The benefits of and barriers to collaborative access activity by higher education providers

A report for the OfS

February 2023

CFE research

Acknowledgements

Contents

Glossary

A&P	Access and participation
APP	Access and participation plan
FSM	Free school meals
HEAT	Higher Education Access Tracker
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HEFCW	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
HE in FE	Higher education delivered by further education providers
IAG	Information, advice and guidance
LA	Local Authority
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership
NCOP	National Collaborative Outreach Programme
NNCO	National Networks for Collaborative Outreach
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
OfS	The Office for Students
P4P	Partnerships for Progression
RO	Realising Opportunities
RCT	Randomised controlled trial
SFC	Scottish Funding Council
SPOC	Single point of contact
TASO	Transforming Access & Student Outcomes in Higher Education
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service
WP	Widening participation

Executive summary

The OfS has committed to supporting Uni Connect, a national collaborative programme delivering access activities and attainment raising support to target young people, until 2025. A key consideration for the OfS is whether and how it might continue to support and incentivise collaborative access activities through this or another mechanism beyond this. This research was commissioned to develop a fuller understanding about the benefits of collaboration for higher education providers, their partners and students, as well as current and potential barriers or tensions that can inhibit partnership working to inform a future strategy. The findings presented in this report draw on insights from existing research and interviews with 23 stakeholders. In addition to the benefits and barriers, the report identifies the characteristics of effective approaches to collaborative access activity and the opportunities to develop a sustainable approach, drawing on current good practice.

Key findings

Benefits of collaboration

Higher education providers collaborate with a wide range of stakeholders including other higher education institutions, further education colleges, third party providers (including in the third sector), local authorities, employers and Local Enterprise Partnerships. Partnership working delivers economies of scale and enhances value for money. Through collaboration, higher education providers are better able to:

- **Identify 'cold spots'** where schools and colleges that could potentially benefit from outreach or support with attainment raising are not being targeted by individual higher education providers and/or that are not actively engaging with the access activities on offer.

- **Understand the diversity of need** and the specific barriers to higher education for young people within a particular region.

- **Share ideas and evidence of good practice** to develop an innovative access offer that effectively responds to the needs of young people to enhance progression.

- **Engage harder to reach groups**, particularly those that are small in number such as care leavers or Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, in access activities, and their parents and carers.

- **Reduce duplication** and deliver access activities more efficiently by drawing on the knowledge, skills and existing resources of partnership members.

- **Extend the reach** of individual partners, particularly small and specialist providers with more limited resources, into new geographical areas and schools and colleges.

- **Reduce burden** on schools and colleges by streamlining communications and delivering a more joined-up, sustained and progressive, impartial offer.

- **Ensure greater synergy** between a higher education provider's widening access goals and the strategic priorities of their partners, in support of the achievement of wider policy objectives linked to social mobility and economic growth in the context of the levelling up agenda.

- **Evaluate a wider range of access activities**, including those that are targeted at small groups by individual providers, and produce more robust evidence of impact, including outcomes for particular sub-groups.

Collaboration also delivers benefits for wider partners:

- **Schools:** Collaboration boosts schools' capacity to meet statutory requirements and national benchmarks for careers education and guidance and improve student attainment.

- **Further education colleges:** By working in partnership, further education colleges can expand their capacity and reach, and raise awareness about alternative routes into higher education, including 'HE in FE'.

- **Third party organisations:** Third party providers benefit from partners' insights into the needs of young people as well as additional revenue that helps to sustain them.

- **Local authorities:** Joint working enables local authorities to effectively deliver their statutory requirements for vulnerable groups (including care leavers) and achieve wider regional priorities.

- **Local Enterprise Partnerships:** Collaboration can help to address objectives for economic growth by increasing the volume and diversity of young people considering careers in strategically-important sectors within a region.

- **Young people:** Young people are able to make better informed decisions, which ensure they progress on the path that is right for them. Collaborative programmes, such as Realising Opportunities (RO)[1], help to level the playing field for students aspiring to selective and research-intensive universities.

Barriers and tensions

Insights into perceived barriers and tensions can help to inform decisions about how best to incentivise future collaboration and the infrastructure needed to support it. The main barriers perceived to inhibit effective collaboration are:

- **Competing internal priorities,** particularly between a provider's marketing and recruitment department and its access and participation team.

- **External tensions** between further education colleges and higher education providers, particularly in relation to student recruitment.

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[1] Realising opportunities (www.realisingopportunities.ac.uk) is a collaboration of leading, research-intensive universities, working together to promote fair access and social mobility for students from underrepresented groups into higher education.

- **Difficulties securing the buy-in to a collaborative approach** at a strategic level within higher education providers and partner organisations resulting in weaker governance, leadership and management.

- **Underestimating the time** needed to build and maintain strategic partnerships, put infrastructure and systems in place, and demonstrate progress.

- **Level of funding and investment** impacts on the volume, scale and sustainability of collaborative networks and activities.

- **Longevity of funding and investment** in collaborative programmes impacts on staff retention and the ability of partnerships to plan and deliver a coherent programme of sustained and progressive support.

Developing a sustainable infrastructure

Any future model for collaborative access should seek to address prevailing barriers and concerns by harnessing the benefits and drawing on current good practice. To ensure the success of any new model, it will be important to:

- **Create a shared vision** and purpose for the collaborative programme and clearly articulate how each member will contribute to the achievement its objectives.

- **Secure the buy-in of strategic managers** in all partner organisations by demonstrating how a collaborative approach will support the achievement of both the individual partners' and the programme's goals.

- **Build on the success of existing partnerships and networks** with established infrastructure, systems and processes.

- **Put in place strong governance structures** that ensure the accountability of all partners.

- **Provide long-term (5 years) investment** to support initial set up (including the development of a coherent offer, communication strategy and strong brand), implementation and delivery.

- **Engage a diverse range of stakeholders** from within and outside the higher education sector, including recipients (e.g. schools and colleges) and primary beneficiaries (the learner voice).

- **Adopt a flexible approach** that is responsive to changes in policy, contextual factors and/or the needs of underrepresented groups.

- **Integrate an evaluation strategy** to demonstrate the effectiveness of a collaborative approach, including the value added for partners, in addition to the impact of collaborative activities on key target audiences.

Supporting and incentivising collaboration

Current sources of funding to support collaboration include central government, institutional match-funding (e.g. from additional fee income) and subscription fees. The report identifies a range of strengths and limitations associated with each of these funding mechanisms. These along with issues of affordability, cost-effectiveness and value for money must be taken into consideration when deciding

on the most effective way to sustain and potentially expand collaborative access and attainment raising activities in the future. In addition to funding, the research identifies a number of other ways that the OfS could incentivise and sustain collaboration:

- **Use Ofsted's and the OfS's regulatory frameworks** to support and encourage collaborative access activity and school engagement.

- **Develop clear guidance** outlining the expectations of higher education providers, and the metrics that will be used to monitor outcomes achieved in collaboration with other providers and wider partners.

- **Encourage partnerships to diversify their membership**, drawing on wider internal staff (e.g. subject and pedagogical specialists) as well as external partners to ensure the expertise and capacity is in place to respond to emerging priorities for widening access, including raising pre-16 attainment.

- **Commission evaluation of collaborative access activities** to address gaps in the evidence base, e.g. the impact of attainment raising activities.

- **Share evidence of what works and case studies** showcasing the benefits of different collaborative models for higher education providers and wider stakeholders.

1. Introduction

This report explores the benefits of collaborative access activities for higher education providers, wider stakeholders and students. It also considers current and potential barriers to collaboration. The findings draw on insights from existing research and interviews with a range of higher education stakeholders. The report offers issues for consideration by the Office for Students (OfS) to inform the development of a future strategy for a sustainable approach to collaborative access.

Collaborative approaches to widening access to higher education

Widening access and participation in higher education has been a priority for successive UK governments for more than 20 years and remains at the heart of current policy to enhance social mobility and stimulate economic growth. While progress has been made, some groups remain underrepresented. Achieving equality of opportunity for all those with the ability and desire to progress to higher education, irrespective of their background, location or characteristics, is a strategic objective of the OfS.[2] To help achieve this, the OfS requires most higher education providers to have an approved access and participation plan (APP) in place,[3] setting out how they intend to widen access and improve the retention, achievement and progression of underrepresented groups.[4] The OfS holds providers to account by monitoring progress against the targets and goals set out in their APPs.

The OfS funds programmes and initiatives to support higher education providers to work together to achieve national access and participation goals. Since 2017, it has funded Uni Connect,[5] a programme supporting 29 partnerships of higher education providers, further education colleges and other stakeholders across England to deliver a collaborative approach to widening access. The programme aims were originally to reduce the gap in higher education by equipping young people in Years 9 to 13 who lived in areas where participation was lower than expected to make informed choices and by minimising barriers. The programme aims have since evolved and from September 2023 there will be a focus on pre-16 attainment raising for students in Years 7 to 11. Similar programmes also operate in the other home nations. The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) supports 'Reaching Wider', a collaborative programme delivered by three regional partnerships[6] comprising all Welsh higher and further education providers, local authorities, employers, schools, the voluntary sector, and Careers Wales to widen

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[2] OfS (2022a) *Our strategy*.

[3] Higher education providers that are registered with the OfS in the 'Approved (fee cap)' category and want to charge above the basic tuition fee cap must have an APP.

[4] OfS (2022b) *Access and participation plans*.

[5] Uni Connect was known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) from 2017–2019 and was originally funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

[6] North and Mid Wales, South West Wales, and South East Wales

access to higher education and higher-level skills. In Scotland, collaborative access activities are delivered through the Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP)[7] and the North of Scotland Universities Collaborative Project.[8]

Uni Connect builds on the legacy of earlier collaborative programmes funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE). Aimhigher was created in 2004 through a merger of Partnerships for Progression (P4P) and Excellence Challenge. The programme supported partnerships of universities, further education colleges, schools, and the careers and apprenticeship services to work together to increase participation in higher education amongst young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. This collaborative approach was reported to streamline and enhance outreach delivery by making effective use of available resources, reducing duplication and through the sharing of good practice.[9]

Funding for Aimhigher ended in 2011. The National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) were launched three years later to bring universities and further education colleges together to provide a more co-ordinated approach to outreach. Through this programme, 34 local and three national networks were established over two years to address 'cold spots' with no or limited outreach activity. Single points of contact (SPOC) were created to provide information and signposting to outreach activities for schools and colleges across England. Like Aimhigher before it, NNCO was shown to facilitate knowledge sharing between partnership members, encourage innovation in outreach and reduce duplication and burden on schools and colleges.[10] Many of the partnerships that were established through NNCO have been sustained and expanded with funding from Uni Connect and are continuing their collaborative work to widen access to higher education for target groups.

Outside of government-funded programmes, third sector organisations (such as the Sutton Trust and IntoUniversity) and networks of higher education providers (such as Realising Opportunities) have been established. They facilitate partners with shared priorities and objectives to work together to overcome inequalities in higher education by providing a range of support for underrepresented groups, including impartial information, advice and guidance (IAG) regarding access to higher education, and summer schools. Participants in these programmes can often benefit from guaranteed interviews and contextual offers to support their progression to more selective universities.

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[7] Scottish Funding Council (2023) *Schools for Higher Education Programme.*

[8] Robert Gordon University (2023) *North of Scotland Universities Collaborative Project.*

[9] Morris, M., Golden, S., Ireland, E. & Judkins, M. (2005) *Evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge The Views of Partnership Coordinators 2004*. National Foundation for Educational Research. National Foundation for Educational Research.

[10] Stevenson, J., McCaig, C. & Madriga, M. (2017) *Evaluation of the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCOs)*. Sheffield Institute of Education.

Research aims and objectives

There is, therefore, an established tradition of collaboration between higher education providers and other stakeholders. Successive programmes have supported the development of infrastructure and provided the drivers for stakeholders to work together to achieve access and participation goals. The OfS has committed, in principle, to supporting Uni Connect until 2025. A key consideration for the OfS is whether and how it might continue to support and incentivise collaborative access activities through this or another mechanism in the future. The OfS commissioned this independent research to inform its decision-making. To achieve this aim, the research addresses two overarching questions:

1. What are the benefits that arise from higher education providers working in collaboration to design, deliver and evaluate widening access activities?

2. What are the current and potential tensions and barriers to effective collaboration in the design, delivery and evaluation of widening access activities?

In this context, access activities include interventions that are designed and delivered in partnership to underrepresented groups of young people prior to enrolment in higher education, including information, advice and guidance (IAG), and attainment raising.[11]

To address these research questions, we conducted a desk-based review of key documents, including guidance and existing evaluations of the benefits of and barriers to collaborative outreach along with 23 semi-structured interviews with representatives from collaborative partnerships, education providers, sector bodies, and third sector organisations (see Annex 2 for further details on the sample of stakeholders).

Much of the existing evidence on access and participation focuses on the effectiveness of activities and their impact on outcomes for learners; less emphasis is often placed on the specific value added through collaboration. This report adds to the current evidence by providing more detailed insights into the ways collaboration is supporting the achievement of the shared ambition for greater equality of opportunity in higher education and the key 'ingredients' for success. The report also offers a fuller understanding of the factors that can inhibit partnership working and impact on the sustainability of collaborative approaches to access, in the context of a proposed risk-based approach[12] and the growing emphasis on attainment raising.[13]

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[11] Activities that are specifically targeted at adults, contextualised admissions and financial support were out of scope, as were activities delivered by a single institution.

[12] The OfS is currently preparing its response to its consultation on a new approach to regulating equality of opportunity in English higher education.

[13] OfS (2022c) *Schools, attainment and the role of higher education.*

2. The benefits of collaboration

Summary

The benefits of effective collaboration include:

– The identification of 'cold spots' where schools and colleges are not actively engaging with the access activities on offer.

– Understanding the diversity of need and the specific barriers to progression to higher education that students face.

– Engaging harder to reach groups, such as care leavers or Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, in access activities, and their parents and carers.

– Reducing duplication and increasing efficiency by drawing on the knowledge, skills and existing resources of partnership members.

– Extending the reach of individual partners, particularly small and specialist providers with more limited resources, into new geographical areas.

– Reducing the burden on schools and colleges by streamlining communication and delivering a more joined-up, sustained and progressive, impartial offer.

– Ensuring greater synergy between higher education providers' widening access goals and the strategic objectives of their partners.

– Evaluating a wider range of access activities including those that are targeted at small groups, to produce robust evidence of impact on outcomes.

– Providing insights into the needs of young people to help wider partners achieve their strategic priorities.

A common thread running through existing evaluations of collaborative programmes such as Aimhigher,[14] NNCO[15] and Uni Connect,[16] is the positive effect that partnership working has on the quality, range, reach and efficiency of widening access provision. Reducing duplication and streamlining delivery and communications with schools and colleges, along with idea creation, innovation and the sharing of good practice, are consistently identified as key benefits of a collaborative approach. In this section, we explore these and the wider benefits of collaboration in more depth, with reference to case studies of current collaborative

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[14] Morris, M., Golden, S., Ireland, E. & Judkins, M. (2005) *Evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge The Views of Partnership Coordinators 2004*. National Foundation for Educational Research. National Foundation for Educational Research.

[15] Stevenson, J., McCaig, C. & Madriga, M. (2017) *Evaluation of the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCOs)*. Sheffield Institute of Education.

[16] The emerging benefits and barriers of collaborative outreach were explored during the Phase one process evaluation by CFE Research. Subsequent reports on the process evaluation have been produced by Ipsos MORI.

practice (see Annex 1). A collaborative approach to widening access and attainment raising can deliver benefits for wider stakeholders including schools, further education colleges, wider stakeholders and young people. We explore the benefits for these stakeholders in the final section of this chapter.

Addressing system wide inequalities

Higher education providers collaborate with a range of stakeholders to design and/or deliver access activities, including other higher education providers, further education colleges, third party organisations (including the third sector), local authorities and community resources (e.g., health services), employers and Local Enterprise Partnerships. Current partnerships range in scale and scope, geographical coverage and funding model but their primary purpose is to support the national ambitions for access and participation. Evidence from the recent process evaluation of Uni Connect suggests that one of the main benefits of a collaborative approach to widening access is that it enables the higher education sector to address issues that are affecting the higher education sector as a whole that cannot be resolved by individual providers working in isolation.[17]

> We're talking about really deep-rooted social inequality that's affecting [underrepresented students]. It seems to me that the best way of trying to resolve those issues is for us to collaborate together as a sector more closely. I don't think any individual institution can really fully address the sort of challenges that these students are facing.
>
> **Higher education provider**

The ways in which collaboration helps to achieve this, while also delivering benefits for individual partners, schools and young people are explored below.

Identifying and addressing 'cold spots'[18]

By working together and sharing information about the schools and colleges they work with, higher education providers can identify 'cold spots', defined as areas where there is a lack of access activities and support for schools and colleges. Once identified, partnerships can assess the needs of these schools and colleges and implement measures to encourage their engagement in access activities.[19]

> We did some mapping a few years ago and basically found that there was an area that wasn't getting anything from any university, and they weren't on our

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[17] Achtaridou, E., Mackay, S. & Torrini, E. (2021) *Evaluation of Uni Connect Phase Two: Detailed Findings Report*.

[18] Shiner, R. (2021). 'New dataset gives a full picture of outreach across England', *OfS blog*. 6 October 2021. https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/blog/new-dataset-gives-a-full-picture-of-outreach-across-england/

[19] Ipsos MORI (2022a) *Mapping and Gapping.*

> [partnership] priority list either. I think there was just one school in that area, it was out on a bit of a limb.
>
> **Uni Connect Partnership**

Identifying and addressing need

A further benefit of collaboration is that higher education providers can develop a holistic understanding of the diversity of need and the specific barriers to progression within a particular region,[20] drawing on the knowledge of partners from within and outside the sector.[21] For example, by working with partners in the further education and third party organisations, universities gain insight into the needs of and barriers facing young people following non-traditional, technical and vocational routes.[20]

> What we're doing when we're working together is… moving beyond that competitive nature and saying, 'Okay, what do the people of this region need, and how can we support that?
>
> **Specialist higher education provider**

Partnership working also facilitates the sharing of insights – based on partners' own experience and evaluation findings – into which activities best address the needs of different groups in different contexts.[22] The sharing of knowledge and insight can be particularly beneficial for higher education providers when the evidence on effective activities for specific underrepresented groups is more limited. Drawing on this knowledge ensures activities are appropriately tailored to the needs of the target group.[23]

> [HEP partner] are doing a lot of research at the moment on free school meals and exclusions. So, sharing that good practice and knowledge is a real benefit.
>
> **Higher education provider**

Research suggests that higher education providers find it particularly challenging to target and engage groups that are relatively small in number and require more tailored or intensive support, such as care-experienced young people.[24] This can lead to gaps in provision. But by working in partnership, providers can identify and address gaps through collaboration with other stakeholders who are also working

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[20] Bowes, L., Tazzyman, S., Sandhu, J., Moreton, R., Birkin, G., McCaig, C., Madriga, M., Kozman, E. & Wright, H. (2019). *The National Collaborative Outreach Programme. End of Phase 1 report for the national formative and impact evaluations*.

[21] Ipsos MORI (2022b). *Strategic Engagement*.

[22] Morris, M., Golden, S., Ireland, E. & Judkins, M. (2005) *Evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge The Views of Partnership Coordinators 2004*. National Foundation for Educational Research. National Foundation for Educational Research; Realising Opportunities (2016). *Impact Report*.

[23] Ipsos MORI (2022b). *Strategic Engagement.*

[24] Stevenson, J., McCaig, C. & Madriga, M. (2017) *Evaluation of the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCOs)*. Sheffield Institute of Education.

with these groups, such as local authorities and third party organisations. Bright Carers, delivered by Brightside, is an example of one such collaborative online mentoring programme that has been specially designed for young carers (see Case study 1).

> For care-experienced students, it doesn't make sense for five universities to go out and strategically engage with the local authority. It's such a small but important group where there are economies of scale of actually doing that together.
>
> **Higher education provider**

Higher education providers can enhance the efficiency of their delivery by drawing on existing resources that are proven to be effective and by co-creating new resources (e.g. labour market information, guidance for teachers and other advisers working with young people) that can be shared with other members of the partnership. Drawing on the knowledge and expertise of partners can also enhance the quality and impact of their offer and help to facilitate the development of a more coherent, joined-up approach.

> We're able to design programmes that bring in elements of expertise from our different providers which wouldn't necessarily be the case if those providers were working in silo.
>
> **Uni Connect partnership**

Enhancing capacity and reach

Collaboration can be particularly beneficial for small and specialist higher education providers that typically have limited access and participation budgets and staff resources compared with larger institutions. By partnering with larger providers, smaller institutions can enhance their capacity, enabling them to scale-up delivery and put on activities that may not be possible otherwise.[25]

> A lot of the central outreach teams don't necessarily have a lot of resource. We come together and do something that on our own we wouldn't necessarily be able to achieve.
>
> **Uni Connect partnership**

Collaborating with third party delivery organisations, including national charities, also enhances higher education providers' capacity to deliver. These partners' experience of working with particular target groups and their specialist skills and expertise can be utilised to deliver activities, such as recruiting and training mentors, on providers' behalf.[26] This is often perceived to be more effective and efficient than providers developing and delivering these types of activity themselves. For example, the

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[25] Bowes, L., Tazzyman, S., Sandhu, J., Moreton, R., Birkin, G., McCaig, C., Madriga, M., Kozman, E. & Wright, H. (2019). *The National Collaborative Outreach Programme. End of Phase 1 report for the national formative and impact evaluations*.

[26] Ipsos MORI (2022b). *Strategic Engagement*.

Aimhigher West Midlands Uni Connect partnership funded MyTutor to carry out attainment raising activities as part of a collaborative programme, in 2019.[27] MyTutor provides online tuition to support learners to gain a grade 4 or above in maths, English, or science. This collaboration supported 258 learners in 21 schools across the West Midlands. The programme had a positive impact on student attainment with learners making twice as much progress in their grades compared with similar peers who did not take part.[28] Insights were also gained about the ideal number of sessions that students should participate in to make the greatest progress. Those that took part made more progress compared to students that received no tuition.

> MyTutor was funded by Aimhigher to help increase attainment at our school. We've got Progress 8 figures showing that students who attended 10 sessions of MyTutor saw an increase of one grade in comparison to students who didn't attend. That was a really nice figure to say we can see an impact on attainment.
>
> **School staff member**

Working with other providers can also help to raise the profile and extend the reach of individual institutions. While this can help any provider to engage underrepresented groups in support of its widening access goals, it is particularly beneficial for small and specialist providers with limited resources to extend their networks and promote their offer, including further education colleges (see Case study 2).

> As a small and specialist institution, working collaboratively really helps us increase our reach with the target groups we prioritise within our access and participation work and also to work across a much wider range of underrepresented groups… including those which are harder to access like care experienced students, estranged students, young carers, military families and refugees.
>
> **Specialist higher education provider**

> We've been able to reach so many more students to spread the message about higher education and the different routes and pathways, which is not always talked about.
>
> **Further education college**

Third party organisations also fulfil an important role in extending higher education providers' geographical reach beyond their local area. This is particularly beneficial for selective institutions, given the relatively limited pool of potential applicants from underrepresented background with the capability to achieve the entry requirements for a high tariff institution in any given area.

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[27] MyTutor (2023) *Online tutoring that releases potential.*

[28] Aimhigher Plus (2019) *My Tutor 2019 Results.*

> To raise our widening participation (WP) numbers in line with targets, we have to look at a national pool… as a university, we don't hugely recruit from the [city] region, particularly with our WP cohort. So we are looking for that national reach to support young people into the institution.
>
> **Higher education provider**

Engaging parents and carers

Parents and carers are a key influence on young people, helping to shape their educational and career choices.[29] Providers and collaborative partnerships strive to engage parents and carers in access activities to ensure they are appropriately informed about the benefits of higher education and can effectively advise the young people they are responsible for.[30] However, many find engaging parents and carers challenging. To overcome this, higher education providers work with organisations with specialist knowledge and skills to develop and deliver tailored and engaging programmes. For example, the Brilliant Club's Parent Power programme is designed to empower parents to support their children's future education and career choice. The initiative creates parent communities across the UK supported by an anchor university. Six, weekly group meetings are hosted, facilitated by a local PhD researcher. The parent voice is at the heart of the programme, with parents themselves deciding what activities will benefit their community. This can include university campus visits, visits from university alumni, tutoring training, and impartial advice about student finance and access to higher education. Importantly, in addition to working with third party organisations, higher education providers work directly with schools themselves to promote these activities. This is beneficial as schools have established relationships with students, parents and carers, which in turn can encourage participation from students. The collaborative element of these activities is important as without these connections, providers would face barriers in engaging with parents.

Enhancing the evidence base on widening access

Until recently, evidence on the impact of access and participation has been relatively limited. One of the primary aims of Uni Connect is to enhance the evidence base on 'what works' in widening access to help address this challenge. Insights from interviews with Uni Connect partnerships and sector bodies suggest that Uni Connect has facilitated the development of effective systems and processes for tracking and monitoring access activities. For example, staff have had the capacity to make better

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[29] Bowes, L., Tazzyman, S., Birkin, G. & Roberts, J. (2022). *An independent evaluation of Uni Connect's impact on intermediate outcomes for learners: A report for the Office for Students on the 2021/22 (Wave 3) learner survey findings*.

[30] Bowes, L., Tazzyman, S., Sandhu, J., Moreton, R., Birkin, G., McCaig, C., Madriga, M., Kozman, E. & Wright, H. (2019). *The National Collaborative Outreach Programme. End of Phase 1 report for the national formative and impact evaluations*.

use of existing tracking systems (such as HEAT[31], EMWPREP[32], and Aimhigher[33]) at both a local and national level to monitor access activity participation. Maximising the capabilities of these systems provides data about the full breadth of activities delivered to young people as part of the Uni Connect programme and/or by other providers that can be shared with the partnership. This in turn supports evaluators to design and implement more robust evaluation methodologies to establish the effectiveness of different access activities. Stakeholders perceive that this more collaborative approach to evaluation would not have been possible in the absence of Uni Connect.

Evaluation capacity has been developed through a national capability-building programme, ongoing training and development of widening participation practitioners, the creation of dedicated evaluation roles within each Uni Connect partnership, the establishment of a national evaluation working group, and by harnessing the evaluation expertise of academics and staff within partner institutions and organisations.[34] The opportunity to collaborate and draw on the evaluation expertise of partners has been particularly beneficial for small and specialist higher education providers, including further education colleges, that often lack the skills and resources to monitor and evaluate the impact of their activities in house.[35]

> We have no evaluation team here at [higher education provider]. We can't afford to buy into HEAT.[36] Those things are not things that we can do without having the collaborative broker [Uni Connect] there.

> **Specialist higher education provider**

The programme has also facilitated inter-partnership collaboration on evaluation. This has enabled partnerships to evaluate the impact of interventions (e.g. those delivered to small cohorts) and implement methods that otherwise would not be feasible, including randomised controlled trials (RCTs). As a result, both the volume and quality of evaluation evidence has increased.

The evidence produced by Uni Connect partnerships on the impact of their activities has been analysed as part of the national impact evaluation of the programme, and is collated in an Evidence Bank which is available via the OfS's website[37] and has been

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[31] Higher Education Access Tracker

[32] East Midlands Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Partnership Tracker

[33] Aimhigher Tracker

[34] OfS (2022d). *Consultation on a new approach to regulating equality of opportunity in English higher education*.

[35] Stevenson, J., McCaig, C. & Madriga, M. (2017) *Evaluation of the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCOs).* Sheffield Institute of Education.

[36] HEAT offer a lower cost subscription model for small providers. Membership types are listed on their website here, with the 'Affiliate Type' most suited to small specialist providers.

[37] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/fourth-independent-review-of-impact-evaluation-evidence-submitted-by-uni-connect-partnerships/

shared with TASO.[38] TASO has drawn on this and wider evidence on the impact of interventions to support access and student success in higher education to inform the development of an Evidence Toolkit.[39] In addition, TASO is collaborating with higher education institutions, third sector providers and social impact specialists on an ambitious portfolio of research to address gaps in the evidence base and improve access to high-quality, robust evidence on what works to eliminate inequalities in higher education. These resources are available to partnerships, individual higher education providers and delivery partners to support their planning and enhance their delivery, as well as to identify evidence gaps and opportunities to collaborate on future evaluations.

> A strength of Uni Connect has been the benefits of collaborative evaluation. I think Uni Connect does a much better job of evaluation than most.
>
> **Sector body**

The benefits of collaboration for wider stakeholders

Schools

As one of the primary recipients of access activities, schools are an important partner for organisations with widening participation priorities. Higher education providers work with schools to target priority groups[40] and to identify barriers to progression to ensure provision is appropriate and responsive to local needs.[41] Strategic school-led partnerships also help to ensure access activities are tailored to best meet student need (see Case Study 3).

> We know the students well… if you're talking about meeting the needs of different student groups in different parts of the country, having that contextual understanding is absolutely key, in terms of driving the aspiration, attainment or just getting them to apply to higher education in the first instance.
>
> **School staff member**

Although attainment raising will not be the principal focus for Uni Connect and individual providers until September 2023, attainment raising activities have been provided to schools and colleges since the start of the programme. These activities have resulted in positive outcomes including increased grades as highlighted on page 13. Previous research shows that schools were increasingly recognising the potential impact of activities delivered via programmes such as Uni Connect on students' motivation and attitudes to learning and the indirect impact this has on

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[38] Transforming Access & Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) is an Affiliate What Works Centre committed to the generation, synthesis and dissemination of high-quality evidence about effective practice in widening participation and student outcomes.

[39] https://taso.org.uk/evidence/toolkit/

[40] Atherton, G., Boffey, R. & Kazim, T. (2019) *POLAR opposite: How the targeting of learners for widening access to HE work could be improved.*

[41] Ipsos MORI (2022a) *Mapping and Gapping*.

attainment.[42] Continued collaborative working with schools on a common vision such as attainment raising can serve to meet the future objectives of Uni Connect, as well as addressing schools' needs to raise attainment. Working in partnership with schools to design and implement attainment raising activities will also help to ensure provision is aligned with the national curriculum.

In addition, by working closely with schools, higher education providers and other delivery partners can gain insight into what is realistically possible and practicable to deliver in a particular context and with specific groups of young people.

> Schools often feel that the principle of [outreach] is a good idea, but the implementation of it in reality might not work in a school environment. Collaboration enables universities to better understand what works for schools.
>
> **Third sector organisation**

A collaborative approach provides signposting for schools about the access offer in their area and gives them resources that they may not have known were available otherwise. As one teacher explained, school staff are often unaware of the range of activities available in their area. The time required to identify suitable activities and engage individual providers can place a considerable burden on staff.

> Time constraints are a massive barrier. Especially, not knowing where to start sometimes (which would have been the case in the past). Now, I can email my university hub and say, 'We're trying to do this. Do you know of any contacts? Do you know what we could do?' They give a list of options of what we can have throughout the year.
>
> **School staff member**

Having a single point of contact within an access network or partnership helps to reduce this burden by streamlining communications and reducing duplication.[43]

> Schools get lots of people knocking on their doors, lots of different institutions offering outreach, as well as third party providers. But we can bring that all under one umbrella. We also have good relationships with partners and can signpost, so if a school's asking us for something we don't offer, we can signpost them to someone who does.
>
> **Uni Connect partnership**

Some Uni Connect partnerships have placed staff within schools and colleges to co-ordinate and/or support the delivery of access activities. This approach reduces the

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[42] Bowes, L., Tazzyman, S., Birkin, G. & Roberts, J. (2022). *An independent evaluation of Uni Connect's impact on intermediate outcomes for learners: A report for the Office for Students on the 2021/22 (Wave 3) learner survey findings*.

[43] Ipsos MORI (2022c). *Data Sharing and Data Protection*; Morris, M., Golden, S., Ireland, E. & Judkins, M. (2005) *Evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge The Views of Partnership Coordinators 2004*. National Foundation for Educational Research. National Foundation for Educational Research.

burden on schools and colleges by boosting their capacity, which in turn can foster a more collaborative partnership. Locating Uni Connect staff within schools and colleges also supports the continued professional development of teaching staff by raising their awareness of the routes to and opportunities in higher education.[44]

School involvement in the partnership plays an important role in ensuring that access activities are tailored to individual contexts and needs.[45] This benefit is identified as one of the key factors that has sustained school involvement in Uni Connect over the longer term.[46]

Further education colleges

Further education colleges are key partners in the design and delivery of collaborative access activities as well as beneficiaries of post-16 outreach activities. Like small and specialist providers, colleges often have limited resources to deliver their own access activity. Working in partnership with larger institutions enables them to expand their reach and access a broader range of young people.[47] It also helps to raise awareness of the variety of routes into higher education, including higher education offered by further education colleges, and ensures information is conveyed in an impartial way.

> When smaller institutions, such as ours, work collaboratively with bigger institutions, the profile of our institutions increases. In fact, in some cases, people actually start to realise that we do exist because we're not even known for offering higher education.
>
> **Further education college**

Membership of a partnership like Uni Connect also provides further education colleges with additional outreach staff and access to resources to support delivery.

> I could go to [higher education partner] and ask them to provide student ambassadors, and they would come and help deliver a session. It's opportunities like that, that just wouldn't exist without this partnership. We wouldn't have any resources.
>
> **Further education college**

Local authorities

Higher education providers often engage local authorities in collaborative access activities to ensure their work responds to the needs of young people (including those the local authority is responsible for, such as those in care). In return for sharing data

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[44] Bowes, L., Tazzyman, S., Sandhu, J., Moreton, R., Birkin, G., McCaig, C., Madriga, M., Kozman, E. & Wright, H. (2019). *The National Collaborative Outreach Programme. End of Phase 1 report for the national formative and impact evaluations*.

[45] Stevenson, J., McCaig, C. & Madriga, M. (2017) *Evaluation of the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCOs)*. Sheffield Institute of Education.

[46] Ipsos MORI (2022b). *Strategic Engagement*.

[47] Ipsos MORI (2022b). *Strategic Engagement*.

and insight, local authorities can ensure higher education providers and their partners are aware of wider educational priorities in the region. This includes priorities linked to levelling up, social mobility and economic growth, and the ways in which they can support the local authority to achieve the associated goals through their joint work.[48] For instance, providing additional support and expertise for care leavers is a statutory requirement for local authorities as part of the 'Keep on Caring' care leaver covenant.[49] This includes ensuring care leavers are supported in their future education. Local authorities can be supported by partnerships to meet this statutory requirement through the provision of tailored activities for care leavers that provide impartial information, advice and guidance about higher education options and wider support.

Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs)

The involvement of Local Enterprise Partnerships in higher education-led partnerships can help to ensure careers information, advice and guidance is informed by local labour market information. This provides up to date information that takes account of both current and future regional skills needs. It can also help to facilitate employer engagement in the development and delivery of widening access activities.[48] Raising awareness of skills needs, the range of potential career opportunities for graduates in a local area and routes into different industries (including degree apprenticeships) fulfils an important role in widening access. However, it also has potential benefits for LEPs, employers and other sector bodies by helping to increase and diversify the pipeline of young people who are considering working in industries that are strategically important for economic growth and social mobility in the region.

Third-party organisations

Collaboration between higher education providers and third-party organisations is mutually beneficial. Many of these providers are charitable organisations, and revenue from programmes such as Uni Connect and the opportunity to extend their reach to new schools and colleges helps to sustain them. Third party providers also benefit from the knowledge and insight higher education providers and other partners provide into the needs of young people and existing provision, helping them to develop a tailored offer that adds value rather than duplicates existing provision.

> There is a danger [without collaboration] that we will implement something that is not based on what people really need or not in the way they need it. Or, we will be reinventing the wheel because something will be happening somewhere else that we don't know about.
>
> **Third sector organisation**

Third-party organisations in turn offer higher education providers several benefits. This includes specialist knowledge about how to engage with particular target groups

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[48] Ipsos MORI (2022b). *Strategic Engagement*.

[49] https://mycovenant.org.uk/about/

(e.g. young carers, refugee and asylum seekers, people from military families and young people from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities), and expert knowledge and skills that can ensure young people receive tailored activities to achieve maximum impact. Engaging with third-party organisations can also support higher education providers to increase their capacity to deliver access activities.

Young people

Young people are the target audience and ultimate beneficiary of access activities. A collaborative approach to the design and delivery of access activities adds value in a number of ways. Benefits include access to a wider variety and choice of access activities, more tailored provision to better meet their needs and increased opportunities to have a voice in the co-creation of activities. Through programmes such as Uni Connect, target groups of young people also benefit from having access to a coherent programme of activities which provides sustained and progressive support and impartial information, advice and guidance. The current evidence suggests that this approach effectively helps young people to develop their knowledge of the benefits and realities of higher education and the diverse offer available.[50] Students can draw on this insight to inform their decision-making and ensure they select the option that is the best 'fit' for them.[51]

> We are able to give students experiences of a technical course, a traditional Russell Group, as well as a smaller provider. Where else would they be able to get experiences like that?
>
> **Uni Connect partnership**

Other collaborative programmes are also impactful for young people. For example, IntoUniversity's, long-term, place-based community-based approach, which works with some of the most disadvantaged young people in the UK, has demonstrated that their students are more likely to progress to higher education compared with students from similar backgrounds that do not receive the support (see Case Study 4).

Higher education providers are increasingly recognising that academic qualifications alone may not always provide an adequate indication of students' potential, and that a range of contextual factors can influence attainment. In response, the use of contextual admissions is utilised in parts of the higher education sector to promote equality of opportunity and fairness in the application process. Contextual admissions processes typically enable students who meet specific criteria to receive an offer

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[50] Bowes, L., Tazzyman, S., Birkin, G. & Roberts, J. (2022). *An independent evaluation of Uni Connect's impact on intermediate outcomes for learners: A report for the Office for Students on the 2021/22 (Wave 3) learner survey findings*.

[51] Williams, M. & Mellors-Bourne, R. (2019). *Improving access for the most able but least likely: Evaluation of the Realising Opportunities programme*. Institute for Employment Studies.

several grades below the standard offer.[52] Institutions take a range of characteristics into account, including free school meal and disability status.[53]

Participants who complete Realising Opportunities (RO), a programme delivered by a partnership of research intensive institutions, benefit from additional consideration from the RO partner universities when they apply to them through UCAS. Applicants could also receive alternative RO offers which are typically two A level grades (or equivalent) lower than the standard offer. The benefit of this collaborative approach is that students are not tied to one provider and can select their preferred institution from within the network.[54] Similarly, the Elephant Group, a social mobility charity formed by a group of state school headteachers, collaborates with universities to offer state school Year 12 and 13 students an access programme designed to increase access to a 'top third' university (see Case study 5).

A summary of the main benefits of collaboration for different stakeholders is provided in Annex 3.

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[52] Boliver, V., Crawford, C., Powell, M. & Craige, W. (2017). *Admissions in Context: The use of contextual information by leading universities*. The Sutton Trust.

[53] Gorard, S., Siddiqui, N., Boliver, V. & Banerjee, P. (2019). Which are the most suitable contextual indicators for use in widening participation to HE? *Research papers in education*, 34 (1), pp. 99-129.

[54] Realising Opportunities (2021). *Recognition Guide: 2022 Entry*.

3. Barriers to effective collaboration

Summary

The main barriers that can inhibit effective collaboration are:

– Competing internal priorities, particularly between a higher education provider's marketing and recruitment and outreach departments, to achieve student numbers and access and participation targets.

– External tensions between higher education providers, particularly in relation to student recruitment.

– A limited strategic approach to collaborative design and delivery of access activities.

– Difficulty securing buy-in from senior stakeholders, schools, further education colleges and wider organisations.

– Underestimating the timescales and resources required to build and maintain strategic collaborative partnerships.

– Reductions in funding which impact on the volume of collaborative activity, including the involvement of third party organisations.

– Limited funding periods or uncertainty over funding can disincentivise investment in new collaborations.

While our desk review and stakeholder interviews highlight that the benefits of collaboration outweigh the barriers, it is important to understand these barriers and tensions as this insight can help to inform decisions about how best to incentivise future collaboration and the infrastructure needed to support it.

Longstanding and current barriers to collaboration

Competing priorities

While national collaborative outreach programmes can help reduce competition between higher education providers, it can be challenging, at least initially, to overcome prevailing cultures of competition within and between institutions.[55]

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[55] Stevenson, J., McCaig, C. & Madriga, M. (2017) *Evaluation of the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach (NNCOs)*. Sheffield Institute of Education.

Internal tensions between departments can act as a barrier to collaboration. For example, tensions can arise between departments responsible for the achievement of student recruitment and access targets.[56]

> Sometimes different priorities can be a barrier and it can be difficult to align them. "OK, you [department] want to work with these students, we [department] want to work with those students, is there an overlap somewhere?" It's about identifying how we can make that work together, because obviously we both need to be meeting targets.
>
> **Uni Connect partnership**

All institutions that are registered with the OfS in the 'Approved (fee cap)' category that want to charge tuition fees above the basic cap are required to have an access and participation plan (APP).[57] These plans require higher education providers to set out their targets to increase access for student groups that are underrepresented at their institution. The aims of Uni Connect are broader and require partnerships to increase access to the higher education sector in general. There is a perception among some Uni Connect partnerships that there can be a misalignment between institutions' specific targets and the aims of Uni Connect, which can hinder collaborative working. This has the potential to lead to siloed activity and the prioritisation of access activities that address institutional inequalities, rather than inequalities nationally.

> The way targets are written isn't very collaborative – you have to say how you will deliver outreach to benefit your institution. That's kind of almost inserting an element of competition from the start.
>
> **Uni Connect partnership**

The current approach to access and participation plans can result in a lack of external coordination with other higher education providers. This can inhibit the development of a joined-up, collaborative approach that ensures resources are appropriately distributed to achieve maximum impact for young people.[58]

Poor communication can become a barrier to effective collaboration as partnerships grow and more organisations (and their relevant points of contacts) become involved.[56] A lack of communication can exacerbate perceptions about competing priorities. One Uni Connect partnership highlighted that consistent messaging is crucial as challenges can occur when there are differences between the collaborative programme and individual providers' internal communications, particularly around

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[56] Bowes, L., Tazzyman, S., Sandhu, J., Moreton, R., Birkin, G., McCaig, C., Madriga, M., Kozman, E. & Wright, H. (2019). *The National Collaborative Outreach Programme. End of Phase 1 report for the national formative and impact evaluations*.

[57] https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/access-and-participation-plans/.

[58] Moss, A. (2022). 'Fair Access and Participation: Sector-wide challenges need sector-wide collaboration', *HEPI blog*, 21 October.

recruitment and admissions. Another Uni Connect interviewee suggested that transparency and co-creation can help all partners feel a sense of ownership within their collaborative network.

External tensions between further education colleges and individual higher education providers can also impede collaborative working. There are two main reasons why these tensions arise: first, differing access and participation priorities and second, competition for student numbers.

> We used to run a very nice pre-16 programme for care experienced students that was in all the institutions access and participation plans, which met a collaborative target. But anything post-16 we always felt we were getting into competition [for recruitment].
>
> **Uni Connect partnership**

Uni Connect has enabled one partnership of five universities to establish a new collaborative partnership with further education colleges in their region. The new college partnership has enabled an expansion of their programme for care-experienced students to include post-16 activities over the last 18-months. The programme is now offered to students across Years 7 to 13.

> The Uni Connect partnership has enabled us for the first time in our region to have had all 5 universities and all 15 colleges in the region involved in a strategic partnership.
>
> **Uni Connect partnership**

It has taken time for this Uni Connect partnership to establish strong relationships with the colleges and to reduce tensions, particularly relating to competition in student recruitment. The impartiality of Uni Connect and the fact that the programme is not directly linked to any individual higher education provider has helped to overcome these challenges. Promoting the mutual benefits of collaboration to all providers has also been key to the development of a strong strategic partnership, as has a focus on the provision of impartial information, advice and guidance information about the range of routes into higher education, including degree apprenticeships and level four and five courses. Another Uni Connect partnership highlighted that placing dedicated staff members funded through the collaborative programme in colleges can also help to mitigate competition and add an impartial voice.

Working together on a collective ambition to increase student attainment has also helped reduce competition between individual universities and colleges. For example, one Uni Connect partnership is setting up a new attainment raising study skills programme for students in Years 12 and 13. They have promoted the impartiality of the programme to partners and highlighted the benefits to each of the individual institutions.

> We have good systems established to avoid competition about student recruitment. We're setting up some new study skills bootcamps and dipping our toe in the water of the attainment raising. We've had careful conversations with our

> partner universities – the programme will be very impartial, it isn't about recruitment, it is very much about skills development and they can see how that can benefit them because the students that may apply to them will be much more ready to study in a HE setting.

Uni Connect partnership

Schools with sixth forms and further education colleges can also be reticent to engage in joint post-16 access activities because of competition over the finite pool of students progressing to post-16 education. National programmes such as Uni Connect have helped to get schools and colleges in the same space by providing impartial information, advice and guidance about progression routes.

> Schools with sixth forms don't necessarily want their local FE colleges coming in because they want all their kids to progress into sixth form. Because we've got a team that aren't aligned to a specific college but are providing IAG about all higher education progression routes, it means we've been able to help our college colleagues by reaching some of their students.

Uni Connect partnership

The pool of potential applicants from underrepresented groups that achieve the necessary grades to progress to a high-tariff, selective institution is relatively small. As a result, competition between these providers for students is high and this can, in turn, deter collaboration. Realising Opportunities (RO)[59] is an example of where research-intensive universities collaborate effectively, through the provision of a structured programme of interventions for high performing students aged 16-19. Securing the buy-in of senior stakeholders at each institution is essential. This has been achieved by clearly communicating how engagement in RO helps individual universities meet their widening access objectives. Universities that collaborate through RO are encouraged to contribute to a recognition guide, which is an indicator of how they will take account of a young person's engagement with the programme in the application process. Students who complete the programme can gain recognition from RO universities in the form of a reduced offer (typically two grades lower). Transparency and a commitment to sharing best practice is key to the success of this process. Partners can view offers made by other RO institutions, which helps to reduce competition because all universities have made an informed decision about what they are willing to offer students to balance recruitment numbers.[60]

National collaborative programmes such as Uni Connect are perceived by partnerships to act as the conduit to collaborative working. They help to remove perceived internal and external institutional competition through the provision of an impartial access offer. This in turn can help to establish a shared vision among

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[59] https://www.realisingopportunities.ac.uk/about/

[60] Realising Opportunities (2016). *Impact Report*.

individual higher education providers that can collectively make progress towards national access and participation objectives.

Absence of a strategic collaborative approach and buy-in

A strategic, forward-thinking approach to collaboration is important to ensure the legitimacy and credibility of collaborative networks. Senior engagement and buy-in within partner higher education providers and other sector organisations is needed to ensure strong governance structures and to facilitate effective leadership and management. Strong governance ensures fairness and transparency between members and effective leadership ensures each member of the partnership contributes to the success of the programme and benefits from its involvement.[61] Effective governance and leadership also helps to ensure strategic priorities of the partners are aligned. In the context of Uni Connect, stakeholders join governing boards to ensure ongoing strategic engagement.[62]

Interviewees highlighted that in the absence of senior buy-in and a strategic, collaborative approach, activities can be duplicated. This acts as a barrier to achieving a joined-up, sustained and progressive access offer for young people. In the absence of a joined-up approach, schools and colleges can become saturated and overwhelmed by communication and offers of support from individual organisations.[63]

> We need a national framework to ensure joined-up delivery, with consistent objectives, targets and links into schools to avoid duplication.
>
> **Higher education provider**

Recommendations on improvements to governance and leadership were identified at the end of phase one of Uni Connect to help partnerships develop a more strategic approach to the design and delivery of their access activities.[61] Findings from the recent formative evaluation of Uni Connect suggest that these areas have been strengthened.[64] However, there is still the perception that variations in the strategic direction, focus and ambitions of individual partnerships, and the access activities they deliver, can present a challenge when seeking to measure progress and impact at a programme level.

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[61] Bowes, L., Tazzyman, S., Sandhu, J., Moreton, R., Birkin, G., McCaig, C., Madriga, M., Kozman, E. & Wright, H. (2019). *The National Collaborative Outreach Programme. End of Phase 1 report for the national formative and impact evaluations*.

[62] Ipsos MORI (2022b). *Strategic Engagement*.

[63] Achtaridou, E., Mackay, S. & Torrini, E. (2021) *Evaluation of Uni Connect Phase Two: Detailed Findings Report*.

[64] Ipsos MORI (2022b). *Strategic Engagement*.

> It's really hard to measure progress as a sector, because we are all pulling in slightly different directions… more importantly, and maybe on a more technical level, we're also using different tools and working towards different objectives.
>
> **Sector body**

> I think without some at least regional, and ideally national, framework that has very clear objectives and targets and roots through into schools, and from schools into university, what we're doing is creating a mess that will be immeasurable.
>
> **Higher education provider**

Securing the buy-in of schools, and those in challenging circumstance in particular, can present an issue for collaborative partnerships.[65] Schools often have limited time and resource to engage with higher education providers' access provision.[66] According to some of the stakeholders consulted, widening access may not be prioritised by school staff who are managing a range of other competing priorities.

> Access to higher education from a school's perspective – there aren't really any proper strategic drivers that encourage schools to engage with widening participation activities. Schools aren't really held to account about what percentage of their pupils go onto higher education.
>
> **Sector body**

The use of different terminology about 'underrepresentation' and 'targeting' can also be a barrier to school engagement. For example, schools predominantly use free school meal (FSM) status and Pupil Premium as a measure of disadvantage. Schools may not be familiar with POLAR4[67], a measure of underrepresentation commonly used by higher education providers. To overcome this barrier, higher education providers need to ensure they adopt a 'common language' that schools understand.

> Higher education providers talk about widening access and schools talk about Pupil Premium/FSM. Polar data does not mean anything to a school. Commonality of language is really important to engage schools.
>
> **Sector body**

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[65] Bowes, L., Tazzyman, S., Sandhu, J., Moreton, R., Birkin, G., McCaig, C., Madriga, M., Kozman, E. & Wright, H. (2019). *The National Collaborative Outreach Programme. End of Phase 1 report for the national formative and impact evaluations*.

[66] Tazzyman, S., Bowes, L., Moreton, R., Madriga, M & McCaig, C. (2018). *National Collaborative Outreach Programme: Year one report of the national formative and impact evaluation, including capacity building with NCOP consortia*.

[67] Participation of local areas (POLAR) classification groups areas across the UK based on the proportion of young people wo participate in higher education

One Uni Connect partnership has overcome challenges of school engagement by focusing on the Gatsby Benchmarks.[68] For example, Benchmark 7 is designed to ensure students develop an understanding of the full range of learning opportunities available to them through encounters with further and higher education. Collaborative partnerships can support schools to achieve this benchmark by facilitating access to providers delivering the different routes.

Providing a dedicated member of staff within schools and colleges to act as a single point of contact for tailored access activity has also helped Uni Connect partnerships to secure school buy-in. The Surrey University case study (Case Study 3) provides an example of how this has been operationalised.

Timescales

Time and resources are needed to build and maintain strategic partnerships. Underestimating the timescales required can increase the likelihood of the collaboration failing, as not all partners will be invested and engaged with the principles of the programme. It took considerable time, up to six or seven months, for some Uni Connect partnerships to establish their networks and to start delivering activity; partnerships that had no existing infrastructure to draw upon required more time to secure the necessary specialist skills and capacity.[69] As one Uni Connect partnership highlighted, taking time to understand the different partners' priorities and perspective is important for fostering relationships and ensures the partnership is sensitive to political tensions and fosters a space where collaboration can happen. It will be important to factor in sufficient time and transitional arrangements for any future collaborative programmes.

When working with multiple organisations, more time is needed to set up contractual agreements and strategy documents. Time and expertise is needed to develop these agreements, which can be overlooked when there is pressure to quickly establish a collaborative network. An investment of time needs to be weighted towards the start of new collaborative activity.

> After maybe five years the true benefit of collaboration can be realised and the ongoing effort to maintain collaboration has reduced. The benefits do, however, massively outweigh the initial time and effort.
>
> **Uni Connect partnership**

Interviewees expressed that it takes time for progress to be made against collaborative access targets. One Uni Connect partnership suggested that extending the APP length to five years would promote more collaborative working by enabling

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[68] https://resources.careersandenterprise.co.uk/browse-category/gatsby-benchmarks/gatsby-benchmark-7

[69] Tazzyman, S., Bowes, L., Moreton, R., Madriga, M & McCaig, C. (2018). *National Collaborative Outreach Programme: Year one report of the national formative and impact evaluation, including capacity building with NCOP consortia*.

higher education providers to identify joint risks and priorities and develop effectively way to address them in partnership.

Future concerns

Uni Connect has been one of the principal levers of collaborative work to ensure young people receive an impartial access offer. The future of collaborative access activity is at a critical juncture as funding for Uni Connect decreases. This is having an impact on the infrastructure, as staff leave and are not replaced, as well as the level of provision, as the access offer is reduced.[70] There is a sense of uncertainty among some stakeholders about the future of collaboration, and in particular, about how it will be funded.

Funding and investment

A strong sentiment to emerge from interviewees was that reduced funding or the removal of funding for a national programme will erode strategic, collaborative access activities. In this context, providers are more likely to prioritise access activities that address to institutional rather than sector-wide objectives.

> Money is always going to be one of the biggest barriers to collaboration, and I think if you can get that right, you're pretty much there. What Uni Connect has done, it's given the incentive to providers to work together on this piece of work and I think that can't be underestimated.
>
> **Uni Connect partnership**

Whilst reduced funding for national collaborative programmes may save money in the short-term by increasing in-house activity at higher education providers, this is unlikely to be effective in the long-term. Some perceive that in the absence of a nationally-funded programme, existing partnerships will be eroded and there will be less incentive for higher education providers to work together. Collaboration with third party organisations may also be reduced.[70] One Uni Connect partnership highlighted that this would result in the loss of specialist knowledge, expertise and capacity that is required to develop tailored activities to support some underrepresented groups. Stakeholders suggest that if future funding structures change, then incentives to collaborate are needed to ensure sustainable and impactful collaborative networks. Some suggest that the OfS, as the regulator, is well positioned to incentivise higher education providers to collaborate, through the new access and participation guidance.

Reduced funding is negatively impacting on partnership working with schools. For example, one school interviewee highlighted that there is no longer sufficient funding for a dedicated in-school outreach person to engage with higher education providers. Schools and colleges are facing unprecedented pressures, and in the absence of this funding, do not have the capacity to deliver access activities themselves.

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[70] Achtaridou, E., Mackay, S. & Torrini, E. (2021) *Evaluation of Uni Connect Phase Two: Detailed Findings Report*.

> We used to have someone that came from the university as part of Uni Connect to the school. They would be at our school two days each week… They would be that bridge to provide more time, which is what we lacked. That was incredible, that made a huge difference.

<div align="right">

School interview

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There are several collaborative programmes and partnerships that pre-date and co-exist alongside Uni Connect, including Go Higher West Yorkshire, the Higher Education Progression Partnership funded by Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Sheffield and Realising Opportunities which is funded through a subscription model. These funding models provide more stability over the longer-term and help to ensure young people receive a consistent and sustainable access offer. However, the infrastructure is smaller compared to programmes such as Uni Connect and there are fewer partners within these networks.

A shift to alternative funding models could negatively impact smaller and specialist providers. These providers have more limited resources to buy-in support and subscribe to networks and services such as tracking systems like HEAT. Furthermore, they often do not have in-house monitoring and evaluation expertise to understand the impact of their access offer. National funding via Uni Connect has enabled such providers to access resources and expertise from partner providers and to develop monitoring and evaluation skills and capacity. This has enabled them to expand their reach and contribute to the evidence base about what access activities are the most effective.

Funding timescales

The evaluation of AimHigher emphasised the importance of a skilled outreach workforce.[71] High staff turnover from short-term funding models can result in the loss in specialist knowledge, including monitoring and evaluation expertise.[72] The Uni Connect partnerships, individual higher education providers and third sector organisations consulted also conveyed that the short-term funding structure for Uni Connect has frequently led to high staff turnover. This inhibits long-term planning and resourcing[73] as well as the sustainability of a strategic approach to collaborative access.

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[71] Morris, M., Golden, S., Ireland, E. & Judkins, M. (2005) *Evaluation of Aimhigher: Excellence Challenge The Views of Partnership Coordinators 2004*. National Foundation for Educational Research. National Foundation for Educational Research.

[72] Ipsos Mori (2021). *Formative Evaluation of Uni Connect Phase Two: Survey of School and College Staff*.

[73] Achtaridou, E., Mackay, S. & Torrini, E. (2021) *Evaluation of Uni Connect Phase Two: Detailed Findings Report*.

I think it's always the challenge of consistency and if anything is collaborative and it relies on a funding initiative, it's on a project cycle which is vulnerable in tenure.

Specialist higher education provider

We're shutting stuff down. We can't recruit anybody else because you're not going to get the calibre of candidate for the length of contract that we're able to offer.

Uni Connect partnership

4. Developing an infrastructure for effective future collaboration

Effective collaboration offers a range of benefits that can contribute to increasing equality of opportunity to higher education for underrepresented young people. Collaboration offers economies of scale and can maximise value for money. This can minimise duplication and result in better co-ordinated, sustained and progressive access activities. A collaborative approach supports the elimination of 'cold spots' in access provision and helps to develop a fuller understanding about the needs and barriers to progression to higher education in particular regions. The strengthening of the evidence base around the most effective access activities for young people is also possible through collaboration.

Several prevailing barriers can impede effective collaboration, however. These include competing internal and external priorities, the absence of a strategic approach and buy-in, and resourcing and time constraints. Future concerns are centred on funding and investment, funding timescales and the shift in focus to pre-16 attainment raising. But the greater emphasis on attainment raising in the context of the recovery from the pandemic presents an opportunity and could serve to stimulate future collaborative activity to address learning lost, which has disproportionately affected individuals who are already underrepresented in the higher education sector.

A future infrastructure to support collaboration should seek to harness the benefits identified in this report, whilst addressing the prevailing barriers and future concerns. We set out below how pre-16 attainment raising activities may present opportunities for effective collaboration. This is followed by the characteristics of a future model to support continued effective collaboration and the envisaged role of the OfS to incentivise this activity.

Raising pre-16 attainment

In February 2022, the OfS set out their ambitions for access and participation over subsequent years. This included expanding school-higher education provider partnership activity to ensure a strategic commitment to raising attainment for pupils from underrepresented groups, increasing the capacity of these pupils to access and succeed in higher education. The shift in focus to raising pre-16 attainment will require individual higher education providers to develop collaborative partnerships to demonstrate positive impact on the performance of institutions outside of their own.[74]

Interviewees were mixed in their views about this shift in focus to raising the pre-16 attainment of underrepresented groups. One Uni Connect partnership was heartened by the proposed changes, suggesting that this has increased partners' willingness to collaborate by working together regionally, rather than "in their own little pockets that

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[74] Moss, A. (2022). 'Fair Access and Participation: Sector-wide challenges need sector-wide collaboration', *HEPI blog*, 21 October.

individual HEPs have identified". They view that their collaborative network is well positioned to develop and implement attainment raising activities and that Uni Connect can act as the conduit to collaborative attainment raising activity.

> I'm really heartened by the increased appetite for collaboration over the last six months than ever before. And I think it's purely to do with the attainment raising aspect.

> **Uni Connect partnership**

Third party providers who have developed and refined interventions to raise attainment over several years agreed that collaboration is key to getting the most out of these programmes. For some, this presents an opportunity to encourage a collaborative approach.

> What we do isn't the solution to everything. We can't do anything without what happens in schools, and universities can't solve attainment issues [alone], they need genuine collaboration, and how you do that is a little bit of a holy grail isn't it?

> **Third sector organisation**

In contrast, other interviewees expressed some potential concerns about the proposed changes. While higher education providers can continue to use strategic outreach funding on activities for mature learners, One Uni Connect partnership cautioned that existing commitments and new collaborative projects for mature students and lifelong learning will have to be terminated. This is because they are concerned that such activities will be viewed as incompatible with the proposed attainment raising agenda.

Another concern conveyed by interviewees was a perceived lack of clarity about the definition of pre-16 attainment, what and how to measure attainment, who to engage with, and the indicators of success. Given the proposed changes are still under development, these concerns are perhaps not surprising. Future OfS guidance is likely to help individual higher education providers and collaborative networks to shape their offer.

> We should all be looking at similar indicators [of attainment raising] and to have similar targets so we can measure national impact. I think we need much more strategic guidance on how to do that.

> **Higher education provider**

Collaboration is viewed by most as an important driver of developing and implementing a suite of access activities designed to raise pre-16 attainment. However, some higher education providers and Uni Connect partners are worried that they do not currently have the necessary skills and expertise in place to design and deliver attainment raising activity, which may impact on developing an effective collaborative approach. It will take time to identify who should be involved in future collaborative partnerships to raise pre-16 attainment, and this will likely involve third

party providers who have been working on attainment-raising programmes for a number of years and have evidence of what works.

> Most universities, if not all universities, are not really best placed to do the kind of work we do on the ground week in, week out… I'm thinking of the most recent piece around attainment raising, for example. I think it is relatively harder for universities to do that kind of work meaningfully over a longer term that an OfS report requires, than it is for partnering with us.
>
> **Third sector organisation**

Most interviewees emphasised that attainment-raising is not just about direct pedagogical support for the curriculum but will require a holistic approach. Some higher education providers suggested that collaborating with academic departments who can offer specialist educational expertise will support them to develop a holistic approach to attainment raising programmes. School interviewees agree that a collaborative approach to attainment raising will benefit them. However, they suggest that higher education providers can best contribute to this through supra-curricular and wrap-around activity, rather than direct academic interventions and third sector organisations. This is also the view of third sector organisations.

> It's about taking a more sophisticated approach to attainment which goes beyond simply augmenting the curriculum, because I don't think schools will want that… we know evidence says increasing attendance, motivation, direction, understanding where they want to go and how they want to get there, will lead to metacognition and study skills, and will lead to better attainment.
>
> **Third sector organisation**

Characteristics of effective collaboration

Based on the findings of this and previous research, we have identified the following characteristics of effective collaboration that should be considered for any future model:

– Create a shared vision and purpose for the collaborative programme and clearly articulate how each member will contribute to the achievement its objectives.

– Secure the buy-in of strategic managers in all partners, and not just higher education providers, by demonstrating how a collaborative approach will support the achievement of individual partners' organisational goals in addition to the programme goals.

– Build on the success of existing partnerships and networks with established infrastructure, systems and processes.

– Put in place strong governance and accountability of members.

– Provide long-term (5 years) investment to support the initial set up and implementation of the programme/partnership, the development of a coherent offer, targeting and awareness raising and the establishment of a strong brand.

- Engage a diverse range of stakeholders from within and outside the higher education sector at a strategic level, including recipients (e.g. schools and colleges) and primary beneficiaries (the learner voice).

- Adopt a flexible approach that is responsive to changes in policy, contextual factors and/or the needs of underrepresented groups.

- Integrate an effective evaluation strategy that draws on the expertise within the partnership to assess the effectiveness of systems and processes and the impact of activities on target audiences and partners.

Supporting and incentivising future collaboration

Funding models

Investment is required to support future collaborative access and attainment raising activity. To incentivise and facilitate this, the OfS may wish to consider several different funding models:

Government funding via a national programme

The existing government-funded Uni Connect programme is the funding model that many believe creates the optimum infrastructure to mobilise effective collaboration. National programmes promote a unified vision and shared objectives under a national brand, which fosters school- and sector-wide engagement and encourages a strategic approach to implementation and delivery. An impartial, sustained, and progressive access offer is a further strength of national collaborative programmes to provide maximum benefit for young people and progress towards access targets. Collaboration ensures streamlined communications and a joined-up offer, which prevents schools being overburdened and activities duplicated. Evaluation capacity can also be bolstered via national level funding to enhance the evidence base.

If the overarching aims of nationally funded programmes are perceived as too rigid and misaligned to regional need, this can deter collaborative working, even if the perception is inaccurate. However, there is a strong sentiment that without a nationally funded programme, collaboration will not continue in the same way with a risk of an impartial access offer being reduced and 'cold spots' in provision re-emerging.

Subscription to a regional collaborative network

Collaboration can also be supported by subscription models where higher education providers pay to become members of a collaborative network. Realising Opportunities, The Elephant Group, the Sheffield Hallam-funded Higher Education Progression Partnership and Go Higher West Yorkshire are examples of current subscription models that have been operating successfully for several years. These funding structures, like national programmes, can help to provide a sustainable and progressive access offer for young people and overcome the challenge of short-term funding cycles that are often associated with national programmes. There is a risk that not all higher education providers will be able to afford or be prepared to subscribe, particularly further education colleges and some small and specialist providers with limited access and participation budgets. A limitation of this model is

that national coverage may not be achieved, resulting in potential 'cold spots' and a more fragmented approach, with the risk of duplication.

Match-funding

Although not widely suggested by stakeholders, a match-funding or co-funding model could be adopted. This would require the OfS to part-fund a national collaborative programme and individual higher education institutions providing the match-funding using a proportion of their additional fee income or an alternative source.

In the absence of a national programme part-funded by the OfS, higher education providers could be incentivised to collaborate through regulatory mechanisms such as access and participation plans. This approach would require institutions to allocate a proportion of their fee income to collaborative activities to address key risks to equality of opportunity.

Incentivising collaboration

– Use Ofsted's and the OfS's regulatory frameworks to support and encourage collaborative access activity and school engagement.

– Develop clear guidance outlining the expectations of higher education providers, and the metrics that will be used to monitor outcomes achieved in collaboration with other providers and wider partners.

– Encourage partnerships to diversify their membership, drawing on wider internal staff (e.g. subject and pedagogical specialists) as well as external partners to ensure the expertise and capacity is in place to respond to emerging priorities for widening access, including raising pre-16 attainment

– Commission the evaluation of collaborative access activities to address gaps in the evidence base, e.g. the impact of attainment raising activities.

– Share evidence of what works and case studies showcasing the benefits of different collaborative models for higher education providers and wider stakeholders.

Annex 1: Case studies

Case study 1: Drawing upon partner expertise in programme design and delivery

Brightside worked with the Children's Society to design a mentoring programme for young carers that took into account their needs and experiences. Individual universities and Uni Connect partnerships recruited young carers to take part and Brightside mentors delivered the 16-week programme online.

Bright Carers was a collaborative online mentoring programme delivered in 2021 by Brightside. This involved a multi-partner collaboration with clearly defined roles and responsibilties for each partner. Seven universities and several Uni connect partnerships recruited fifty-three young carers in years 10-13 to take part. Brightside recruited mentors through their established specialist network of volunteers. The Children's Society supported the design of the programme and provided a training and a resource toolkit for mentors to enable them to support and advise young carers about the specific challenges and barriers they may experience.

A collaborative model strengthened the mentoring programme, by drawing on specialist expertise offered by partners such as the Children's Society to ensure it was tailored for young carers. This meant that young carers received bespoke, impartial advice and support. Joint funding for the programme enabled several universities to collaborate and upscale the delivery of the programme, which enabled them to expand their reach to more young carers. Through working together, individual providers were also able to make progress against their access and participation targets for young carers.

> It can be hard for individual universities to justify budget and resource for a small cohort of young people so we found a model where each institution can contribute a small amount of funding and resource to reach a larger cohort of specific groups. The result is a more cost-effective way of supporting groups with specific barriers but crucially it also creates the opportunity for cross pollination expertise and ultimately a programme which is really set up and designed to meet the needs of those young people.
>
> **Brightside staff member**

Brightside's recent impact report highlights the positive impact of the programme on young carers' knowledge about what to expect from student life, knowledge of the application process and optimism for their future. Young carers reported an increase in their coping strategies, an increase in their knowledge about where to locate trustworthy information and a better understanding of student finance. They were positive about their overall experience of mentoring and 82 percent of survey respondents said that the programme contributed to their decision about what to do next after school or college.

Case study 2: Providing impartial information to promote student choice

Collaborative subject taster days are part of Go Higher West Yorkshire's access offer. They are designed to provide students with impartial careers information across a range of industry sectors and highlight the different study pathway options. Higher education providers, along with local employers and wider industry partners, collaborate to provide an introducton to a range of subject specialisms and the different education options in the area.

Go Higher West Yorkshire (GHWY) is a partnership of thirteen Higher Education Providers, including HE-in-FE colleges, small and specialist providers, and universities. GHWY's Uni Connect partnership coordinates regional access activities with a range of providers and local employers for students in years 9-13.

Collaborative subject taster days are organised to showcase the options available in the area. For example, Leeds Trinity University, Huddersfield University, University Centre Leeds and West Yorkshire Police offer a taster day about policing and criminology. Collaborations involving specialist providers are also part of GHWY's offer, designed to introduce students to the variety of courses and career pathways available in the locally-important creative sector. A suite of events offered to students including in-person and online events allow students to experience what the breadth of higher education life will involve whilst focusing on specific subjects. Additional online sessions provide information about other aspects of higher education, such as student finance that students can watch at a time convenient to them.

Collaborative partnerships enable partners to pool their resources to provide an impartial access offer for students. This is particularly beneficial for smaller, specialist providers and further education colleges with locally responsive higher education offers, who have less resource to host such events. Multi-partner subject taster days help to break down barriers to higher education for young people by broadening their horizons and showing them the range of careers on offer. A focus on specific industry sectors and subject areas also enables the taster days to contribute to addressing regional skills shortages.

It's great to be able to showcase the full breadth of what's available in those career industries. We just couldn't do it ourselves… it is really valuable work, but without that central coordination, to get the two to three universities together to do it, it just wouldn't be there.

Specialist Provider

Case Study 3: A shared strategic approach to enhances school collaboration

The University of Surrey and Kings College Guilford have established a strategic, two-way collaborative partnership to embed access and attainment raising outreach activities. A dedicated university member of staff based in the school coordinates access activity, which helps to facilitie partnership work and deliver a sustained access programme.

Kings College Guildford, a state secondary school located one mile from the University of Surrey, has high local levels of deprivation and historically a low higher education participation rate. A strategic, collaborative partnership between the University of Surrey and Kings College Guildford has been in place since 2016.

The school is part of a local multi-academy trust, the Guildford Learning Partners Academy Trust. The university's former pro-vice-chancellor and Executive Dean of Faculty is a Learning Partners board member. The university employs a member of staff who is based in the school to coordinate and deliver a sustained access programme to raise students' aspirations towards higher education and improve their attainment.

Having a dedicated member of staff embedded in the school offers a range of benefits. It enables the university to better understand the school context and enhances collaborative working to ensure access and attainment raising activities are tailored to meet students' needs. The university member of staff provides a single point of contact, which facilitates both student and parent engagement by enabling them to build a trusted relationship. The school provides the university with access to students' attainment data, which enables them to develop more robust evaluations to understand the impact of their attainment raising activities. The university staff member also joins school senior leadership meetings to identify underrepresented students to effectively target access and attainment raising activities.

> I think one of the massive benefits of having someone in the school is that they are there. They're completely embedded, the children know them, all of the parents know who this person is. And when we're working with, the learners and families that we're working with, it's really important that they have someone that they can trust and build up that rapport with someone they know.
>
> **University staff member**

Early evidence suggests that this strategic, collaborative partnership is having a range of positive impacts. Students in years 7-11 report an increase in their aspirations towards their education and progressing to higher education.

> We're seeing a shift in aspirations and expectation from students and their families. From where we started to we hear more students and parents talking positively about University. Data from our annual survey shows an increase in

Students are starting to show an increase in their motivation to work hard and attainment levels are also increasing – the gap between the King College's Attainment 8 score and the national score has decreased. Wider benefits are also being seen. For example, since the strategic partnership has been in place, the school received a 'good' Ofsted rating. It is one of a very small number of schools to increase by two Grades (from Grade 4 to 2) in one attempt and Ofsted praised the partnership, stating that.

> Close partnership work with the University [of Surrey] enables pupils to be well informed about future career paths. This motivates them to strive for the educational standards they will need to achieve in order to access appropriate further or higher education.

Ofsted

The University of Surrey is currently reviewing how this successful strategic, collaborative model can be replicated without a university member of staff in a further eight schools interested in developing a similar partnership. The university has also launched pilots in a suite of access and attainment raising activites to expand their collaborative partnership working with schools that do not currently have an embedded university staff member.

Case Study 4: A community-based, long-term collaborative partnership model

IntoUniversity works with schools and university partners to deliver long-term programmes for primary and secondary school students in communities with high levels of poverty and low levels of progression to higher education. Activities are designed and delivered in partnership with higher education providers, using community centres as a base.

IntoUniversity is a place-based community charity, established in 2002 to work with the least advantaged young people in the UK to tackle inequalities in education. With 39 learning centres in 22 towns and cities across England and Scotland, **Into**University targets areas with the highest proportions of poverty among young people and where progression to higher education is low. Each community centre is part-funded by a university and run by a centre leader and three education workers.

Long-term, home-from-home support for young people of mixed ability aged seven and above is at the heart of **Into**University's approach, to ensure young people can realise their ambitions, achieve their academic potential, develop vital skills and gain experience of the world of work. An important feature of the **Into**University collaborative model is to conduct feasibility studies and community consultations before a new centre is opened. This includes a lengthy period of research to understand the nuances of a local community that **Into**University plans to work in, and to ensure the centre team is well grounded in the local cultural, social and political dynamics of the area. When opening a centre, **Into**University commits to securing funding for at least five years, with the aim of providing a long-term, sustained offer for young people which they can depend on for the foreseeable future.

> One-off interventions don't overcome challenges or support students enough, it needs to be genuine engagement with individual students over the long term. And that's also why it's so important it's in the community because we're not parachuting in, we're not picking students up and saying, 'Come over here and look at something great over here.' We're saying, 'Here's your centre in your community. It's for you and your family, right where you live with staff who are here day in, day out, getting to know you.
>
> **IntoUniversity staff member**

Collaboration is central to the success of **Into**University. The organisation works closely with primary and secondary schools in the areas in which its centres are situated in order to identify young people in the community who are in need of the support offered. Meaningful ongoing consultation with schools also helps to ensure that the **Into**University programme complements rather than duplicates school delivery. University collaboration is also crucial both financially, to support running centres, and in supporting programme delivery by hosting visits and providing volunteers and academic staff to deliver bespoke sessions for students. Corporate engagement with local and national businesses provides employablity programmes

and centres also collaborate with cultural institutions, local authorities, virtual schools, local youth groups and other community organisations.

Adopting a community-based, long-term collaborative partnership model enables young people from the most deprived background to benefit from a suite of activities. This includes academic support, one-to-one mentoring, aspiration-raising workshops, employability sessions, leadership skills, university residential programmes and school holiday clubs. Students have acess to resources such as tutors, laptops, books and revision materials. The **Into**University long-term, collaborative model also helps to meet the wider national attainment raising policy agenda.

> Most, if not all, universities are not really best placed to do the kind of academic support work we do on the ground week-in-week-out after school with young people. So, in terms of meeting OfS's objectives around attainment, for example, I think it's easier and more effective for universities to partner with us to do that kind of community work over the long-term. Our collaborations enable universities to support us on the ground in work which impact really positively on our young people.
>
> **IntoUniversity staff member**

IntoUniversity's unique collaborative model shows postive, measurable change for young people across a range of outcomes including inreased attainment and progression to higher education. Their latest impact report shows that 66 percent of the 2021 school leavers cohort progressed to higher education compared with 27 per cent of students from similar backgrounds. A quarter of these students progressed to Russell Group universities compared to nine percent nationally. Findings by FFT Education Datalab show that students who regularly attended **Into**University's access support over several years make 3 months additional progress in Key Stage 2 maths. Collaboration between schools and universites and wider community partners with a focus on educational, social and emotional support over a sustained period of time is viewed as the key to these successful outcomes.

Case study 5: A school-led collaborative model

The Elephant Group is an example of a school-led collaborative model with a mission to improve access for state school students to 'top third' universities. Headteachers meet with university partners at regional hubs to ensure that access activities are tailored to meet the needs of member schools.

The Elephant Group is a social mobility charity partnership formed in 2018 by a group of state school headteachers. Originally launched in Elephant and Castle in London, the charity now has regional hubs in the East Midlands, Yorkshire and the North East and a new virtual hub in the South West, with a total of 43 members from non-selective state schools and post-16 providers. Ten of the 'top third' universities also form part of the network. Corporate partners committed to social mobility and inclusion offer students professional opportunities and financial support, and charity partners support specific programmes as required by member schools.

Each region has two collaborative forums to co-develop a school-led outreach strategy to meet the needs of member schools.

- A **strategic group** of headteachers and university widening participation leads meets termly to discuss sector updates. This forum is used to co-create access programmes based on the schools' need, and as attendees are decision-makers, these can be actioned quickly.

- An **operational group** of in-school outreach leads meets each half-term to discuss programme delivery and share progress and insight about the issues schools are facing. School staff consider particular student cases at the operational group and solutions are discussed from across the Elephant Group network. Insight from the group is fed to the strategic group, which is used to further develop their access strategy and approach as required. These forums are also used to identify and provide access-based CPD for teachers.

Schools contribute through a membership fee, supported by other partners. Membership provides access to specialist knowledge and resources to support their students to apply and enter the 'top third' universities. The co-delivered Elephant Access programme for state school students in years 12 and 13 forms a central strand of the Elephant Group's access offer. This is designed and delivered in collaboration with schools to support academically able students' aspirations, attainment and applications into a 'top third' university.

State schools have limited capacity to host access activities compared to independent schools, and so collaboration has been identified as a way to provide high performing state school students with the necessary support needed to apply and progress to 'top third' universities.

> We haven't got that capacity in state schools, or the expertise and the knowledge. So, we're trying to circumvent that by getting a collaboration of schools, along with the universities, together. The Elephant Group are really

> experienced and knowledgeable about the sector. We're trying to shortcut all the stuff that all the independent schools have gained over 400-year relationships with these top universities. The shortcut is to join a network of schools and/or organisations that have expertise in this area because we can't do it ourselves.
>
> **Headteacher**

A multi-partner collaborative approach means that schools and the core programme benefit from more tailored support for their students. For example, one student who intended to apply to Oxford University was put in touch with a corporate partner staff member who had completed the same university course and arranged a video call for a mock interview. An open and collaborative approach between schools and universities has brought insight into the challenges each is currently facing in widening participation work and the need for flexibility from both sides.

> Just being in that meeting, listening to the universities' perspective, understanding their limitations, both policy-wise and then, practically, in delivery, has made some of the schools shift their thinking and their practice and vice versa. So, that's one benefit, I've learnt a lot, it means that we also amend our practice and/or expectations and certainly, it's a flexible approach.
>
> **Headteacher**

The Elephant Group has a small core team, focusing on ensuring the quality of the networks in the existing hubs rather than establishing new ones. However, there is a strong belief that a school-led collaborative model is successful and scalable.

> I think the model is actually the future because it's about a proper collaborative model across lots of different types of providers… a partnership which isn't predicated on government funding. So, we can just keep going.
>
> **Elephant Group, CEO**

The Elephant Group their own data hub to track student progress, identify bespoke access solutions for schools, identify those students most in need of the programme, and for evaluation of the programme. Data collection and analysis of the whole cohort allows them to reach the most in need. Evidence suggests that state school students benefit from the school-led, Elephant Group collaborative approach. Fifty-four percent of state school students from the 2021 cohort who completed the Elephant Group access programme enrolled at a 'top third' university. Independent UCAS findings also show that students who took part in the programme were more likely to apply to and enrol at a 'top third' university compared to similar students in similar schools nationally.

Annex 2: Interview sample

A total of 23 interviews were completed with key stakeholders across the collaborative outreach system. Interviews were either individual or paired depending on the availability of staff at each organisation. Selection of organisations was made in consultation with the OfS to obtain a rounded perspective of the different sectors. For instance, with higher education providers, the sample was selected to reflect different types of institution, including selective and higher tariff, and specialist providers.

Type of interview	Number	Notes
Uni Connect Partnership	4	Varied sample, including smaller/rural partnerships and those that have had a longer history of collaboration
Other collaborative programme	1	To explore differences in delivery between Uni Connect models and other programmes
Sector body	4	There is some overlap between some sector bodies and delivery partners
Third sector delivery partner	5	Varied sample of different charities in relation to size, purpose and role in collaboration
Schools	3	Varied sample of size, location and funded status
Further education college (that offers higher education)	1	To represent colleges in the primary research, as a higher education provider and a beneficiary of access activity
Higher education providers	5	Varied sample to include specialist providers, campus-based university with Uni Connect programme, post-92 urban university and Russell Group institution

Annex 3: Mapping stakeholder benefits

Table 1 summarises how effective collaboration for outreach access activities benefits different stakeholder groups: higher education providers, schools and further education colleges, wider stakeholders and young people.

Table 1. The benefits of effective collaboration for different stakeholders

Higher education providers	Schools and further education colleges	Wider stakeholders (including third sector organisations)	Young people
Supports the achievement of access and participation targets	Prevents schools and colleges being overwhelmed by approaches from multiple providers	Provides knowledge and insight into the needs of young people to meet wider strategic objectives (e.g. economic growth, social mobility)	Ensures young people receive impartial access activities and advice
Increases the ability to identify and address gaps in access provision	Upscaling access activities means more schools and colleges can engage in the support offer	Supports access to complex student groups to enable tailored access activity to be developed	Enables young people to engage in joined-up, sustained and progressive access activity
Enables greater geographical reach of access activity beyond local areas	Single points of contact provided by higher education providers can reduce burden on individual teachers to facilitate their buy-in	Reduces the risk of targeting the same groups of young people, supporting a joined-up approach	Supports the geographical and social mobility of young people

Higher education providers	Schools and further education colleges	Wider stakeholders (including third sector organisations)	Young people
Improves the quality and impact of access activities for different student groups and contexts	Provides clear signposting and communication channels to schools and colleges about the access offer	Revenue from collaborating helps to improve and extend the access offer	Enables young people to meet and mix with other students
Increases capacity to upscale the design and delivery of access activities	Can support the achievement of common, wider strategic objectives, such as attainment raising	Access a wider range of schools that can benefit from their offer	Supports young people to make more informed decisions about what to do next after their studies
Reduces duplication and streamlines delivery to provide a joined up, progressive offer	Enables schools and colleges to receive an access offer that is tailored to the specific needs of their establishment		
Supports access to better quality data and develop robust evaluation methodologies that can enhance the evidence base	Can increase the profile of schools and colleges		