties.

[30] See www.gov.uk/government/statistics/2011-rural-urban-classification-of-local-authority-and-other-higher-level-geographies-for-statistical-purposes.

[31] The rural weighting applies to target areas in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, Cumbria, East Anglia, Lincolnshire and North Yorkshire.

receiving the minimum indicative allocation of £300,000 for outreach hubs, no partnership receives a higher allocation overall for academic year 2021-22 than they did for 2020-21.