

Uni Connect expectations, collaboration and key messages

Publication date: 29 June 2020

Note: this information was originally sent to partnerships on the 12 June. All information was accurate at the time of sending.

1. The purpose of this document is to provide Uni Connect partnerships with further information on the OfS expectations of the partnerships during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, provide some opportunities for collaboration and highlight key national messages for students from relevant sector bodies, bringing the information together in one place.

Expectations

2. In the letter that we sent to partnerships on 26 March 2020, we set out our revised expectations for the programme which accounted for the impact of the pandemic. The expectations as set out in the letter will remain for the rest of the academic year. We expect partnerships to continue exploring and delivering alternative modes of engagement. In particular, they should continue to address:
 - How their approach could support broader groups of underrepresented students, not just those in their target schools and wards.
 - The information, advice and guidance needs of students applying to higher education in the current admissions cycle.
3. In addition to the expectations set out in the March letter, we wish to highlight some further expectations and messages in relation to inclusive practice, evaluation and early recruiters.

Inclusive practice

4. We encourage partnerships to consider what the specific issues or barriers for engaging might be for particular groups of students and ensure that all activity and resources are as inclusive as possible. Partnerships might, for example, want to make sure their materials and digital outreach are accessible for disabled students.

Evaluation

5. Evidence generated through evaluation is still a vital part of Uni Connect. It helps us to understand how the programme makes a difference, share learning with the wider sector, and inform funding decisions. In practice, doing evaluation during a pandemic involves many challenges in response to rapidly planned activities, so some compromises may be necessary. The key principle remains, however, that planning evaluation alongside activity development from the start is critical to collecting the information a partnership needs to understand how their new activities are working and what they can do to improve their impact for learners. Getting rapid feedback is especially important now that partnerships are running new activities in a very different context.

Early recruiters

- Partnerships need to focus on information, advice and guidance (IAG) for students applying to higher education in the current admissions cycle. They should also consider IAG for Year 12 students who may be interested in applying to higher education providers with early recruitment processes – for example medicine, dentistry and veterinary courses, conservatoires and Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Applications for many of these courses will be required in October, soon after the current Year 12 students return for Year 13 and into a new term that remains uncertain. We encourage partnerships to consider how they can support the learners they engage with, who may be interested in these courses.

Collaboration

- Following conversations with all partnerships in April, it is clear that partnerships have rapidly adapted to the changing situation and have been re-purposing agreed funding allocations and activity to reach learners digitally. We would like to thank partnerships for responding to the situation efficiently, for changing the focus of their work in light of our guidance letter on 26 March, and for helping the Uni Connect team get a better understanding of what is happening across the programme. We produced a summary of the findings following these conversations and shared with partnerships in the operational update on 11 May 2020.

Sharing of experiences, approaches and strategies

- During discussions with partnerships, they highlighted that they would like to share with each other what approaches they have been taking to deliver outreach during the pandemic. To help facilitate this we are encouraging them to use the 'Discussions Threads' tab on the [Uni Connect community platform](#). We recognise that many of the approaches will have been developed at pace and have not yet been evaluated.
- As a starting point, we have suggested some questions to prompt discussions:
 - How have you adapted your activity so that it can continue to be delivered or have you had to create lots of new activities?
 - What have you learned from your experiences? What advice can you offer to others who might be seeking to deliver similar activity?
 - Are there any issues engaging learners or schools or colleges? How have you or are you planning to overcome these?
 - Are there any activities that have been more successful for particular year groups or student characteristics?
 - Are there resources or strategies for approaches to the current pandemic that you would like to share with other partnerships?

Digital provision of IAG and outreach

- Discussions with partnerships also highlighted a request for the OfS to coordinate information on the range of digital provision of IAG and outreach available. The Uni Connect team has brought together a range of resources for partnerships. This draws together digital provision of

IAG and outreach from third party providers in one place. We intend to keep this updated and share on a regular basis. Please email unicconnect@officeforstudents.org.uk if you think there are any national providers not included in the table which would be useful to add.

11. This resource was shared with partnerships as part of the operational update in June.
12. Please note that the 'Digital provision of IAG and Outreach' document is intended to be an information resource only. The OfS does not endorse any particular provider, platform or activity included within it.

Key messages

OfS briefing notes

13. We published a briefing note on the provision of IAG for prospective students on 10 June and were pleased to include two Uni Connect case studies as examples of different partnership approaches. Any Uni Connect case studies that did not appear in the briefing itself will be added to the [case studies and resources](#) section of our website. We are also developing a briefing note focused on outreach, to complement the note on IAG which we hope to publish in early July. To date, six briefing notes have been published on:

- [Postgraduate research students](#)
- [Information, advice and guidance](#)
- [Supporting international students](#)
- [Students without family support](#)
- [Supporting student mental health](#)
- [Student accommodation](#)

Discover Uni

14. The Discover Uni website has a dedicated [coronavirus web page](#) with information on the impacts of coronavirus on a range of different areas of interest to prospective students, including:
 - examinations 2020
 - applications and admissions
 - student finance
 - tips for studying at home.
15. The webpage also contains information for specific underrepresented groups of students, including:
 - care leavers and estranged students
 - disabled students
 - international applicants and students
 - mature students.

16. There will also be some resources for prospective students, teachers and advisers to download and share when thinking about their higher education choices and applications this year. To access these, make sure to check the coronavirus information pages above.

Key Discover Uni message for students in England

- Applicants who receive an unconditional offer are advised to consider whether this is the right university or college and course for them before they make any decision.
- It is important for applicants to explore and consider all their options and not to make impulsive decisions.
- There will be plenty of places available for applicants to choose from when making their applications and decisions.

17. Find more useful information on the [Discover Uni website](#).

UCAS

18. UCAS has a dedicated [Coronavirus page](#) on their website with the latest information and updates for students, providers and advisers. It also has a section on [virtual open days](#) and a Unibuddy function that enables prospective applicants to chat with current undergraduate students about their experiences.

19. UCAS launched the [UCAS Hub](#) last year, a personalised, digital space that delivers information and advice to students based on their preferences and context. The UCAS Hub is also hosting a number of live [Q&A sessions](#) with experts on various topics for your 2021 entry students.

20. There is a dedicated section for advisers on [Confirmation and Clearing 2020](#). UCAS will be launching a new [Clearing Plus](#) service for unplaced applicants matching them with relevant courses. To find out how it works, join UCAS for a live [UCAS Clearing Plus demo and preparing for Confirmation and Clearing session on Wednesday 17 June, at 1600](#).

Key UCAS messages for students in England

- It is important for students to take time to assess their options and make decision that are right for them. UCAS has given students more time to make decisions on their offers as follows:
 - If applicants receive their last decision on or before 4 June 2020, their reply date is 18 June 2020 (except if using [Extra](#) to find a place).
 - If applicants receive their last decision on or before 13 July 2020, their reply date is 20 July 2020 (including Extra choices).
- It is important to reiterate to students that offers are not decided on grades alone. Information in personal statements and references are part of the decision-making process, along with interviews, portfolios, auditions, and any other information that is relevant to an applicant's potential to succeed on an undergraduate course.
- There will be plenty of opportunities for applicants to use [Clearing](#) should they wish. If applicants change their mind and want to change course or university, they can use self-release to quickly move to their new choice.

Admissions process

- All applications will continue through the admissions process in the same way and students do not need to do anything different this year. UCAS will still receive grades from the awarding bodies and pass them on to the applicant's chosen university or college.
- Universities and colleges will consider these grades in the same way as any qualifications from previous years.
- If applicants hold conditional offers – their offer will still become unconditional if they meet the offer conditions (usually related to grades).
- If applicants have already accepted an unconditional offer – this does not affect their offer.
- If applications are unsuccessful – applicants can still use [Extra](#) and [Clearing](#) to find a suitable place.
- If students are applying as private candidates – they will need to get in touch directly with the universities or colleges they have applied to.

Key dates

Example table

Date	Description
Thursday 18 June 2020	Applicant reply date for decisions received by 4 June
1800 Tuesday 30 June 2020	Deadline for 2020 entry applications. After this date and time, applications will automatically be entered into Clearing.
Sunday 5 July	The last date for applicants to add an Extra choice for 2020 entry
Monday 6 July	Clearing opens for 2020 entry
Monday 6 July	International Baccalaureate results published
Monday 13 July	University and college decisions due on applications that were submitted by 30 June
Monday 20 July	Applicant reply date if all university or college decisions have been received by 13 July (including Extra choices). Otherwise, applications will be declined, and applicants will be entered into Clearing if eligible
Thursday 13 August	JCQ results day
Thursday 13 August	Adjustment opens for applicants that have met and exceeded conditions for their firm choice. Adjustment is an optional avenue that applicants can use to reconsider where and what to study and is available from 13 to 31 August 2020
Monday 31 August	Remaining offer conditions must be met and Adjustment ends

Tuesday 8 September	Completed 2021 entry UCAS undergraduate applications can be submitted
1800 Monday 21 September	Final date for 2020 entry applications
1800 Thursday 15 October	Entry deadline for courses at Oxford and Cambridge, and most courses in medicine, veterinary medicine/science and dentistry
Tuesday 20 October	Final date to add 2020 entry Clearing choices and for universities and colleges to accept applicants in Clearing.

Student Loans Company

21. The Student Loans Company (SLC) has prepared guidance and FAQs on student finances for prospective students during the pandemic which is available [online](#).
22. A number of resources on different aspects of student finance have been created and were shared in the June operational update. They provide additional information on:
- research to repay (general)
 - research to repay for estranged students
 - research to repay for care leavers.
23. General FAQs and more specific Disabled Students' Allowances (DSA) FAQs are available on the [SLC HEI provider site](#) and are regularly updated.

Key SLC messages for students in England

- The student finance deadline for new students has already passed but for anyone who may have missed it, the advice is still to get an application in as soon as possible. Even when someone is not sure of their eventual course, university or college, new students should apply based on their first preference, as there is no penalty for withdrawing an application or amending details later.
- If a student's household income has been affected by the coronavirus outbreak, for example, due to their parent(s) being furloughed, they should still apply for student finance. The [Current Year Income assessment process](#) is available and could lead to them being awarded more student finance.
- Students with a disability or long-term health conditions should be encouraged to apply for [Disabled Students' Allowances](#) as soon as possible. It currently takes approximately 14 weeks for applications to be processed so students need to apply now to ensure support is in place in time for the start of their course.
- With immediate effect, UK nationals who do not have a UK passport only need to provide their original UK birth or adoption certificate if they are applying for full-time and part-time undergraduate funding. Students do not need to provide an Applicant's Declaration of Identity Form (ADIF) for academic year 2020-21 and can confirm their identity by their original birth or adoption certificate alone. Please note this only applies to academic year 2020-21.

- More information for students is available on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)