

STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENT

This Learning Digest identifies learning points for Uni Connect partnerships in relation to strategic engagement of partners and stakeholders. It is based on interviews and a workshop with partnership leads conducted as part of Uni Connect’s formative evaluation (2019-2021), commissioned by the Office for Students. It is not intended to provide a definitive approach to strategic engagement, rather some useful learning points from partnerships’ experiences so far. This learning digest is produced by Ipsos Mori, from independent research commissioned by the OfS. It does not necessarily reflect the OfS’s views or position.

Strategic engagement of local, regional and national partners is critical to effective delivery of Uni Connect. It involves partnerships working with key stakeholders to identify shared objectives and collaborative approaches to addressing these.

Uni Connect is not delivered in isolation; there are a wide range of stakeholders involved in outreach at a regional level. Effective engagement with key

stakeholders to understand need and existing provision can help ensure a joined-up and co-ordinated approach, avoid duplication and maximise the value and impact of Uni Connect.

Strategic engagement can incorporate sharing data and intelligence on learner need and existing provision. It can also incorporate joint initiatives with partners and stakeholders.

With special thanks to all Uni Connect partnerships and particularly to:

- Beka Avery and Emma Angell – Pathways, reach@le.ac.uk
- Gerarde Manley and Sonal Morjaria, Leicester & Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership, Gerarde.manley@llep.org.uk
- Hello Future, hellofuture@cumbria.ac.uk
- Sussex Learning Network, admin@sussexlearningnetwork.org.uk

KEY CONSIDERATIONS



PRE-ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

- Prior to engaging partners and stakeholders, it is useful to have an understanding of the wider landscape of outreach provision within the area (see the Mapping and Gapping Learning Digest in this series for further details)
- The national outreach coverage dataset (with interactive maps) is a useful source of information on outreach provision across England
- Identifying and researching organisations with similar or shared objectives to Uni Connect as a whole, as well as individual partnerships can be helpful for informing a targeted approach to strategic engagement
- Partnerships need to be knowledgeable about the key issues and challenges prior to any engagement
- Key partners (where they exist locally) could include Local Enterprise Partnerships, Careers and Enterprise Coordinators and Careers Hubs, as well as others who align with the strategic priorities identified by partnerships



APPROACHES TO ENGAGING KEY PARTNERS AND STAKEHOLDERS

- This can involve identifying existing relevant networks and partnerships, and asking to join
- It can also involve inviting key partners and stakeholders to join Uni Connect governing boards to ensure ongoing and continuous engagement at a strategic level
- Engaging organisations with a long history of outreach activity within the area can be helpful in generating insight and intelligence on the key issues faced by different cohorts of learners and how best to reach them
- Developing relationships with key individuals within partner organisations can facilitate access to wider networks of potential partners and stakeholders
- It can be useful to agree a common basis for engagement and a shared language that is understood across partner organisations, including schools and colleges, e.g. based on the Gatsby benchmarks and / or another relevant framework
- Clarity and transparency on the respective roles and responsibilities of each partner organisation, as well as how available resources will be used, can help build trust
- In some cases, formalising partner roles and responsibilities through “Memoranda of Understanding” can help bring clarity and avoid duplication of effort by different partners – for example, the Gatsby benchmarks can be used to delineate organisational contributions



IDENTIFYING SHARED OBJECTIVES

- Shared objectives could be at a Uni Connect programme level, such as improving higher education (HE) outcomes for underrepresented groups
- Objectives could also be at partnership level, such as improved outcomes for specific cohorts of learners (such as care leavers or those from military families)
- Objectives can be aligned rather than identical - for example, Uni Connect activities can contribute to LEP priorities around addressing skills shortages in key and growth sectors



SUSTAINING STRATEGIC ENGAGEMENTS

- Shared objectives could be at a Uni Connect programme level, such as improving HE outcomes for underrepresented groups
- Objectives could also be at partnership level, such as improved outcomes for specific cohorts of young people
- Regular and ongoing strategic meetings with partners can be helpful to review and sense check Uni Connect and other organisations’ objectives and re-iterate / reinforce shared objectives
- Promoting and showcasing the work of Uni Connect and partners through sharing good practice examples can help increase visibility and credibility, as well as demonstrate the value and impact of strategic engagement

Potential issues to be alert to



- It can be resource intensive to establish and maintain meaningful engagement with strategic partners
- Uni Connect cannot be ‘all things to all people’ – engagement should focus on a few key areas of strategic importance
- Perceived competition between providers for learners can sometimes be a barrier to engagement and collaboration
- Schools and colleges can sometimes feel overwhelmed by multiple approaches from outreach providers – aligning activities and communications can help address this

What does success look like?



- Comprehensive and tailored outreach is delivered to schools, colleges and learners based on a shared and evidence-based understanding of need and gaps in existing provision
- Duplication is avoided and gaps in outreach provision are identified and addressed
- School, college and learner reach and engagement is increased
- Partners and stakeholders are mobilised to identify appropriate and creative solutions to address regional needs. Solutions are developed and implemented quickly and easily, especially in times of crisis such as COVID-19
- A more joined up, high quality, impartial and locally coherent offer for HE information, advice and guidance / Outreach, careers advice and other relevant local initiatives is achieved

WORKING TOGETHER

A CASE STUDY FROM LEICESTERSHIRE

Pathways and the Leicester and Leicestershire Enterprise Partnership (LLEP) collaborated on “Unbox Your Future”.

- The LLEP curated a package of career-related items and sent this to target individuals across Leicestershire
- The box was sent to 1,500 young people aged 16-18 who were particularly hard to reach or not in education, employment or training – a physical box was sent to help overcome any potential barriers for those in digital poverty
- The package included information from numerous partner organisations on potential career pathways and a ‘voucher’ with dedicated helpline to call a careers advisor
- Pathways included information and guidance on different choices and a virtual reality headset, enabling learners to “tour” university and college campuses
- Pathways also provided evaluation support and expertise so that the initiative was evaluated robustly



IMPACT: A survey of students who were sent the box found that:

- 75% of students reported that they had received the box, and of these, 96% said they had opened it
- 62% of young people said that they were happy to receive it, were interested in the contents, and / or felt valued
- 68% reported that they spoke with someone else about the box, usually a parent



What worked really well... We put together a VIP voucher which was a call to action for a service that already existed but we wanted to test, ‘If we give you this voucher that looks like a high street voucher, and it says you’re a really important young person, call this professional, they’re ready to talk through careers advice with you.’ We were followed up with over 30 young people, NEET or unknown, cashing in that voucher and it drove traffic to those services.

Gerarde Manley, LLEP