

Developing a theory of change for a future national collaborative outreach programme

Theory of change and commentary on next steps

December 2024

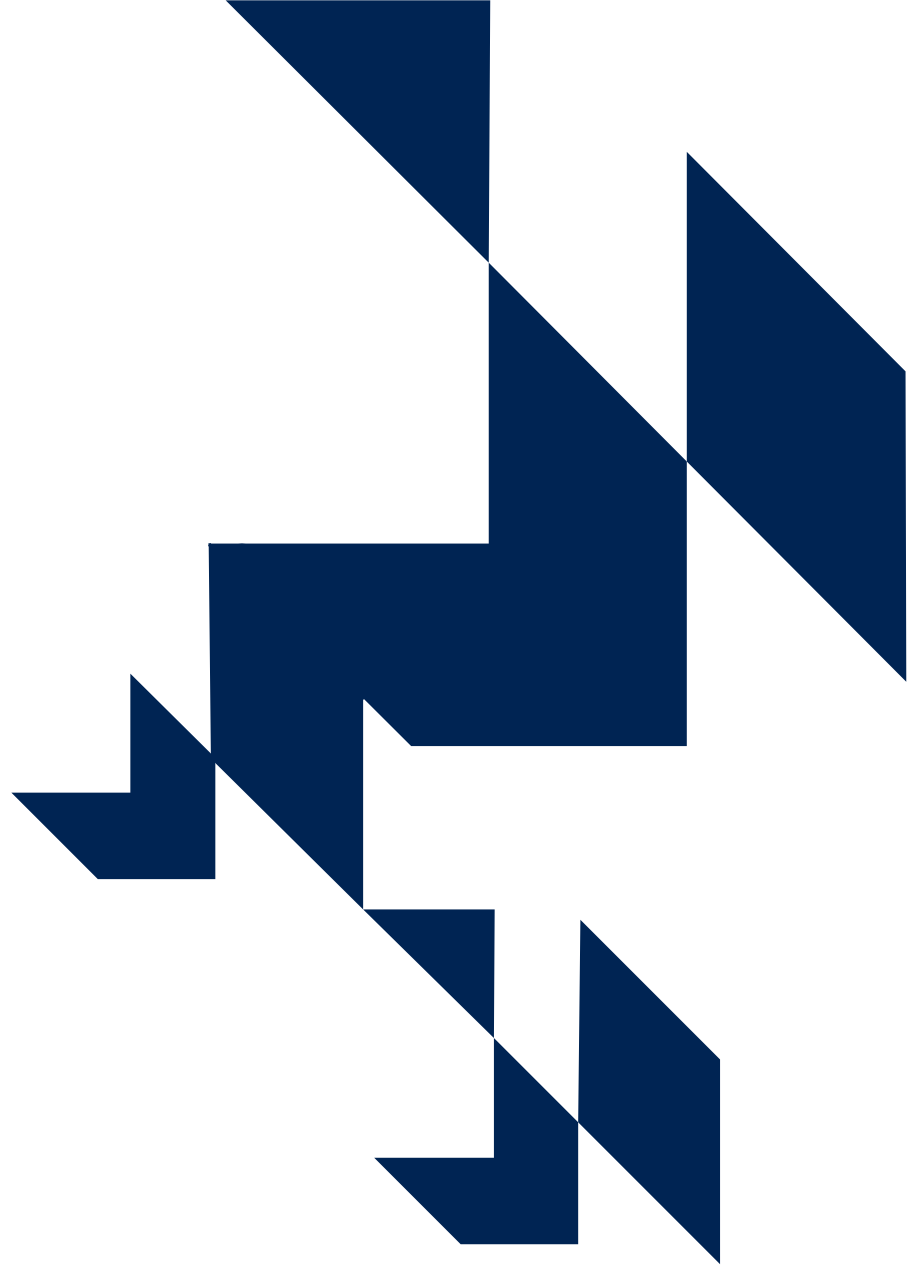
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This document sets out our theory of change for a future national collaborative outreach programme and discusses likely next steps

- **Uni Connect** is the national programme through which higher education providers work together, and with partners, to improve equality of opportunity in access to higher education. Funded by the Office for Students (OfS) since 2019, Uni Connect is the latest in a series of nationally funded ‘collaborative outreach’ programmes that have operated in England since the early 2000s.
- The OfS commissioned a **review of collaborative outreach**, which was published in February 2024. The review recommended continued national funding for collaborative work to promote access to higher education but also highlighted ways in which Uni Connect – or a future programme – could be strengthened.
- In particular, the review identified a ‘lack of a shared understanding of what the strategic purpose of Uni Connect is – or should be’ and recommended that the OfS **‘articulate a clear strategic mission and theory of change for collaborative outreach’**.
- In the summer and autumn of 2024, the OfS sought **input from over 70 stakeholders** representing different sectors and organisations involved in higher education access to develop and refine a draft mission and theory of change.
- This document sets out the result of that exercise. It presents the OfS’s **overall vision for the future of collaborative outreach, and the theory of change that underpins it**, expressed narratively, diagrammatically and as a logic model to support evaluation. It also discusses the **key programme design implications** that sit beneath and adjacent to this high-level theory of change, which the OfS will have to work through as it prepares to implement a future programme model based on the theory of change, subject to the outcome of the government’s multi-year spending review in spring 2025.

Theory of change



We have an opportunity to reframe the mission of centrally funded collaborative outreach in terms of the long-term impact we want to achieve

Narrative statement of mission and purpose:

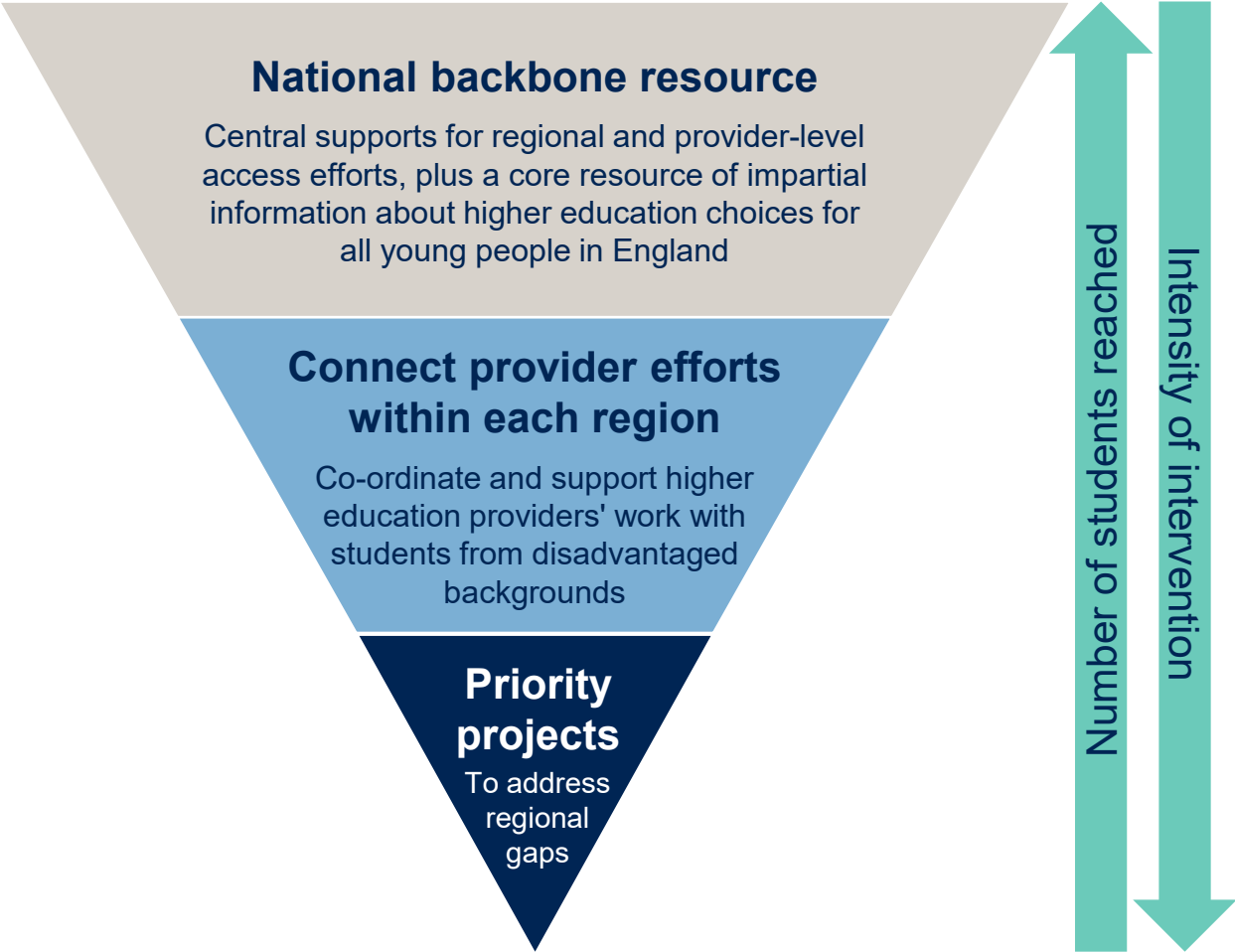
Building on the work of Uni Connect and predecessor programmes, and complementing the leading role of higher education providers, colleges, schools and other partners, we will put in place a refreshed **national collaborative outreach programme** that:

- provides and maintains a **national backbone resource** of **impartial information** about higher education choices for all young people in England, plus central supports for regional and provider-level efforts to expand access to higher education
- acts as the **connector in every region** between higher education providers and partners to **maximise their collective impact** on breaking down barriers to opportunity – including by developing and sharing **evidence of what works**, and
- **prioritises early, persistent and consistent engagement** for students who would otherwise be **most underserved**.

So that **by 2027**, an infrastructure is in place to support access to higher education – one that is both consistent across England and responsive to regional needs. Evidence shows more young people have the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to make informed choices, and inequalities in higher education participation are starting to reduce, especially for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

So that **within a generation**, inequalities in higher education participation have been substantially reduced or eliminated, and work to promote higher education access has become an integrated, sustainable feature of the landscape for national, regional and individual prosperity.

The theory of change envisages a national collaborative outreach programme with three distinct – but interrelated – layers of activity...



Respective roles

The OfS commissions resources and central supports with and on behalf of the network

Regional partnerships promote and signpost national resources to schools and colleges (backed by messaging from the Department for Education (DfE)), draw on central supports (e.g. communications and evaluation infrastructure) and advise the OfS on emerging resource needs

Higher education providers (and their third sector partners) take on an increasing share of proactive access work

Regional partnerships facilitate coordination and co-delivery between higher education providers to avoid duplication/unserved 'cold spots', and promote evidence-based practice and alignment with regional economic needs

The OfS encourages, incentivises and monitors higher education provider engagement with regional collaborative efforts via access and participation plans (APPs) and wider messaging

Regional partnerships (in collaboration with higher education providers) undertake **proactive work with students from the most underserved groups** where regional gap-analysis has shown it would be impractical to serve them through provider-level activities alone

Likely that these interventions would be **more intensive and sustained** with the same students over several years

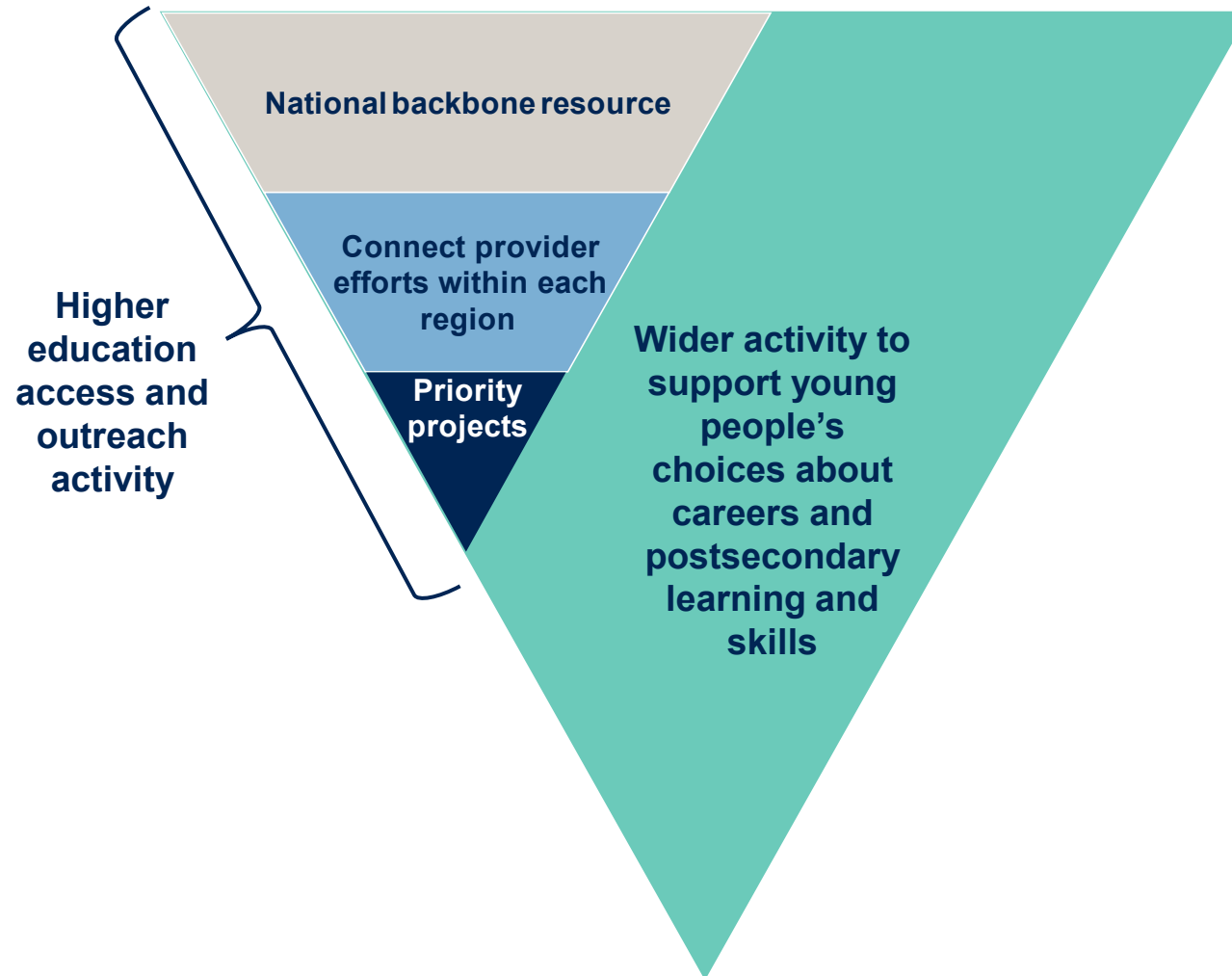
Further discussion of what activity in each layer could look like in practice is provided on slides 12-15

... Which implies a refocusing by regional partnerships away from providing general information, advice and guidance and towards facilitating collective impact...

Aspect of programme theory of change	Relative role of regional partnerships	Relative impact and focus
<p>National backbone resource</p> <p>Central supports for regional and provider-level access efforts, plus a core resource of impartial information about higher education choices for all young people in England</p>	<p>Regional partnerships have an ongoing role in promoting and signposting national resources to schools and colleges, so that all students can access core of full, frank and fair information on all higher education choices.</p> <p>Although they may contribute to the development of national resources, a key aim of the national backbone is to free up regional partnerships' time to focus on more impactful activity.</p>	<p>~10%</p>
<p>Connect provider efforts within each region</p> <p>Co-ordinate and support higher education providers' work with students from disadvantaged backgrounds</p>	<p>The biggest potential impact of collaborative outreach comes through higher education providers and other partners working together – co-delivering and coordinating their activities to reduce duplication/unserved 'cold spots' and align with regional economic needs.</p> <p>Regional partnerships' key will be catalysing this collective impact by convening joint working and promoting evidence-based practice.</p>	<p>~50%</p>
<p>Priority projects</p> <p>To address regional gaps</p>	<p>Because there will likely always be students who – demographically or geographically – are underserved by provider-level access work, regional partnerships will have an ongoing role in delivering or commissioning early, persistent, and consistent engagement with these students.</p> <p>This engagement will be targeted based on regional gap-analysis.</p>	<p>~40%</p>

Further discussion of what activity in each layer could look like in practice is provided on slides 12-15

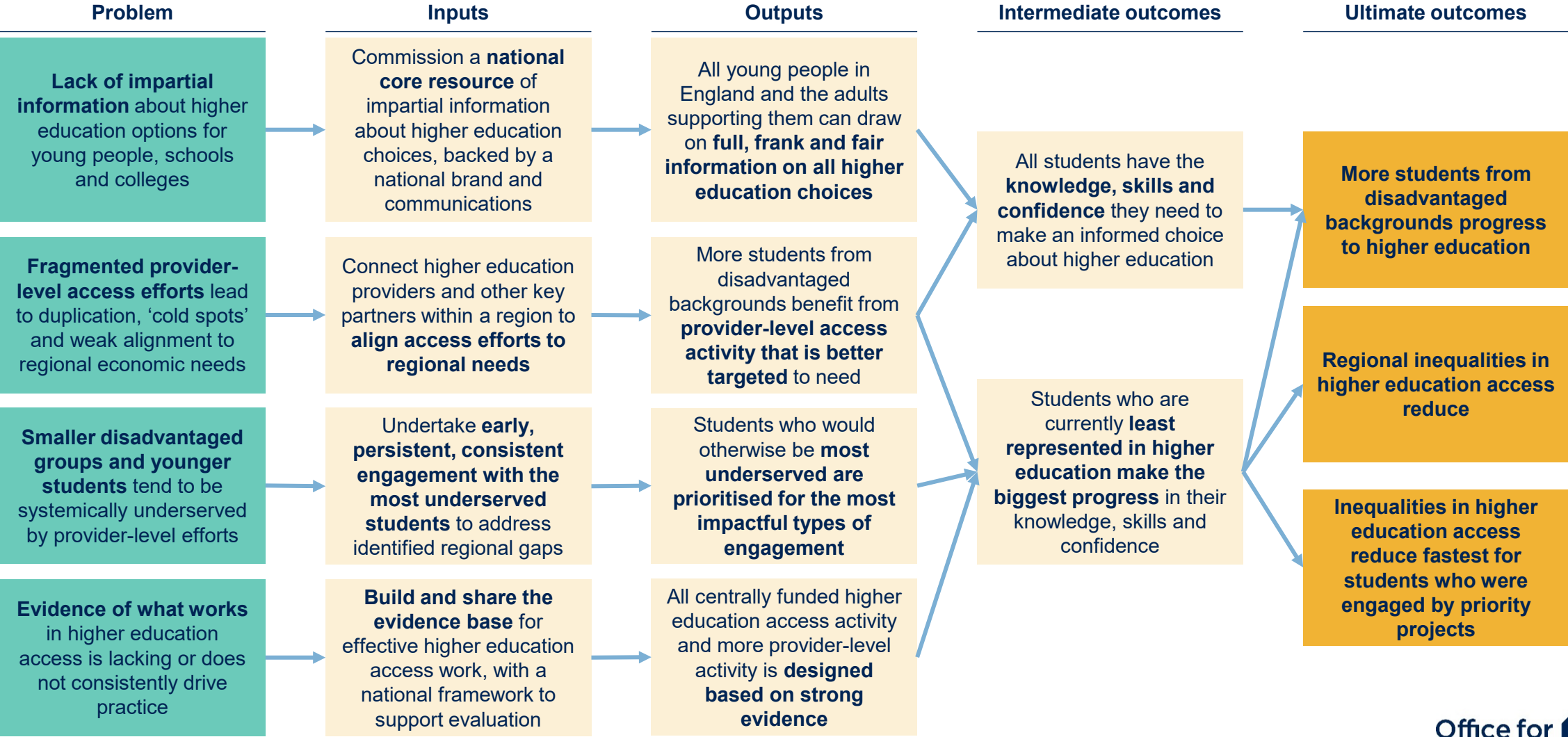
... And underlines the importance of situating higher education access work within the wider landscape of post-secondary options and careers



Regional partnerships have a key role in ensuring that higher education access within a region are aligned with regional economic needs and other regional careers education, information, advice and guidance efforts – e.g. the Careers and Enterprise Company.

The **OfS and DfE** also have an important role in ensuring that policy and messaging to schools, colleges and students is joined up at the national level.

The overall theory of change can be articulated as a logic model which can be used as a basis for evaluation



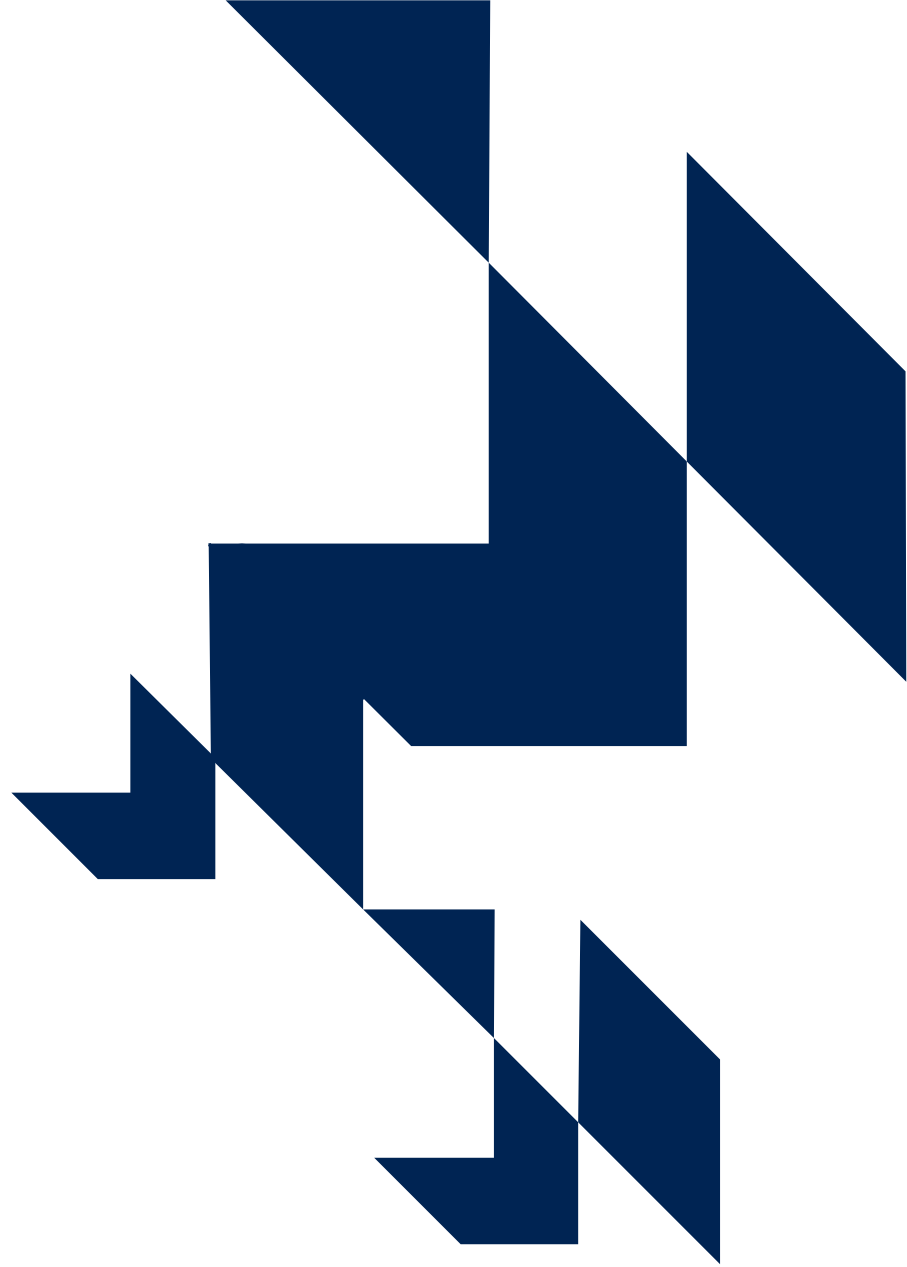
In summary, we envisage a future for collaborative outreach in England that builds on current efforts but with some strategic shifts in approach

What will be different under the new theory of change?

- Collaborative higher education access work will have a **clear, stable, coherent mission** – and we will give regional partnerships **clearer guidance** on how to divide their efforts
- A core of resources – and shared supports for the network – will be **commissioned nationally**, underpinned by a single **national brand**
- **Connecting partners for collective impact** to address regional needs will be the most important function for regional partnerships – although they will still undertake direct student engagement based on identified priorities – and we will emphasise the importance of collaboration (including via APPs)
- Common tools and frameworks to tell a **stronger shared story about impact**
- No requirement to run standalone **attainment raising** activities

We also believe **multi-year funding** is necessary to enable this work to succeed

**Next steps towards
a future national
collaborative
outreach
programme**



Several steps need to happen before our vision for a future programme becomes a reality

2024-25 academic year

- Publish **theory of change** for future national collaborative outreach programme
- Consider outcome of the government's **multi-year spending review** (spring 2025)
- Begin to work through **programme design implications** in light of spending review outcome with stakeholder input
- Conduct review into the OfS's **current information resources** to inform design of national backbone

2025-26 academic year

- Final year of **current Uni Connect programme model**
- Make key decisions on **programme design** for new programme model based on with continued input from stakeholders
- Develop **implementation timeline** and communicate key steps to providers and partnerships

2026-27 academic year

- Earliest **transition to a new programme model** could take place

Beneath the overall theory of change there are some important design implications we will need to work through in more detail (1/4)

'Connector' role

- The [review of collaborative outreach](#) found **some partnerships already act as a connector**, facilitating collaborative working between partners in a way that is responsive to local needs – for example, through:
 - ‘mapping and gapping exercises’, where providers pool data on the schools, colleges and students they are engaging with to **identify and address geographical and demographic gaps** in higher education access provision – as well as what schools and colleges themselves identify as the needs
 - developing multifaceted activities that are **jointly delivered** by several partners, sometimes through the use of **pooled funding or resources**
 - ‘**crowding in**’ funding from local employers, charities and other public funding sources, such as Mayoral Combined Authorities, local enterprise partnerships and Arts Council-funded providers.
- However, it has **not always been easy for Uni Connect partnerships to get all the relevant partners to the table**, and the amount of provider-level access activity (especially to younger age groups) **appears to be reducing** as higher education providers face increased financial pressures.
- So the OfS will need to develop a clear and credible plan for how it will **encourage and incentivise higher education providers to engage fully** in collaborative outreach and prioritise work to address regional inequalities – through clear messaging and the APP regime.
- Although a future model would seek to build on existing good practice, the connector role is unlikely to look identical in each region. The OfS will need to work with partnerships to define **common expectations** for what it means to facilitate collective impact – and the skills and techniques involved.

Beneath the overall theory of change there are some important design implications we will need to work through in more detail (2/4)

National backbone resource

- A national backbone resource could involve **providing functions on behalf of the network** based on recognised needs – for example:
 - evaluation and data analysis
 - a central website
 - communications and branding
 - facilitation or delivery of cross-regional programming – e.g. for specific groups, like refugee students.
- But it could also involve the creation/curation of literal resources – either:
 - full, frank and fair information on all higher education choices for students, teachers and parents/carers to **access directly**
 - a **‘core curriculum’** of exemplar materials for higher education access professionals at the regional or provider level to draw on, reducing the need to ‘reinvent the wheel’ (examples in the review include resources on topics like degree apprenticeships or medical admissions).
- The OfS will also need to consider what can be achieved by identifying or aggregating the best of **what already exists within the network and what need to be commissioned additionally** – either from regional partnerships themselves or an external supplier – as well as how to ensure the backbone resource is funded sufficiently.
- In moving to a **consistent national brand**, the OfS will need to consider its approach to cobranding, especially where the OfS is not the sole funder of an activity.

Beneath the overall theory of change there are some important design implications we will need to work through in more detail (3/4)

Priority projects

- The theory of change anticipates regional partnerships will proactively undertake **early, persistent and consistent engagement** with students from the most underserved groups where **regional gap-analysis** has shown it would be impractical to serve them through provider-level efforts alone.
- In the context of a reducing provider-level access provision, this means **ensuring that the approach does not increase gaps in provision but neither does it provide an excuse for higher education providers to neglect their role** in promoting equality of opportunity in higher education access.
- The OfS will need to consider how tightly to define parameters for **how priority projects are targeted** – for example:
 - How broad can the priority group be? (e.g. all pre-16 students in the region; whole cohort in a low-participation school or college)
 - Will partnerships have complete freedom to set their own criteria for conducting their regional gap-analysis, or should there be some level of national consistency? (e.g. regional equality of opportunity risk registers (EORRs), some nationally tracked metrics to enable comparison)
 - Are any groups of learners out of scope?
- Equally, the OfS will need to consider whether to prescribe the **kinds of activity** that can constitute priority projects, or whether to leave that to the judgement of regional partnerships.

Beneath the overall theory of change there are some important design implications we will need to work through in more detail (4/4)

Evaluation

- The theory of change includes a **logic model**, showing the different points at which we could measure the contribution of collaborative working towards improved higher education access.
- In building out its **approach to measurement and evaluation** for a future programme, the OfS will need to:
 - further define some of these measures – for example, how it wishes to conceptualise ‘students from disadvantaged backgrounds’ and ‘regional inequalities’
 - identify which of aspects impact can be measured through existing data sources and which will require the development of new metrics or instruments
 - consider how best to approach the challenge of measuring the collective impact of partners within a region – for example, how to create better visibility about what different partners are doing with which students.
- The OfS will also need to consider how a **more consistent national framework for evaluation** can be sufficiently flexible to **take account of different approaches** within regional programming.
- The roles of the three **longitudinal tracker services** and that of the **Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes (TASO)** are also likely to be important considerations in designing and implementing the evaluation approach.

Beyond the theory of change there are also some unresolved questions from the review that have programme design implications (1/3)

Questions and recommendations from [the review of collaborative outreach](#) which are not directly addressed in the theory of change, but which the OfS will need to consider in a future programme design:

‘Maintain a regional approach to collaborative outreach, but operate through a smaller, consolidated number of regional partnerships.’

Changes to the size and shape of regional footprints would have important implications for what the ‘connector’ role would look like in each region – for example, because it might change the number and nature of higher education providers within each regional footprint, and the extent to which regional footprints overlap with other structures, such as Mayoral Combined Authorities.

‘Require all regional partnerships to include in their governance arrangements representation from schools and colleges, and ideally from other regional stakeholders such as local authorities and employers’ groups’.

If the OfS decides to follow this recommendation it would also form part of the expectations for the ‘connector’ role.

Beyond the theory of change there are also some unresolved questions from the review that have programme design implications (2/3)

Questions and recommendations from [the review of collaborative outreach](#) which are not directly addressed in the theory of change, but which the OfS will need to consider in a future programme design (continued):

‘Should future regional partnerships always be hosted by a ‘lead partner’ higher education provider?’

‘Should a revised collaborative engagement programme maintain whole-of-England coverage? (versus focusing on a smaller subset of places or regions)’

‘Should the OfS mandate provider contributions in a revised collaborative outreach programme?’

‘Should the OfS award some funds for a future collaborative programme via competition? (versus the current approach of allocating funds directly to regions via a formula)’.

Any changes to the overall approach to commissioning and funding the programme at a regional level would form important part of the context for implementing the theory of change.

Beyond the theory of change there are also some unresolved questions from the review that have programme design implications (3/3)

Questions and recommendations from [the review of collaborative outreach](#) which are not directly addressed in the theory of change, but which the OfS will need to consider in a future programme design (continued):

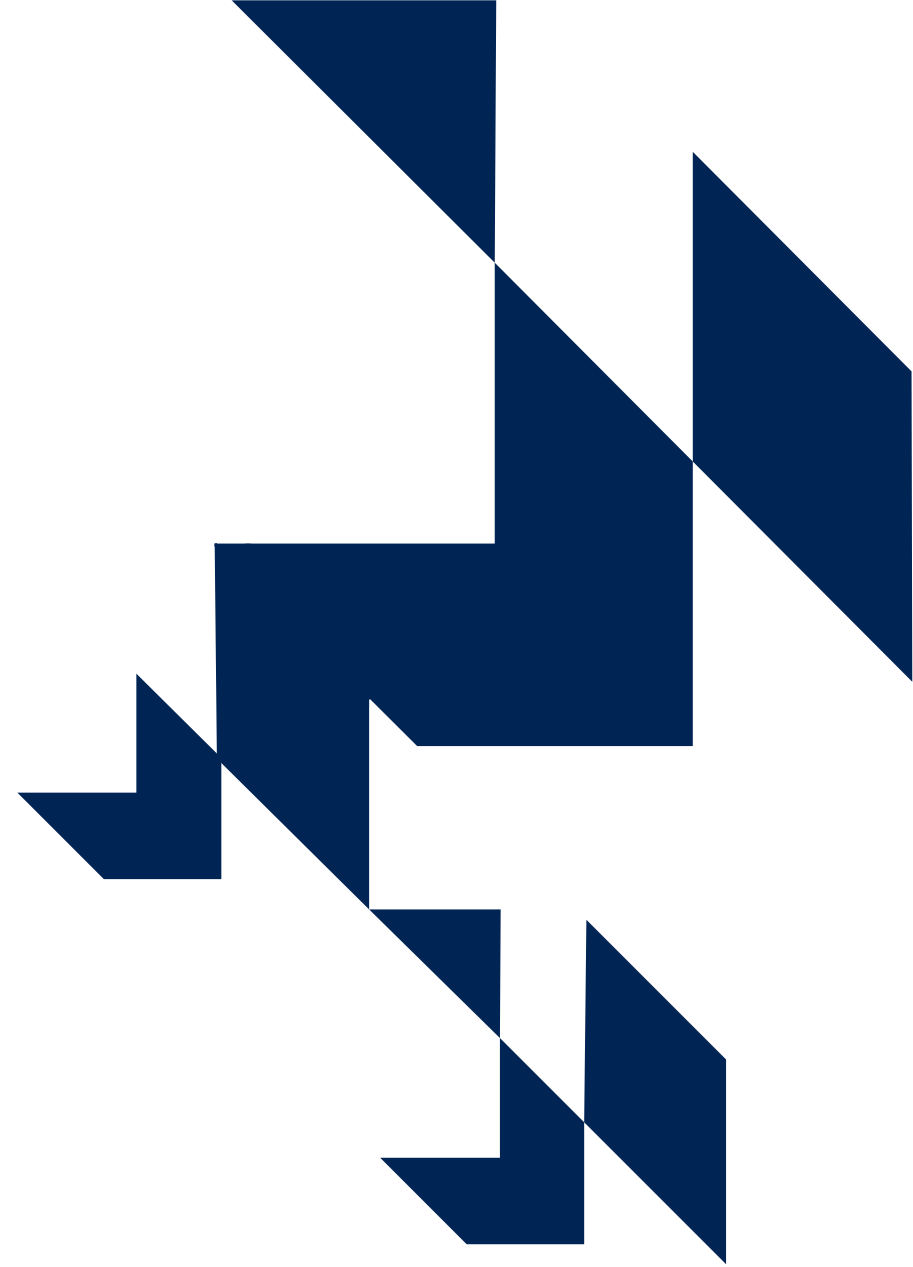
‘Focus on holding regional partnerships accountable based on evidence of collective impact, rather than inputs and outputs’.

The OfS’s ability to do this will depend on how successful we are in establishing a consistent national framework evaluating impact.

Transition

As the review highlighted – as stakeholders reiterated during the theory of change development process – a carefully managed transition is essential to ensure that a future programme builds on the expertise and relationships of Uni Connect.

Appendix: Methodology for developing the theory of change



In summer and autumn 2024 the OfS worked with Public First to develop a theory of change for a future national collaborative outreach programme

Desk research and fieldwork

Analysis of key messages from the evidence, drawing on the review of collaborative outreach (which itself engaged with over 300 stakeholders)

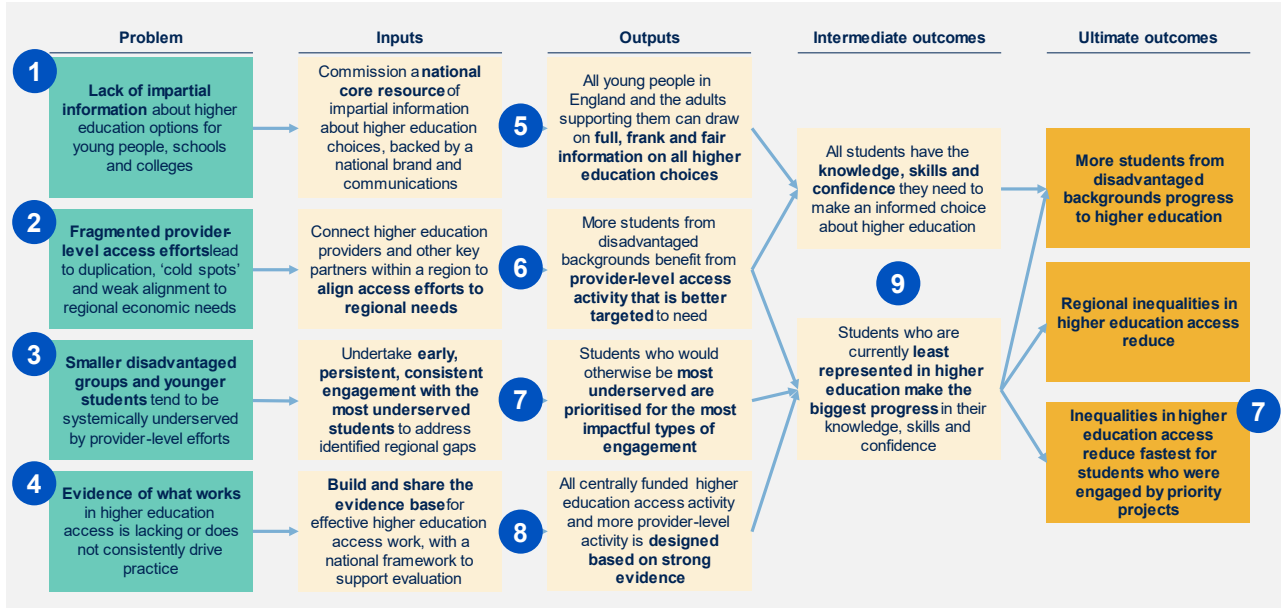
Stakeholder workshops



Theory of change

- Four stakeholder workshops (June-September 2024), bringing together mixed groups from different sectors and organisations involved in high education access (e.g. higher education providers, Uni Connect partnerships, further education colleges, schools, charities and sector/membership bodies) – **69 participants in total**.
- A workshop with **heads of all Uni Connect partnerships** to engage with a draft theory of change.

Each element of the theory of change is supported by evidence



Supporting evidence for the theory of change:

1. [Review of collaborative support for improving equality of opportunity in access to higher education](#), chapter 4.1. Validated by stakeholders in theory of change workshops.
2. Review, chapter 3 and chapter 4.1. Validated by theory of change stakeholder workshops.
3. Review, pp42-43. Validated by theory of change stakeholder workshops.
4. [The impact of interventions for widening access to higher education](#) (EPI/TASO, 2020) on the general lack of causal evidence for impact of outreach on higher education enrolment. Review, especially pp39-41 and 47, in relation to Uni Connect and collaborative outreach.
5. Review, especially pp52-58, set out the case for some programme functions being commissioned nationally; chapter 3.3 showed how this can work by reference to international examples. Validated by theory of change stakeholder workshops.

6. Review, pp42-44, sets out the current impact of Uni Connect in coordinating and increasing the reach of institutional outreach; pp51-52 and chapter 4.4 set out the current impact of regional partnership working and the potential for this to be strengthened.
7. [An economic analysis of Uni Connect](#) (annex to the review) found that students receiving an intensive package of outreach through Uni Connect had a significantly higher probability of attending higher education.
8. Evaluations using the Uni Connect evidence bank found that a wide range of activities have a positive impact on intermediate outcomes that are associated with increased progression to higher education, such as students' knowledge of higher education, and many have a positive impact on students' self-confidence, attainment and intention to apply ([CFE, 2023a](#) and [CFE, 2023b](#)). Review, chapter 3.2, sets out the key characteristics of successful school-higher education collaboration based on the research literature.
9. OfS Insight brief 13: [Schools, attainment and the role of higher education](#) (2022) explains the importance of interventions to build knowledge, skills and confidence in widening participation and reducing participation gaps in higher education.

Notes on terminology used in the theory of change

- We use the term ‘**students from disadvantaged backgrounds**’ throughout this theory of change. Although educational disadvantage can be defined and measured in a variety of ways, this term is better understood in the wider education system than higher education-specific terms like ‘underrepresented’.
- For clarity, we also use the term ‘**underserved**’ to refer specifically to those students from disadvantaged backgrounds who are not currently getting the support they need from provider-level access efforts – for example, younger students and those from smaller disadvantaged groups.
- We use the term ‘**collaborative outreach**’ to mean the ways that higher education providers work together, and with partners, to improve equality of opportunity in access to higher education (the same definition used in the [review of collaborative outreach](#)).

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The logo for the Office for Students, featuring a dark blue square with a yellow square in the top right corner containing the letters 'OfS' in white.

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