

# **Formative Evaluation of Uni Connect Phase Three: Final Report**

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# Contents

<b>Executive Summary .....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1 Introduction.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2 Uni Connect Phase Three .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3 Evaluation Approach .....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>4 Key Findings: Targeted Outreach .....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>5 Key Findings: Strategic Outreach .....</b>	<b>24</b>
<b>6 Key Findings: Attainment Raising .....</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>7 Key Findings: Signposting .....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Annex A: Evaluation Questions.....</b>	<b>43</b>

# Executive Summary

The formative evaluation explores programme delivery: what has worked well, less well and why, as well as enablers of and barriers to effective practice. This document summarises the key findings from the formative evaluation, which was carried out between May and December 2022.

## Context and Background

The Uni Connect programme was established in January 2017 to support the government's social mobility goals to **increase the number of young people from underrepresented groups going into higher education**. It is led by the OfS and delivered through 29 partnerships of universities, colleges, local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, employers and other local partners across England.

The first phase of Uni Connect focused on delivering **targeted outreach** to learners in specific wards where participation in higher education was lower than might be expected given the levels of GCSE attainment of young people in those areas. The second phase incorporated new requirements on partnerships to develop **strategic collaborative interventions** with local partners to deliver outreach to other underrepresented groups in higher education.<sup>1</sup>

Phase three of Uni Connect began in academic year 2021-22 and will run to the end of academic year 2024-25. The objectives of phase three represent a shift in focus away from direct delivery of targeted outreach towards more collaborative strategic interventions, including new responsibilities for partnerships to develop an **attainment raising offer** for schools to be delivered from academic year 2023-24.

## Programme Aims and Objectives

The initial aims of phase three of Uni Connect (covering academic year 2021-22) were to:

- Contribute to **reducing the gap** in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups.
- Equip learners from underrepresented groups to make **informed choices** about their options in relation to the full range of routes into and through higher education and to **minimise the barriers** they may face when choosing the option that will unlock their potential.
- Support a **strategic local infrastructure** of universities, colleges and other partners that can cut through competitive barriers, offer an efficient and low-burden route for schools and colleges to engage, and address outreach 'cold spots' for underrepresented groups.
- Contribute to a **stronger evidence base** around 'what works' in higher education outreach and strengthen evaluation practice across the sector.<sup>2</sup>

In February 2022, the OfS announced new strategic priorities for access and participation over the next four years. This included expanding school–university partnership activity to include a strategic commitment to **raising attainment** for underrepresented students, increasing the capacity of such young

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<sup>1</sup> As defined by the Office for Students in its Access and Participation Glossary: [Access and Participation Glossary - Office for Students](#)

<sup>2</sup> Office for Students (OfS) – Uni Connect Phase Three 2022-23: Operating Plan Guidance, May 2022.

people to access and succeed in higher education, and significantly expanding the evidence base on access and participation to understand what works.

Following this, the OfS notified Uni Connect partnerships that they would be given an expanded role to support increased strategic school engagement by universities and other higher education providers to raise attainment. During 2022-23, partnerships were expected to **develop evidence-based collaborative approaches to raising attainment** at Key Stage 3 and into and through Key Stage 4 in local state secondary schools, drawing on the expertise and resources of local universities. Partnerships were expected to develop their collaborative approaches to attainment raising during 2022-23 with a view to starting delivery of these from 2023-24.

## Evaluation Approach

The formative evaluation focused on Uni Connect programme activity delivered during 2022-23. Data gathering for the evaluation was undertaken between May and December 2022 and incorporated:

- A **desk review** of Uni Connect phase three programme documentation.
- **Scoping interviews** with key stakeholders from the OfS involved in programme design/delivery.
- Attendance and presentation at **three Uni Connect partnership events**.
- Development of a **Theory of Change** for phase three of the programme.
- **39 in-depth interviews** conducted between October and December 2022, of which 29 were with Uni Connect partnership leads and 10 with local stakeholders.
- A **workshop** with partnership leads in December 2022.

## Key Findings: Targeted Outreach

In phase three, Uni Connect partnerships were expected to continue to provide **sustained and progressive targeted outreach** to support learners to make well-informed decisions about their future education and to reduce gaps in higher education participation for the least represented groups. However, from 2022-23 onwards, partnerships were **not expected to actively recruit any new targeted outreach learners to the programme** and to focus their activities on those who had previously been engaged. This meant that no new Year 9 learners would be recruited to targeted outreach in 2022-23 and the focus would be on supporting existing targeted outreach learners in Years 10 to 13. This element of the programme will be phased out over the subsequent four years as the cohort of existing target outreach learners progress beyond Year 13.

A range of approaches were being taken by partnerships to **manage the reduction and phasing out** of the targeted outreach element of the programme. These included reducing the number of schools and colleges they were working with based on an assessment of need and previous levels of engagement with the programme. Most had also reduced the number and/or range of activities they were offering by shifting from a tailored package of support to a more standardised offer or focusing on activities with the lowest cost to delivery and/or where there was most evidence of impact.

Several partnerships had **cut back or completely stopped using external partners** to deliver targeted outreach activities to reduce delivery costs and enable them to retain their existing staffing infrastructure.

This was reported to be having a negative impact on the wider outreach sector, with some external delivery partners reliant on Uni Connect funding.

Schools and colleges were said by partnerships to have been generally accepting of the reduction in the targeted outreach element of the programme in the context of financial constraints across the public sector. However, there was concern by some partnerships that further reductions could result in some schools and colleges deeming it **not worth the administrative burden** associated with engagement.

Some partnerships were found to have been **more proactive than others** in taking difficult decisions to ensure they were able to meet the changing requirements of the programme, including the shift away from direct delivery of targeted outreach towards more strategic collaborative interventions. Those partnerships who had **taken action early to address this**, such as through restructuring teams, were generally in a better position to respond to the changes.

Partnerships considered targeted outreach to be **critical to maintaining the reach of Uni Connect** within schools and colleges and the foundation from which the other newer elements of the programme could be built. There was concern among some partnerships that the planned reduction and phasing out of targeted outreach would erode that foundation, making it difficult to engage schools and colleges in new strategic outreach and attainment raising initiatives.

### Key Findings: Strategic Outreach

Uni Connect partnerships are expected to develop **strategic collaborative interventions** with local partners to facilitate outreach delivery to cohorts of students who are underrepresented in higher education. Partnerships are expected to engage with local partners to co-design, develop and deliver strategic outreach interventions to address local need and gaps ('cold spots') in existing provision, proactively seeking opportunities to co-fund this work.

There was wide variation between partnerships in how far they had progressed with the design, development and delivery of strategic outreach interventions. Those partnerships who had been **proactive in planning and developing their strategic outreach provision** in the previous academic year were delivering collaborative interventions that were generating match funding from local partners.

Uncertainty about future funding was resulting in some partnerships focusing on support for **existing initiatives delivered by local partners**, rather than developing 'new' interventions. Most partnerships were not hopeful about being able to secure match funding to deliver strategic outreach initiatives owing to budget constraints faced by partners, although this was often a perception and some partnerships had not been proactive in seeking out match funding opportunities.

It was widely recognised that the **skills, knowledge and experience** required to develop strategic outreach interventions were different to those required to deliver targeted outreach. A small number of partnerships had appointed a **dedicated strategic outreach lead** to support the development and delivery of their strategic outreach offer and this was found to be working well.

### Key Findings: Attainment Raising

During 2022-23, partnerships were expected to develop **evidence-based collaborative approaches to raising attainment** at Key Stage 3 and into and through Key Stage 4 in local state secondary schools, drawing on the expertise and resources of local higher education providers.

Uni Connect partnership plans to deliver attainment raising activities were generally found to be at an **early stage** at the time of the interviews for the formative evaluation (Autumn 2022). Most partnerships had had initial conversations with schools and wider stakeholders and partners about what such an offer might look like, and several were planning to run small-scale pilots with local partners to develop and test potential approaches.

Schools were said to have been **generally positive and responsive** to the news that partnerships would be working on developing an attainment raising offer. However, partnerships were keen not to raise expectations that could not be met.

Uni Connect attainment raising interventions are expected to support **one or more of the following aims**: 1) upskilling and supporting existing teachers; 2) providing targeted academic support to learners; 3) tackling non-academic barriers to learning and 4) supporting curriculum development. Tackling non-academic barriers to learning was the most common aim that partnerships were looking to address through their attainment raising offer. Where partnerships were intending to deliver targeted academic support to learners, this most commonly focused on developing literacy and numeracy skills. These types of intervention were considered by partnerships to be most closely aligned to their existing outreach offer and where they felt they could add most value.

Partnerships would welcome clearer guidance from the OfS on the **key metrics of success** for the attainment raising element of the programme. Partnerships were given autonomy to determine appropriate measures for their attainment raising interventions, which could include measures relating to intermediate outcomes such as improved academic self-efficacy, critical thinking or study strategies.

### Key Findings: Signposting

Uni Connect partnerships were expected to continue to deliver **signposting** to help teachers and advisers find out about the outreach activity available in their area. Requirements in relation to this include acting as a point of contact for secondary schools and colleges to signpost to local outreach provision, supported by a website providing contact information and details of their Uni Connect offer.

Signposting was considered by partnerships to be a **well-established and stable** element of their offer. Partnerships have been developing their website content over several years and these are now very rich sources of information.

The main challenge facing partnerships in relation to signposting was **resourcing** as many had let go or reduced marketing and communications staffing in response to funding reductions. Some were now outsourcing this support, some had passed responsibility to project officers and one had hired a graduate intern to take the lead on their social media activity, which was said to be working well.

### Recommendations

The findings from the formative evaluation point to some recommendations for consideration by the OfS and Uni Connect partnerships to support future programme planning, development and delivery – these are set out below.

#### Recommendation 1 – OfS to provide clarity on likely levels of future funding

A key barrier faced by partnerships in planning their Uni Connect provision was uncertainty about future funding, both overall and the expected division of funding across the different elements of the programme. This was impacting the ability of partnerships to enter into formal agreements with local

partners to co-design, develop and fund collaborative strategic outreach and attainment raising interventions.

#### Recommendation 2 – Uni Connect partnerships should plan for full phasing out of targeted outreach

Uni Connect partnerships had implemented a wide range of measures in response to the reduction and planned phasing out of targeted outreach. However, the focus of these measures was often on what was needed within the current academic year rather than the longer term. Some had postponed difficult decisions – for example, by using strategic outreach funding to address emerging gaps from the reduction in targeted outreach or by reducing the use of external delivery partners to protect existing staffing structures.

#### Recommendation 3 – Uni Connect partnerships should ensure appropriate resourcing is in place to deliver strategic outreach interventions, including to explore match funding opportunities

While some partnerships were making good progress in implementing collaborative strategic outreach interventions, others had made limited progress in developing a separate strategic outreach offer and were using the available funding to enhance their targeted outreach offer or address gaps emerging from the phasing out of this. There was a perception among partnerships that it would be difficult to secure match funding from local partners to deliver collaborative strategic interventions, but there was limited evidence of proactive approaches being taken by partnerships to identify such opportunities.

#### Recommendation 4 – OfS should provide greater clarity on expectations for collaborative interventions

The evaluation identified a lack of clarity among some Uni Connect partnerships on expectations for the attainment raising element of the programme, including how success would be measured. The OfS should consider providing additional guidance to partnerships to ensure that expectations for attainment raising are clear and can be met, including that the onus is on individual partnerships to identify appropriate measures of success for their attainment raising interventions and that these can include intermediate outcome measures.

#### Recommendation 5 – Uni Connect partnerships should take a more proactive approach to gaining buy-in from local higher education providers to deliver attainment raising interventions

There was evidence that some Uni Connect partnerships were prioritising attainment raising interventions that they felt confident they could deliver themselves with minimal input from local higher education providers. Partnerships should consider whether they could do more to broker engagement, input and buy-in from local higher education providers to support the design, development and/or delivery of attainment raising interventions for schools.

#### Recommendation 6 – Uni Connect partnerships should expand signposting offer to incorporate local attainment raising activities

Signposting was found to be a well-established element of the Uni Connect programme. Partnerships should consider how their signposting offer could be further expanded to incorporate local attainment raising activities and interventions for schools, including those delivered by higher education providers.



# 1 Introduction

Ipsos UK was appointed by the Office for Students (OfS) to deliver a formative evaluation of phase three of the Uni Connect programme, focusing on delivery during 2022-23. The aim was to identify learning and enable sharing of effective practice with Uni Connect partnerships and the OfS. The formative evaluation explored what was working well, less well and why in programme delivery, as well as enablers of and barriers to effective practice. This document reports findings from the evaluation, which was carried out between May and December 2022.

## 1.1 Context and Background

Uni Connect (formerly known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme – NCOP) was launched in January 2017. The programme, led by the OfS, brings together 29 partnerships of universities, colleges, local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, employers and other local partners across England to support access and participation in higher education through multiagency collaborative working. There have been two previous phases to the programme:

- **Phase one: January 2017 to July 2019** – involved delivery of targeted outreach focused on 997 specific wards in England where participation in higher education was lower than expected given the GCSE results of the young people who lived there.
- **Phase two: August 2019 to July 2021** – building on phase one, Uni Connect continued to deliver targeted outreach. This phase included an additional strand (outreach hubs), which enabled partnerships to develop strategic collaborations with local partners to deliver outreach in schools and colleges beyond the target wards.

**Phase three** of Uni Connect began in academic year 2021-22 and will run to the end of academic year 2024-25 (with funding subject to confirmation on an annual basis). The objectives of phase three represent a shift in focus away from direct delivery of targeted outreach towards more collaborative strategic interventions, including new responsibilities for partnerships around developing an attainment-raising offer to be delivered from academic year 2023-24.

## 1.2 Document Structure

- The remainder of this report is structured as follows:
  - **Chapter 2** provides an overview of Uni Connect phase three.
  - **Chapter 3** describes the evaluation approach and data collection methods.
  - **Chapter 4** presents key findings relating to delivery of targeted outreach.
  - **Chapter 5** sets out how partnerships are progressing with delivery of strategic outreach.
  - **Chapter 6** discusses progress made by partnerships in developing a new attainment raising offer.
  - **Chapter 7** outlines partnership approaches to signposting.
  - **Chapter 8** sets out preliminary conclusions and recommendations.

# 2 Uni Connect Phase Three

## 2.1 Introduction

This chapter begins with an overview of Uni Connect phase three, covering programme aims and objectives. This is followed by the Theory of Change for Uni Connect phase three, which was developed during the scoping and design phase of the evaluation and is based on a desk review of programme documentation and consultations with key stakeholders.

## 2.2 Programme Design and Delivery

### Context and Background

The Uni Connect programme was established in January 2017 to support the government's social mobility goals to **increase the number of young people from underrepresented groups going into higher education**. It is led by the OfS and delivered through 29 partnerships of universities, colleges, local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, employers and other local partners across England.

The first phase of Uni Connect focused on delivering **targeted outreach** to learners in specific wards where participation in higher education was lower than expected given the levels of GCSE attainment of young people in those areas. The second phase incorporated new requirements on partnerships to develop **strategic collaborative interventions** with local partners to deliver outreach to other underrepresented groups in higher education.<sup>3</sup>

Phase three of Uni Connect began in academic year 2021-22 and will run to the end of academic year 2024-25. The objectives of phase three represent a continued shift in focus away from direct delivery of targeted outreach and towards more collaborative strategic interventions, including new responsibilities for partnerships to develop an **attainment raising offer** for schools to be delivered from academic year 2023-24.

### Phase Three Aims and Objectives

The initial aims of phase three of Uni Connect (covering academic year 2021-22) were to:

- Contribute to **reducing the gap** in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups.
- Equip young and adult learners from underrepresented groups to make **informed choices** about their options in relation to the full range of routes into and through higher education and to **minimise the barriers** they may face when choosing the option that will unlock their potential.
- Support a **strategic local infrastructure** of universities, colleges and other partners that can cut through competitive barriers, offer an efficient and low-burden route for schools and colleges to engage, and address outreach 'cold spots' for underrepresented groups.

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<sup>3</sup> As defined by the Office for Students in its Access and Participation Glossary: [Access and Participation Glossary - Office for Students](#)

- Contribute to a **stronger evidence base** around ‘what works’ in higher education outreach and strengthen evaluation practice across the sector.<sup>4</sup>

In February 2022, the OfS announced new strategic priorities for access and participation over the next four years. This included expanding school–university partnership activity to include a strategic commitment to **raising attainment** for underrepresented students, increasing the capacity of such young people to access and succeed in higher education, and significantly expanding the evidence base on access and participation to understand what works.

Following this, the OfS notified Uni Connect partnerships that they would be given an **expanded role** to support increased strategic school engagement by universities and other higher education providers to raise attainment. During 2022-23, partnerships were expected to **develop evidence-based collaborative approaches** to raising attainment at Key Stage 3 and into and through Key Stage 4 in local state secondary schools, drawing on the expertise and resources of local universities. Partnerships were expected to develop their collaborative approaches to attainment raising during 2022-23 with a view to starting delivery of these from 2023-24.

### 2.3 Programme Theory of Change

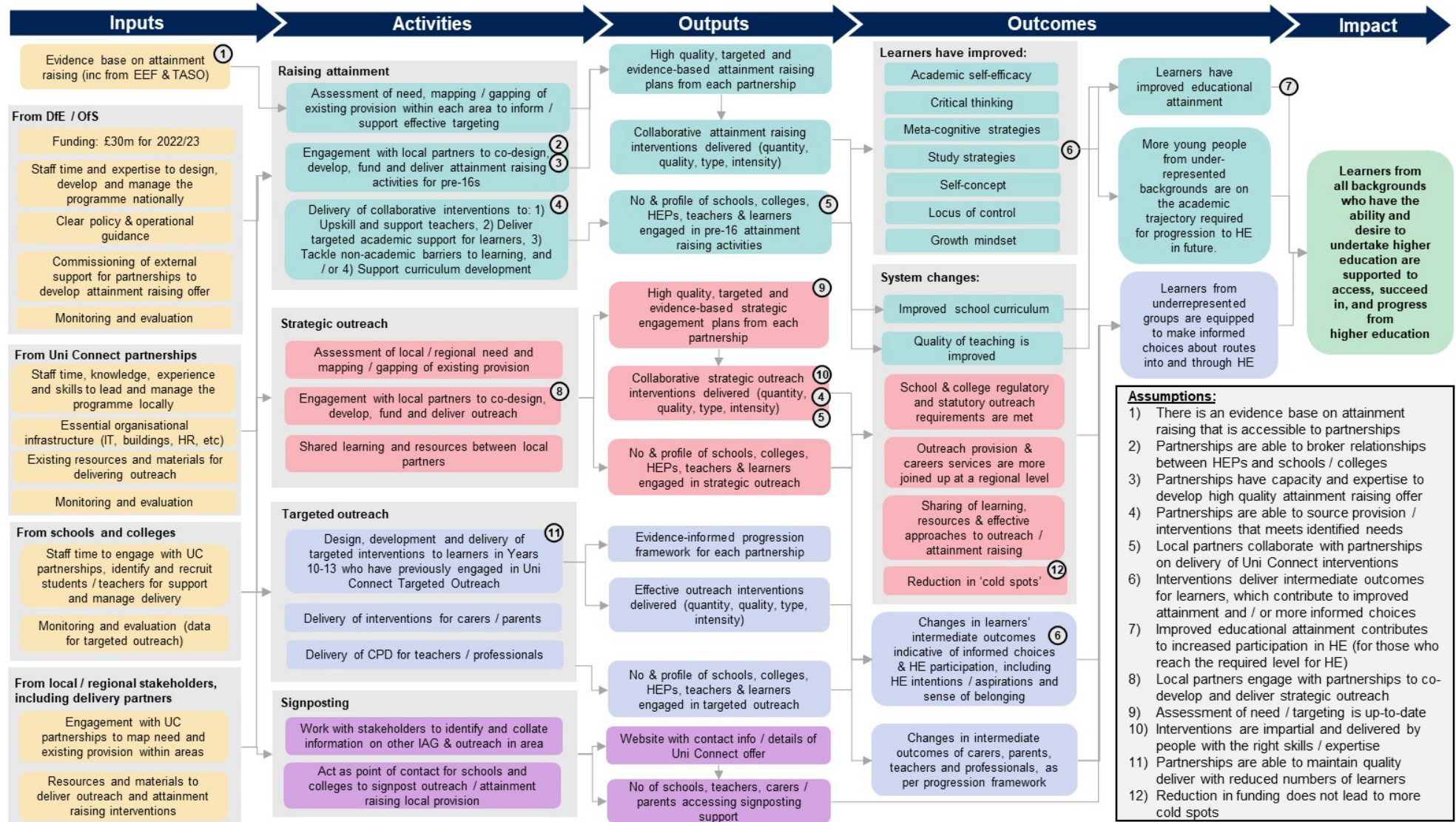
A **Theory of Change** for Uni Connect phase three was developed during the scoping and design phase of the formative evaluation. It details how the programme’s inputs and activities are expected to result in intended outcomes and impacts for learners, including the assumed causal pathways, mechanisms and assumptions. The Theory of Change was informed by a desk review of relevant documentation on the programme and wider literature on outreach and attainment raising, as well as familiarisation interviews with key stakeholders within the OfS.

Figure 2.1 provides a **diagrammatic representation** of the Theory of Change for Uni Connect phase three. It shows the key inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes associated with the programme as well as the overall intended impact. The arrows in the diagram represent the anticipated pathways whereby activities are expected to lead to outputs and then outcomes and impact, providing a set of causal chains. The assumptions that underpin the model have been mapped with numbers in the diagram.

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<sup>4</sup> Office for Students (OfS) – Uni Connect Phase Three 2022-23: Operating Plan Guidance, May 2022.

Figure 2.1: Theory of Change for Uni Connect Phase Three



The colours in the diagram illustrate the main pathways through from activities to outcomes, which can also be traced through the lines/arrows.



## Inputs

A total of **£30m government funding** has been made available to deliver Uni Connect during 2022-23. This represents a 25% reduction from the previous year (£40m). This reduction in core funding for the programme is a key driver of the shift in focus away from direct delivery of targeted outreach to more collaborative approaches to delivering strategic outreach and attainment raising activities.

The Department for Education provides strategic direction to the OfS through the provision of guidance, which sets out the government's strategic and policy priorities for higher education and how it expects the OfS to address these. Uni Connect draws on **staff time and expertise** from the OfS to design, develop and manage the programme nationally. This includes the development of **policy and operational guidance** for Uni Connect partnerships and national **monitoring and evaluation** of the programme. Additional advisory inputs will be provided by Causeway Education, who have been commissioned by the OfS to support partnerships to develop their attainment raising offer during 2022-23.

At a local level, partnerships draw on **staff time and expertise** to design, deliver and manage the programme as well as existing **resources, materials and infrastructure**. Additional inputs come in the form of **school and college staff time** to engage with partnerships, identify and recruit participants (learners, teachers and/or parents/carers) to Uni Connect interventions, manage delivery and participate in the monitoring and evaluation of the programme.

Other **local and regional stakeholders** provide input to the programme through engagement with Uni Connect partnerships to map need and existing provision and to co-design, develop, deliver and/or fund collaborative interventions. This includes HEPs and other delivery partners, who also bring resources and materials for delivering outreach and attainment raising interventions.

Uni Connect partnerships are expected to draw on existing evidence of what works in raising attainment to inform development of their plans for this element of the programme. This includes (but is not restricted to) evidence from:

- **The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) Teaching and Learning Toolkit<sup>5</sup>** – the toolkit brings together existing evidence on what works to improve learning outcomes. For each type of intervention, a summary of the average impact on attainment is provided, as well as an assessment of the strength of evidence in support of this and associated costs.
- **Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO)<sup>6</sup>** – including a recent review of available evidence on interventions and activities carried out by higher education providers (HEPs) to raise the attainment of school-age students. The report provides an overview of the range of activities being delivered by HEPs and the evidence in support of the effectiveness and impact of each.
- **Causeway Education** – have been appointed by the OfS to support Uni Connect partnerships to develop their attainment raising offer. They have produced an evidence-based toolkit to help partnerships develop their plans for supporting attainment raising. The toolkit maps out the steps

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<sup>5</sup> [Teaching and Learning Toolkit: EEF \(educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk\)](https://www.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/teaching-and-learning-toolkit/)

<sup>6</sup> [Rapid evidence review and typology of attainment raising activities conducted by HEPs June 22.docx \(pcdn.co\)](https://www.pcdn.co/rapid-evidence-review-and-typology-of-attainment-raising-activities-conducted-by-heps-june-22.docx)

from considering the needs of schools and young people in their area, through to designing effective interventions.

- **Local Evaluations** – each Uni Connect partnership is required to develop a plan setting out how they will evaluate the activity they deliver locally. These plans should cover all elements of Uni Connect programme activity, which from 2023-24 will include collaborative attainment raising interventions.

## Activities

### Raising Attainment

The OfS has not been prescriptive with Uni Connect partnerships on the specific attainment raising activities to be delivered through phase three of the programme. Rather, the expectation is that partnerships will **engage local stakeholders** within their respective areas to develop a shared understanding of need, map existing provision and identify where they can add most value. They will work with those stakeholders, drawing on specialist advisory input and existing evidence, to develop collaborative approaches to raising attainment. This will include **brokering relationships** between HEPs and schools, drawing on expertise and resources from HEPs to support delivery.

The attainment raising activities and interventions developed by partnerships should focus on developing collaborative approaches to raising attainment at Key Stage 3 and into and through Key Stage 4 in local state secondary schools. These interventions should support one or more of the following aims:

- Upskilling and supporting existing teachers.
- Providing targeted academic support to learners.
- Tackling non-academic barriers to learning.
- Supporting curriculum development.

There is an expectation that a significant proportion of resources and funding for attainment raising activity should come from regional stakeholders, with Uni Connect partnerships playing a strategic brokerage role.

### Strategic Outreach

Uni Connect partnerships are expected to continue to engage with local partners to co-design, develop, fund and deliver **strategic outreach interventions** to address local need and gaps ('cold spots') in existing provision. Uni Connect partnerships are expected to proactively seek **match funding** for strategic outreach interventions from local partners. Some activities and interventions delivered through the strategic outreach element of the programme will be a continuation of those developed during phase two of Uni Connect (through outreach hubs), but there is also an expectation that partnerships will revisit and update their plans for strategic outreach where required and in response to changes in the landscape of outreach provision in their areas.

### Targeted Outreach

Uni Connect partnerships are expected to continue to provide **sustained and progressive targeted outreach** to support learners to make well-informed decisions about their future education and to reduce gaps in higher education participation for the least represented groups. However, from 2022-23 onwards

this element of the programme will **be available only to learners in Years 10 to 13 who live in the Uni Connect target wards**. Partnerships will not be expected to actively recruit new learners to the programme, but it is possible that some new learners may be engaged (such as those who move from one institution that does not engage with Uni Connect to one that does). Over time, this element of the programme will be phased out as the current cohort of learners progress beyond Year 13.

### Signposting

Uni Connect partnerships are expected to continue to deliver **signposting** to help teachers and advisers find out about the outreach activity available in their area. Requirements in relation to this include acting as a **point of contact** for secondary schools and colleges to signpost to local outreach provision, supported by a **website** providing contact information and details of their Uni Connect offer. Partnerships are also expected to work with relevant stakeholders to ensure their signposting offer is **coherent with other IAG and outreach** offered in the local area for both young and adult learners. During 2022-23, partnerships are expected to make plans to expand their signposting offer to incorporate local attainment raising activities and interventions for schools delivered by higher education providers.

### Outputs

The activities delivered through phase three of Uni Connect are expected to result in a series of outputs. These include **high quality targeted and evidence-based plans** from each partnership setting out how they intend to deliver their new attainment raising offer and responsibilities in relation to strategic outreach. Partnerships are also expected to produce evidence-informed **progression frameworks** for the targeted outreach element of the programme, which set out a planned, integrated and progressive approach to supporting learners towards, into and through higher education. Partnerships are also required to host a **website** providing contact information and details of their Uni Connect offer to support their 'point of contact' role. The website is intended to help schools and colleges (including teachers and advisers), learners and parents and carers to access appropriate outreach resources and support.

Other outputs relate to the number of **schools, colleges, learners, teachers, parents and carers** engaged in Uni Connect activities, as well as the volume and type of **interventions** delivered and/or brokered through the programme.

### Outcomes

#### From Attainment Raising

The new attainment raising element of Uni Connect is expected to contribute to a series of **intermediate outcomes for learners**. Partnerships can identify their own intermediate outcomes to target locally through their attainment raising offer, informed by existing evidence on the types of intervention that have been found to be effective in improving attainment.<sup>7</sup> However, intermediate outcomes can be expected to relate to things like **improved academic self-efficacy, critical thinking, metacognitive strategies, study strategies, self-concept, locus of control and growth mindset**. This strand of the programme is also expected to contribute to improved **school curriculum** and improved **quality of teaching** through interventions aimed at upskilling and supporting existing teachers.

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<sup>7</sup> Such as those included in an evidence review published by TASO: [Understanding the impact of interventions to address inequality in the student experience \(pcdn.co\)](https://www.pcdn.co)

These intermediate outcomes are expected to contribute to learners having **improved educational attainment** and more young people from underrepresented groups being on the **academic trajectory** required to progress to higher education in the future. This pathway from intermediate outcomes through to longer-term outcomes and impacts is supported by evidence that academic achievement is the most important predictor of university progression.<sup>8</sup>

### From Strategic Outreach

Interventions delivered through the strategic outreach element of the programme are expected to **meet school and college regulatory, statutory and performance ‘needs.’** They are also expected to contribute to outreach provision and careers services being **more joined up** at a local level and to the **sharing of learning, resources and effective approaches** to outreach between local partners. This joined-up approach is expected to further contribute to a reduction in **gaps** (‘cold spots’) in provision as well as the **reduced duplication** of similar types of outreach provision to the same groups of learners. These intermediate outcomes from strategic outreach are expected ultimately to contribute to young and adult learners from underrepresented groups being better equipped to make informed choices about routes into and through higher education.

### From Targeted Outreach

The sustained and progressive targeted outreach delivered by partnerships is expected to contribute to changes in the **intermediate outcomes of learners** indicative of informed choices and higher education participation, including higher education intentions and aspirations. Targeted outreach is also expected to contribute to intermediate outcomes for **parents, carers, teachers and professionals**. These intermediate outcomes are in turn expected to contribute to learners from underrepresented groups being better equipped to make informed choices about routes into and through higher education.

### From Signposting

The signposting activities delivered by Uni Connect partnerships are expected to contribute **indirectly** to learners from underrepresented groups being better equipped to make informed choices about routes into and through higher education. This is expected to happen through partnerships acting as a **single point of contact** for all state secondary schools and colleges in their area to signpost to local outreach provision, where such provision exists and is available. This will provide teachers and advisers with up-to-date information about the available outreach provision in each area.

## Impact

The overall aim of Uni Connect is to contribute to the strategic objective of OfS to ensure that learners from all backgrounds who have the ability and desire to undertake higher education are supported to **access, succeed in, and progress from higher education**. All three strands of activity delivered by partnerships are expected to contribute to this overarching objective.

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<sup>8</sup> Crawford, C. (2014). The link between secondary school characteristics and university participation and outcomes, London: Department for Education. CAYT research report.

Crawford, C., Gregg, P., Macmillan, L., Vignoles, A. and Wyness, G. (2016). Higher education, career opportunities, and intergenerational inequality. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 32(4), pp.553-575.



## Assumptions

There are a number of assumptions underpinning the Theory of Change for Uni Connect phase three, including that:

- There is an **evidence base** on attainment raising that is accessible to partnerships.
- Partnerships are able to **broker relationships** between HEPs and schools/colleges.
- Partnerships have the **capacity and expertise** to develop a high quality attainment raising offer.
- Partnerships are able to **source attainment raising provision/interventions** that are applicable, impactful and informed by identified needs.
- Local partners **collaborate** with partnerships on delivery of Uni Connect interventions.
- Uni Connect interventions deliver **intermediate outcomes** for learners, which contribute to improved attainment and/or more informed choices.
- Improved educational attainment contributes to **increased participation in higher education** (for those who reach the required level for HE).
- Local partners engage with Uni Connect partnerships to **co-develop, deliver and fund** strategic outreach interventions.
- Assessment of need/targeting within each area is based on **up-to-date** data and insights.
- Interventions are **impartial** and delivered by people with the **right skills and expertise**.
- Partnerships are able to maintain **quality delivery** of targeted outreach with reduced numbers of learners.
- The reduction in funding for the programme does not lead to **more cold spots**.

## 3 Evaluation Approach

Ipsos was appointed by the OfS to conduct an evaluation of Uni Connect Phase Three in May 2022. The focus for the evaluation was activity delivered during 2022-23. It was a formative evaluation, meaning that it aimed to identify learning to support and enhance ongoing planning and delivery. It was outside the scope of the evaluation to assess the overall impact of the programme. The OfS identified a list of priority questions and associated sub-questions for the evaluation to focus on (see Annex A).

Data collection for the evaluation was ongoing from May to December 2022 and encompassed:

- A **desk review** of Uni Connect phase three programme documentation.
- Five **scoping interviews** with key stakeholders from the OfS involved in programme design/delivery.
- Attendance and presentation at **three partnership events**.
- Development of a **Theory of Change** for phase three of the programme.
- **39 in-depth interviews** conducted between October and December 2022, of which 29 were with partnership leads and 10 with stakeholders who have been working closely with partnerships.
- A **workshop** with partnership leads/representatives in December 2022.

### Desk Review

A review of relevant background documentation and data on the programme was carried out during May and June 2022. This included partnership grant award letters, phase three operating plan guidance, the latest monitoring returns, slides from partnership information events and draft logic models for each strand of the programme. The review also incorporated evidence from TASO and EEF on the effectiveness of different types of attainment raising activity. The purpose was to develop a detailed understanding of the key aims and objectives of phase three of the programme and an overview of how partnerships were intending to approach this.

### Scoping Consultations

Five in-depth interviews were conducted with key stakeholders from the OfS in June and July 2020, including members of the senior team accountable for Uni Connect, current and previous partnership account managers and those responsible for monitoring programme activity and performance. Interviews were semi-structured in nature and lasted up to an hour. They were recorded and transcribed.

### Attendance at Partnership Events

The OfS hosted three online events during July 2022 for Uni Connect partnerships to come together (in regional clusters) to receive further information on expectations of phase three and ask any questions, particularly in relation to the new requirement to develop an attainment raising offer. Ipsos attended these events to gain an early understanding of how partnerships were responding to the changes to the programme and key issues to be alert to in conducting the formative evaluation.

## Theory of Change Development

The findings from the desk review and scoping consultations were brought together to inform the development of Theory of Change for phase three of the programme (see Section 2.3) and the accompanying evaluation framework.

## Interviews with Partnership Leads and Wider Stakeholders

39 in-depth semi-structured virtual/telephone interviews were conducted, 29 with partnership leads and a further 10 with wider stakeholders. The interviews with partnership leads took place between October and November 2022. The interviews with wider stakeholders took place after the partnership lead interviews and were completed at the end of November/early December 2022.

The wider stakeholder interviews included a mixture of delivery organisations and strategic partners, such as career guidance services, local authorities, careers hubs, education advisors and teachers. The purpose of these discussions was to gather external perspectives on the Uni Connect programme and its interaction with local partners. Wider stakeholders were identified and recruited through the interviews with partnership leads. The discussion guides for these interviews included specific questions that identified different types of stakeholder engaged with Uni Connect, including probes on aspects of interest to the evaluation. The team conducting partnership lead interviews were fully briefed on the key themes to explore in order to help identify relevant stakeholders for wider consultation. The wider stakeholder interviews involved a more tailored conversation about a specific topic of interest. In this way, the wider stakeholder interviews were more focused on specific thematic areas.

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and the qualitative data was analysed using a code frame aligned to the evaluation framework and the key questions the evaluation was seeking to address. The data was coded thematically to identify overarching themes and findings. This provided a structured and systematic approach to analysis based on the evaluation objectives.

## Workshop with Partnership Leads

In December 2022, all 29 partnership leads were invited to take part in an online workshop lasting three hours. The purpose of the workshop was to present the key and emerging findings from the formative evaluation to date and to provide partnerships with the opportunity to discuss and feedback on these.

# 4 Key Findings: Targeted Outreach

## Chapter Summary

- A range of approaches to managing the reduction and phasing out of the targeted outreach element of the programme were being taken by partnerships, including:
  - Reducing the number of schools and colleges they were working with.
  - Reducing the number of activities they were offering.
  - Shifting from a tailored package of support to a more standardised offer.
  - Focusing on activities with the lowest cost to delivery and/or where there was most evidence of impact.
  - Offering fewer activities that were more focused and targeted, such as those specifically tailored to Year 10 and Year 11 students.
- Partnerships have been adapting their infrastructure in response to the changes to this element of the programme. Some have moved staff from targeted to strategic outreach and some have had to let staff go in response to funding reductions. Most anticipate losing more staff towards the end of the year owing to uncertainties about future funding.
- To reduce costs, several partnerships have reduced or completely stopped using external partners to deliver targeted outreach activities. This was said by partnerships to be having a negative impact on the wider sector, with many of their external outreach delivery partners dependent on Uni Connect funding.
- Year 10 is a critical year for outreach activities as it is before learners start exams and become more difficult to engage. Partnerships were beginning to rethink their model and approach to delivering targeted outreach next academic year when Year 10s will no longer be supported through this element of the programme.
- Partnerships consider targeted outreach as critical to maintaining the reach of Uni Connect within schools and colleges and the foundation from which the other newer elements of the programme can be built. There was concern that the phasing out of targeted outreach will erode that foundation and make it difficult to engage schools and colleges in new strategic outreach and attainment raising initiatives.

## 4.1 Introduction

In 2022-23, the targeted outreach element of the Uni Connect programme was available only to learners in Years 10 to 13 living in Uni Connect target wards. Partnerships were not expected to actively recruit new learners to this element of the programme. Over time, this element of the programme will be phased out as the current cohort of learners progress beyond Year 13.

This chapter reports on how Uni Connect partnerships are responding to this change. It begins with an overview of approaches taken to deliver targeted outreach followed by discussion of the types of activity

being delivered through this strand of the programme. The implications of the planned phasing out of this element of the programme are then discussed.

## 4.2 What approaches are partnerships taking to targeted outreach?

A range of approaches to managing the reduction and phasing out of the targeted outreach element of the programme were being taken by partnerships. Most were delivering a similar programme to previous years but **at a reduced scale**. Partnerships were found to be decreasing the number of schools and colleges they were working with, as well as decreasing the range of activities offered through this element of the programme.

A key challenge faced by some partnerships, particularly those in more rural areas, was that they were working with a lot of schools and colleges with low numbers of target learners. In response, some had **increased the minimum threshold of target outreach learners** that schools and colleges must have to receive support through this element of the programme. The aim was to reduce the overall number of schools and colleges they were working with by focusing on those with the highest number of target learners. One partnership increased the threshold of target learners that each school or college must have from 80 to 100. Another was working only with schools with high numbers of target learners within whole year groups, as they found delivering interventions to whole year groups to be more efficient and less disruptive for schools and colleges than targeting smaller groups.

Partnerships were becoming **more selective** in the schools they were working with through targeted outreach. There were several examples where partnerships were using a RAG rating approach<sup>9</sup> to select which schools to continue or stop working with, focusing on those with greatest need and/or those who were most engaged and compliant with programme monitoring and evaluation requirements. As a result, most were working with a smaller number of schools and colleges who were more engaged with the programme and generating better evidence of impact.

We went through a process where we looked at all the 100-ish schools that we work with and we RAG-rated them on three factors. It was those schools that had the highest proportion of Uni Connect learners, schools that had been really well engaged with us over the last few years, and the schools where we'd got data-sharing processes in place. Via that process, we weeded out a number of schools that maybe weren't engaging with us anyway, schools that had very small Uni Connect cohorts. **Partnership lead**

Several partnerships had shifted from offering a tailored package of support for schools and colleges (for example, by offering a menu of activities for them to choose from) to a **more standardised offer**. This typically involved reducing the number of activities on offer, focusing on those with the lowest delivery cost (such as online or group work) and where there was greater evidence of impact. Partnerships were engaging with their impact data to inform these decisions. In one example, a partnership identified that six to eight engagements were optimal for generating impact and so had reduced their offer to focus on those. Another was providing a differentiated offer to those identified as low, medium and high priority through a RAG rating approach, with high-priority schools and colleges receiving a more intensive offer than those identified as medium or low priority.

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<sup>9</sup> This involved rating schools or colleges they were currently working with as red, amber or green depending on factors relating to need, volume of target learners, levels of engagement, participation in programme activities and compliance with monitoring and evaluation requirements.

Schools and colleges were said by partnerships to have been generally accepting of the reduction in the targeted outreach element of the programme in the context of financial constraints across the public sector. However, there was concern among several partnerships that further reductions could result in some schools and colleges deeming it **not worth the administrative burden** associated with engagement (including to meet programme monitoring and evaluation requirements) and there was some early emerging evidence of this.

For the first time ever, we are at risk of losing a school because we can't give them enough resource to engage, and that's never happened to us before. So, I think [...] we might potentially be asking them for too much for the resource that we can give them, unless we start doing it in a different way.

**Partnership lead**

### Targeted Outreach Example

One partnership previously offered a bookable menu of activities to schools and colleges that were available to all learners regardless of year group. They are now offering activities, workshops and masterclasses tailored to individual year groups, with Year 10s receiving a different offer to Year 11s. This has enabled them to reduce their overall offer, while continuing to deliver some focused interventions to all year groups.

Some partnerships viewed the reductions in funding for this element of the programme as an opportunity to **review and streamline** their offer by focusing on a smaller number of activities that are more targeted to need. One partnership on reflection thought they had previously offered **too much choice** to schools and colleges, who were not always aware of the most appropriate activities for different types of learner. Drawing on local data and evaluation evidence, the partnership felt well placed to advise schools and colleges on the most appropriate interventions for their learners.

However, partnerships also expressed disappointment that this element of the programme was to be phased out completely as it was highly regarded by schools and colleges and was perceived by partnerships to have demonstrated good evidence of impact at a local level.

## 4.3 What targeted outreach activities are partnerships delivering to learners, carers/parents and teachers/professionals?

### Targeted Outreach for Learners

Partnerships were still offering a variety of targeted outreach activities to schools and colleges, albeit at a reduced scale in comparison to previous years. Examples of the types of activity being delivered included support to learners with subject-specific work, one-to-one personal advice and guidance, study and motivational skills activities, peer mentors, campus experience days, workshops, residentials and faculty experience days at universities. Partnerships have also been engaging with schools and colleges to understand their outreach needs and priorities and using this insight to develop a more tailored and streamlined offer, which is made up of fewer activities overall that are more targeted to the identified needs of schools, colleges and learners.

### Example Of Targeted Outreach Offered To Learners

One partnership previously offered a wide range of activities and campus visits to schools and colleges. They have now refined their offer based on feedback from schools and colleges about how they could best work with them for maximum effect.

They have developed a broad programme with schools and colleges focused on personal advice and guidance – an area identified by schools as a key priority for outreach. This is delivered as a targeted outreach project and also forms part of their strategic outreach offer, meaning that it can be accessed by any school or college in their area.

*'There are all kinds of things in the targeted outreach pot but it's up to the school to say "Our biggest problem is that we need more careers advice" or "We need personal guidance." And they stipulate what's going to work for them and why.'*

### Targeted Outreach for Teachers and Professionals

Partnerships reported **good engagement with teachers and professionals in their continuing professional development (CPD) offer**. One partnership has a staff member responsible for CPD needs for teachers, advisors and their own staff. They have created a programme of online sessions for teachers designed to broaden their knowledge of higher education options, as well as resources to help them to advise students on pathways to HE. Another partnership had developed and introduced a comprehensive package of **online resources** for school and college staff during the pandemic, which they saw as an investment in the longer term. Several partnerships delivered annual conferences for teachers and delivery staff to facilitate networking and shared learning.

Targeted outreach work undertaken by partnerships with teachers was considered **crucial to the legacy of the Uni Connect programme**. One partnership was working with teachers and students in schools and colleges to support UCAS applications. They were offering CPD to support teachers with writing references for UCAS, which was receiving positive feedback. Events to help teachers and learners navigate post-16 options were also being offered by some partnerships, in addition to post-18 support for university choices, and different types of higher education pathway such as degree level apprenticeships. Partnerships delivering these types of activity were positive that if the Uni Connect programme was to come to an end, they would have trained teachers in place to advise on careers and information, thereby creating a **positive legacy** from the programme.

### Targeted Outreach for Parents and Carers

Some partnerships, although not all, were offering a range of targeted outreach activities for parents and carers. These included virtual parents' evening events focusing on options and pathways after GCSEs and post-18. Some were also delivering virtual events for parents on revision skills and student action plans. One partnership was encouraging schools to be more proactive in marketing their activities for learners to parents, pointing out which activities they were offering to learners and why.

#### Example of Targeted Outreach Offer for Parents and Carers

One partnership developed a targeted offer for parents during the pandemic that they have since continued with as it was very well received. It supports parents and carers with understanding study skills and what effective revision looks like to better equip them to support and guide young people on the types of revision they are doing.

*'I think a really important one for parents and carers to understand is what effective revision looks like. It's very easy for students to say, "Yes, look, Mum and Dad. I'm revising," and they're just, sort of, staring blankly at a book.'*

They also offer study skills training for foster carers with the aim of indirectly supporting care-experienced young people.



Several partnerships described **challenges faced in engaging parents and carers** in outreach activities, which has been a long-standing issue for the programme. One partnership ran a series of evening events for parents offering speaker-led discussions on student finance and higher education options, but turnout was low. Partnerships would welcome additional support from schools and colleges to encourage parents and carers to attend such events. Partnerships also discussed challenges faced in **measuring the effectiveness and impact of activities delivered to parents and carers** in statistical terms, with evidence on these types of activity tending to be more narrative in nature. As a result, there was limited evidence on which approaches worked best.

One partnership did report a surge in visits to the parent and carer pages of their signposting website on GCSE results days, which included content and resources designed to help parents understand the different higher education routes and pathways.

#### 4.4 What are the implications of phasing out targeted outreach?

##### Partnerships are adapting their infrastructure and staffing

Larger partnerships with more funding and access to additional resources and sources of funding were generally found to have been able to absorb the reduction in funding with **limited changes to their overall infrastructure**, while smaller partnerships were experiencing more immediate effects, particularly on staffing levels. There were several smaller partnerships who described the impact of the cuts on their infrastructure and staffing model as very damaging, with one partnership describing it as 'catastrophic.'

Most partnerships had **reduced their overall level of staffing**, and several had moved staff across teams or combined job roles. There were examples of where targeted outreach manager roles had been combined with evaluation manager roles into a single position, enabling partnerships to reduce their overall staffing levels without losing either function. Such combined roles were often shaped by the specific skillsets of individuals already working for the partnership and there was some concern among partnerships that these roles could be hard to fill in future given the breadth of skills required.

Partnerships anticipated that **further cuts and restructuring** were likely to be required over the coming year, and several highlighted the potential loss of key staff as a risk to delivery. In anticipation of potential staff attrition, several partnerships were frontloading targeted outreach activity at the start of the academic year to reduce risk.

Some partnerships were found to have been **more proactive than others** in taking difficult decisions to ensure they were able to meet the changing requirements of the programme. One partnership had made some of their targeted outreach staff redundant and used the funding to source external providers who could deliver attainment raising interventions—something that their targeted outreach staff would have been unable to do as it requires a different skillset. Another had shifted some of their targeted outreach staff over to work on strategic outreach, acknowledging that this was likely to be more of a focus for the programme going forward. Those partnerships who had anticipated the reductions in funding and **taken action early to address this**, such as through restructuring teams, were generally in a better position to respond to the changes. Others who had not taken such a proactive approach were now looking at the possibility of larger-scale redundancies than if they had taken action earlier. Some partnerships were trying to secure roles for their staff within their wider institution or with partners to avoid redundancies, but this was proving difficult.



I think the hope was that people would naturally move on and therefore we wouldn't need to go through the redundancy situation. Sadly, that only happened with the central team, but delivery staff have held on to the hope that their roles would continue. This basically means that we now cannot afford the team that we've got. So, [...] we will be looking at a 50% reduction. **Partnership lead**

The impact of the reduction in targeted outreach was said by partnerships to be **noticeable on the ground**. Some partnerships had taken the decision not to continue to fund the placement of staff in schools and colleges or to significantly reduce previously funded roles such as higher education ambassadors or progression officers. Another partnership had cut their lead teacher payment, which was a discretionary payment to schools and colleges to cover the costs of administration and the coordination of Uni Connect activities. This resulted in one school leaving the programme as they could not cover the administration costs associated with continued engagement. These roles were reduced in others owing to partnerships considering the costs too high to justify for a reducing cohort of targeted outreach learners and in the context of the changing requirements of the programme.

### Implications for Delivery Partners

Several partnerships had **cut back or completely stopped using external partners** to deliver targeted outreach activities to reduce delivery costs and enable them to retain their existing partnership infrastructure. This was reported to be having an impact on the wider outreach sector, with some external delivery partners and charities reliant on Uni Connect funding. It was also said by partnerships to be negatively impacting the range and quality of what could be offered through this element of the programme.

We are not going to be using third-party providers as much as we did before, which is a shame in the sense that they were able to provide some activity that we can't do internally. A good example is the [name of external provider]. We used to provide some targeted activity for particular groups through them, but they are costly. We won't be able to provide summer schools in the same capacity that we did before. Again, expensive but great. Great for all those students and in terms of what our evaluation results are showing. **Partnership lead**

From this academic year, we have had to remove those budgets [for external delivery partners] because we recognise that actually our staff structure is more important. So, having people on the ground who are able to deliver is more important to the partnership than being able to use third party providers to come in and deliver that activity, which was expensive. **Partnership lead**

### Implications for Engaging Schools and Learners

From 2023-24, targeted outreach will no longer be delivered to Year 10s. Several partnerships highlighted **Year 10 as a critical year for outreach activities**, as it is the last year before exams when young people become more difficult to engage. Partnerships were anticipating having to rethink their whole model and approach for the next academic year when Year 10s will no longer be supported through targeted outreach. A few partnerships have assumed that when they tell schools they are working only with Year 11s and above, some schools will discontinue their engagement with the programme.

For the coming year, our targeted outreach won't look dramatically different because Year 10 is the purposeful year in terms of engagement. It will be what happens next year, I think we'll see a bigger difference because of GCSE's, we don't get huge engagement at Year 11. **Partnership lead**

Several partnerships were addressing gaps arising from the reduction in targeted outreach using strategic outreach funding—for example, using this to enable them to continue working with Year 9s in the current year. However, uncertainty about future funding for strategic outreach was creating concerns about how sustainable this was likely to be. Schools were said to value early intervention, and some were looking to higher education partners to potentially deliver outreach to younger students now that Uni Connect would no longer be supporting those age groups. This was causing concern among some Uni Connect partnerships as the perception was that HE providers were less impartial, delivering outreach that was more aligned to their own institution and university progression rather than all possible HE pathways.

# 5 Key Findings: Strategic Outreach

## Chapter Summary

- There was wide variation between partnerships in how far they had progressed with the design, development and delivery of strategic outreach interventions.
- Some partnerships who were proactive in planning and developing their strategic outreach provision in the previous year were now delivering collaborative interventions that were generating match funding from local partners.
- Others had made limited progress in developing a separate strategic outreach offer and were typically using this to enhance their existing targeted outreach offer. There were also several examples of partnerships using strategic outreach funding to address gaps arising from the reduction in targeted outreach.
- Uncertainty about future funding was resulting in some partnerships focusing on support for existing initiatives delivered by local partners, rather than developing 'new' interventions.
- Funding constraints were also found to have resulted in some planned strategic outreach interventions having to be significantly scaled back or stopped altogether. Most partnerships were not hopeful about being able to secure match funding to deliver strategic outreach initiatives owing to budget constraints faced by partners.
- A small number of partnerships had appointed a dedicated strategic outreach lead to support the development and delivery of strategic outreach, but most were not in a position to do this and as a result were struggling to allocate dedicated staff time to developing this element of the programme.

## 5.1 Introduction

The term strategic outreach was introduced in the third phase of the Uni Connect programme, having evolved from outreach hubs. Partnerships are required to develop strategic collaborative interventions with local partners to facilitate outreach delivery to cohorts of students who are underrepresented in higher education. Uni Connect partnerships are expected to engage with local partners to co-design, develop and deliver strategic outreach interventions to address local need and gaps ('cold spots') in existing provision, seeking opportunities to co-fund this work. In some cases, this will be a continuation of activities and interventions developed during phase two of Uni Connect through outreach hubs, but there is also an expectation that partnerships will develop new strategic interventions with partners.

This chapter begins with an overview of how partnerships are progressing with the development and delivery of strategic outreach interventions followed by discussion of the types of activity being delivered through this strand of the programme and key opportunities and challenges. The chapter concludes with key issues relating to the evaluation of strategic outreach interventions.

## 5.2 How are partnerships progressing with strategic outreach?

Partnerships have welcomed the opportunity offered through strategic outreach to work with a **broader range of schools and colleges** than they could do previously through targeted outreach. This was also commented on positively by wider stakeholders, who felt that the criteria for targeted outreach was too

restrictive and excluded some schools, colleges and students who could potentially benefit from outreach support.

We really like it [strategic outreach] and think it's a force for good. The mild relaxation of the targeting the schools have liked, and we've liked. We know that we're a widening participation program. The areas we work in, you'd have to be doing something quite substantially wrong just to be working with middle-class kids because there aren't any, but the relaxation has given us a bit more autonomy to branch out into the protected groups as well. **Partnership lead**

Partnerships were taking comprehensive and data-driven approaches to mapping need within their areas. Most were using HEAT data alongside insight from local partners to **map 'cold spots' and cohorts of learners** who could benefit from strategic outreach. This information was being mapped against the characteristics of learners. Some partnerships were ranking schools and colleges based on criteria such as proportion of students receiving free school meals, IMD, pupil premium, TUNDRA and POLAR to give an indication of deprivation, to further inform identification of which schools and colleges could benefit from support. While these approaches were useful in providing insights into which schools, colleges and students might have the greatest need, targeting also needed to be informed by which partners were willing and able to collaborate.

**Uncertainty around future funding** was acting as a constraint on the development and implementation of strategic outreach activities and interventions. Partnerships were reluctant to raise expectations with partners or stakeholders around what could be delivered in case this was not achievable, which would risk reputational damage. This was contributing to partnerships either scaling back original ambitions for this strand of activity or being generally quite modest and conservative in their planning. As mentioned in the previous chapter, several partnerships were using strategic outreach funding to address gaps left by the reduction in targeted outreach rather than developing new interventions.

Partnerships were **not optimistic about the possibility of generating high levels of match funding** to deliver strategic outreach activities. Universities were said to be under increasing budgetary and financial pressures themselves and therefore unlikely to be able to make funds available for this. Where they would have previously had a dedicated budget for outreach activities, many reduced or cut this entirely when Uni Connect was formed and they no longer have ring-fenced money available to support this. Other local partners were also said to be facing similar budgetary pressures.

We're just trying to build those kinds of strategic relationships. But, again, you know, nobody has money or spare resource, so it's actually really tricky. We are trying to find efficiencies, 'Where can we do things together to make it more effective?' but that takes time, and it takes time to build those relationships. **Partnership lead**

### 5.3 What types of strategic outreach interventions are being delivered?

There were some positive examples of strategic outreach being delivered as a differentiated strand of programme activity targeting **specific underrepresented groups** such as care leavers, those from an ethnic minority background or learners with special educational needs or disabilities. One partnership described their strategic outreach provision as more holistic than what they were offering through targeted outreach as it involved working with a wide range of partners to develop a shared understanding of need and target provision accordingly, rather than focusing on the needs of specific schools and colleges. Additionally, being able to assess student needs using a place-based approach, rather than applying a formula determined at national level, was viewed positively as it enabled partnerships to offer something more tailored to the specific needs of their area. There were also

examples of where partnerships were building on and expanding existing interventions being delivered by partners to key target groups.

### Strategic Outreach Example

One of our local universities have developed a leadership programme for second-year undergraduates from ethnic minority backgrounds. We are now in discussions with them about how we might be able to adapt that programme to enable participants to establish mentorship relationships with students in further education (FE) colleges and sixth forms. So, we are looking at where there are existing programmes being run by partners that can be further built upon.

Some partnerships were embracing the strategic outreach element of the programme and viewing it as an opportunity to **work much more flexibility**, with new partners and stakeholders. There were examples of where partnerships had developed strategic interventions with partners that were already generating relatively high levels of match funding, although these were not common. Those partnerships who were further ahead on this element attributed their success to having good existing networks and contacts across their region that they could draw on, having started development work on this early and being proactive, responsive and flexible in seeking out strategic outreach opportunities.

Wider stakeholders also viewed the introduction of strategic outreach as a **positive development** for the programme. One referenced new activity they had been delivering with their local Uni Connect partnership, including a network for heads of sixth forms in their area. Strategic outreach was perceived to have enabled better joint communication and planning. Another had developed **referral pathways** with local care leaver teams through the establishment of close working relationships with local authorities, the Careers and Enterprise Company and local enterprise partnerships (LEPs).

In previous phases [of Uni Connect] they were targeted to particular schools. So, although we were using our networks to keep people up to date, we'd often have to hold a separate meeting for specific actions around the Uni Connect partnership. Whereas with it [now] being more universal, it's much easier to bring a bit of cohesion to the system in terms of our communication with schools and colleges. **Local authority stakeholder**

Critical to the success of strategic outreach interventions was **effective engagement and communication** with key stakeholders and partners to reach a shared understanding of need and the development of collaborative approaches to addressing this. Some partnerships had established regional partnerships to take the lead on collaborative initiatives targeted at underrepresented groups.

We have something called the SEND<sup>10</sup> Progression Partnership, which addresses our work with disabled students. It's a network of organisations, including representatives from all four of our universities covering outreach teams but also those with specific remits around supporting disabled students once they're at university. We also have a number of third sector organisations and a local authority within the group. They have developed a guide to higher education which takes account of the experiences of the Student Ambassadors that we have worked with who have disabilities and have gone on to be successful at university. That's the major piece of work we've done through that group, as well as offering some mentoring for students in mainstream schools with disabilities. **Partnership lead**

<sup>10</sup> Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

## 5.4 What are the opportunities and challenges?

A small number of partnerships had appointed a **dedicated strategic outreach lead** to deliver this element of the programme and this was found to be working well, particularly where they were given a regional remit. However, several partnerships were facing challenges **resourcing their strategic outreach offer** owing to staff reductions and limited available discretionary budget. A further challenge was that the skills, knowledge and experience required to develop and deliver strategic outreach interventions were different to those required to deliver targeted outreach, meaning that not all partnerships had existing staff who could confidently deliver on this element of the programme.

We have a central team and we've lost at least one manager post, which we're not going to replace. That person's responsibility was very much about making sure the relationships were strong between the schools and us, and the partners and us, and between all of the projects. So that's had to be absorbed into the rest of the team. If there are future cuts, which there will be, I'm not sure how much longer the project will be able to run. **Partnership lead**

Several partnerships said they did not think it was realistic to lever match funding to develop new collaborative interventions given the financial pressures most of their partners were also facing. It was clear that some had **not proactively sought match funding** for strategic outreach interventions but had assumed that it would be challenging. Some were hoping to gain insight from other partnerships who were doing this well.

I think what we haven't done very well in the past, and what we certainly need to be looking at moving forward, is working with external partners. And that's one of the key things. And I think for me, coming in new, that's where I'm hoping to lean on some of the expertise of some of the other Uni Connect leads to understand who they're working with, what's working well, where there are opportunities for match funding. **Partnership lead**

Some partnerships were prioritising **support for existing initiatives** already being delivered by partners, rather than developing new strategic outreach activities. There were examples of partnerships putting resources (funding and/or staff time) into events for learners that were already being delivered by partners. This was felt to be the most effective use of available resources given the level of funding available for this element of the programme. However, it does raise a question around added value and attribution, as these events would have taken place anyway, with or without support from Uni Connect.

Partnerships provided some examples of successful strategic outreach interventions that they had previously developed but **decided not to continue** in response to the reduction in funding available to deliver the programme. One partnership had brought together some of their member institutions to co-deliver a healthcare focused careers fair, which had received very positive feedback. Another had worked with local football clubs to run a programme for boys, who had particularly low levels of HE progression in their region – this programme had also been positively received. Partnerships made the decision not to continue with these interventions as they felt it would be a better use of available resources to **retain their existing staffing infrastructure**.

A key challenge faced by partnerships in developing collaborative strategic interventions with partners is that their objectives **do not always directly align with those of Uni Connect**. For example, higher education providers tend to concentrate their outreach activities on the recruitment of learners, while a key feature of the Uni Connect programme is that it is impartial and not directly aligned to any single institution. Similarly, some local authorities are interested in supporting interventions aimed at improving school attendance, which is not a key priority for Uni Connect. One partnership described the delicate balancing act they felt was needed between engaging partners who were willing and have capacity,



while ensuring that any collaborative interventions aligned with the overarching aims and objectives of the Uni Connect programme.

We've identified, for example, one of our college partners that has significant numbers of care experience students, far in excess of the national average. And then it's working with them to identify what they can do and if they have the capacity to support a series of projects to work with their students and then engaging with the university partners that had this group as a priority in terms of their APP work... you need the evidence base, but you need to work with the willing as well. **Partnership lead**

Strategic outreach interventions were considered by partnerships to be **more difficult for schools and colleges to engage with** in comparison to targeted outreach, which was also acting as a barrier to implementation. Whereas targeted outreach involved partnerships telling schools and colleges what their offer entailed, and which students would be eligible to receive support, strategic outreach puts more of the onus on schools and colleges to tell partnerships what type of support they would like to receive and which students could potentially benefit. This is more resource intensive for schools and colleges, many of whom are facing resourcing challenges themselves.

## 5.5 Monitoring and Evaluation

There was concern among some partnerships about how to measure the impact of strategic outreach interventions, particularly those that were not school or college based or that were being co-delivered through partners. Some of the young people partnerships were working with through their strategic outreach activity were vulnerable groups, such as refugees, for whom it can be difficult to obtain demographic information or to administer research tools such as surveys. Partnerships would welcome more guidance from the OfS on expectations for monitoring and evaluation of this strand of activity.

I've often felt, since taking the role as the [partnership] lead, that a little bit more guidance on how to evaluate the strategic outreach elements would have been beneficial. And even, I guess, giving more absolute definitions of how strategic outreach can be approached. **Partnership lead**

The challenges faced by partnerships in establishing effective monitoring and evaluation approaches for strategic outreach interventions have been exacerbated by funding cuts and the resultant loss of key staff members, including those responsible for evaluation.

# 6 Key Findings: Attainment Raising

## Chapter Summary

- Uni Connect partnership plans to deliver attainment raising activities were generally found to be at an early stage in Autumn 2022. Most partnerships had had initial conversations with schools and wider stakeholders and partners about what such an offer might look like. However, they were reluctant to enter into any formal agreements or commitments given uncertainty around how much funding will be available to deliver on this.
- Schools were said to have been generally positive and responsive to the news that partnerships would be working on developing an attainment raising offer. However, partnerships were keen not to raise expectations that could not be met. They were protective of the good relationships they have built with schools over many years. There was also some nervousness about going into schools and speaking to trained educators about attainment raising activities, recognising that this was not their core area of expertise.
- Partnerships welcomed the toolkit provided by Causeway Education to inform development of their offer, but several expressed concern that a lot of the good practice approaches recommended (including residential summer schools, one-to-one tutoring and mentoring) were expensive to deliver and therefore likely to be challenging to adopt.
- At the time of the interviews, some partnerships had submitted a first draft attainment raising plan for review and had had an initial meeting to talk this through. This was resulting in some having to rethink what they were proposing based on feedback that it did not meet expectations. Partnerships expressed some concern about how they could meet the good practice expectations being set within the parameters of what was likely to be feasible with the level of funding available.
- Some partnerships expressed concern about their capacity and capability to develop an attainment raising offer in the context of reduced funding and the loss of key staff members. They have had to focus their available resources on meeting existing commitments, which was resulting in some falling behind on developing plans.
- Partnerships would welcome greater clarity on expectations for this element of the programme, including how success will be measured. They are used to a comprehensive approach to evaluating their outreach activity and are nervous about progressing with approaches without knowing if these will meet expectations in terms of impact.

## 6.1 Introduction

Uni Connect partnerships have been given an expanded role to support increased school engagement by universities and other higher education providers to raise attainment. During 2022-23, partnerships were expected to develop evidence-based collaborative approaches to raising attainment at Key Stage 3 and into and through Key Stage 4 in local state secondary schools, drawing on the expertise and resources of local higher education providers. Partnerships were expected to develop their plans for attainment raising during 2022-23 with a view to starting delivery of these from 2023-24.

This chapter begins with an overview of progress made by partnerships in developing collaborative approaches to raising attainment, including the key strengths, opportunities, risks and challenges



associated with this. This is followed by discussion of progress made by partnerships in engaging schools and higher education providers in the development of their attainment raising offer. The chapter concludes with key issues and considerations in relation to monitoring and evaluating attainment raising interventions.

## 6.2 Progress in development of attainment raising offer

### How are partnerships approaching this?

At the time of the interviews for the formative evaluation (October to December 2022), most partnerships **were still at an early stage in developing their attainment raising offer**. Those who were most advanced were typically those who were larger and therefore had access to more resources and support, those who were already delivering attainment raising activities and those who had been proactive in starting development work on this early. Those partnerships whose attainment raising plans were least well developed were those who had limited resources available to support development of these and where this was perceived to be a whole new area of activity that they had not delivered previously.

There was a lot of consistency between partnerships in the approaches being taken to the scoping and development of their attainment raising plans. Almost all had completed **initial engagement and consultation with local partners** including schools, higher education providers and local authorities. This was often done in the form of engagement events or workshops facilitated by Uni Connect partnership staff. Scoping work with schools and teachers typically focused on identifying key issues affecting students in relation to attainment and the existing provision in place to address these. Engagement with higher education providers focused on understanding what (if anything) they were already delivering in relation to attainment raising locally and what else higher education providers might be able to offer. This scoping work was found to be useful for partnerships in developing their understanding of the existing landscape of provision and where they could potentially add value.

Some partnerships were spending some of their available funding on **developing the evidence base** on best practice approaches to the design and delivery of attainment raising interventions. One partnership had commissioned an external organisation to conduct a review of the literature on the effectiveness and impact of different types of approach and to facilitate a follow-up workshop with local partners to discuss the findings from this. Another had jointly commissioned research along with another partnership looking at how higher education providers could raise attainment in schools in their region, which included consideration of potential target cohorts of learners. In both examples, partnerships had found the insights from the commissioned research to be useful in informing their developing approaches. However, there was a risk of some **overlap and duplication** with the work being undertaken by Causeway Education on behalf of the OfS, which included development of an evidence-based toolkit on best practice approaches to raising attainment.

There were several examples of where partnerships were **collating and analysing available data on attainment within their area** to better understand need and identify potential schools or cohorts of learners to target. One partnership was using attainment data to develop a dashboard benchmarking schools in their area against regional and national averages. While these data-driven insights were found to be generally useful for partnerships in understanding the scale of attainment gaps in their area, in some cases they highlighted that levels of need were likely to be greater than what could be addressed through the programme. Attainment data was found to be most useful when considered alongside local information and insights into existing provision (and gaps) and which schools were likely to be well placed to engage with attainment raising activities. Some partnerships were also mapping those schools

identified as having attainment gaps against those they were already working with on strategic or targeted outreach to identify where they could potentially expand or pivot their existing offer.

We have just gone through a process of looking what attainment gaps there are in the local authorities that we cover. Slightly frustratingly, I think 60 out of about 100 schools that we were looking at flagged as having below average attainment. So, I guess our concern is that the need is probably greater than our capacity to deliver. **Partnership lead**

A small number of partnerships were **conducting surveys of students** to explore their views in relation to attainment. This typically involved adding questions to existing surveys that were being used to inform outreach activity. The questions provided students with the opportunity to reflect on how they were feeling in relation to achieving the grades they needed to go on to do what they wanted to do next and what (if any) additional support they might need to feel more confident in achieving these. Analysis of the data collected through these surveys had not yet been completed at the time of the interviews and so it was not yet known how helpful this information would be in informing their approach. However, one partnership highlighted potential sensitivities in using data gathered through these surveys to make the case to schools for delivering an attainment raising offer, given that it was self-reported by students.

In considering which activities and interventions to take forward as part of their attainment raising offer, a starting point for most partnerships was to **review their existing outreach resources and materials** with a view to determining whether any of these could be repurposed as attainment raising interventions. Several partnerships gave examples of outreach activities that they believed were having a positive impact on attainment but had never been measured or evaluated from that perspective. It was noted that most of these interventions were directly funded or delivered by partnerships and so did not meet the criteria for 'collaborative' interventions in their current form, but they provided partnerships with some existing resources that they could take to potential partners.

We fund a project with our partners to go in and teach lab skills directly to students with some exam support sessions at the end, so it's directly linked to attainment. We've never measured it, because we were measuring the impact it has on knowledge of pathway to a STEM subject or what a degree in a STEM subject can do for you. **Partnership lead**

Partnerships were keen to emphasise that any new attainment raising interventions should be designed to **complement** the existing outreach and careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) work that Uni Connect has delivered over many years **rather than replace it**. They viewed this new strand of activity as an opportunity to add value to their existing offer, with the consensus being that attainment raising alone was not enough to secure progression to higher education and that it needed to be combined with effective outreach and CIAG.

Several partnerships said they were **taking a modest approach** to developing their attainment raising plans. This was being driven by a lack of clarity about how much funding would be available to deliver this in future years and nervousness about overcommitting beyond what they would be able to deliver. One partnership started with a list of six interventions to develop and test, but subsequently reduced this to one following scoping and based on concerns about costs and capacity to deliver. Several partnerships referenced the good reputation they had developed with schools over many years through quality delivery and were keen to maintain this.

There's plenty of ideas but when we started to scope out one of them, we realised that if we want to do this properly it's going to take quite a bit of work. Capacity wise, these things could be quite difficult to get up and running, and they could cost quite a lot of money. We have plans to do one project, that we think it's (sic) going to cost about £24,000 and that's only with about 20 learners. **Partnership lead**

Several partnerships had **small scale pilots** either underway or planned to test attainment raising activities and interventions. These were typically being delivered to small cohorts of learners (approximately 10 to 20) and in collaboration with local partners. One partnership was about to launch seven separate pilots with partners across their region, but most were focusing on one or two. The pilots were said by partnerships to have been successful in facilitating engagement of local and regional partners in the development and testing of attainment raising initiatives, including schools, local authorities and higher education providers. The pilots usually incorporated some form of pre-/post-assessment, and some were considering options for establishing a control group to enable more robust assessment of effectiveness and impact. The pilots had not yet concluded at the time of the interviews and so it is not possible to report on how useful they have been for partnerships in informing their approaches.

#### What support are partnerships drawing on to inform development of their offer?

The OfS has appointed Causeway Education and the Centre for Education and Youth (CfEY) to provide **independent support** to Uni Connect partnerships to develop their attainment raising strategies and plans. This package of support includes:

- An evidence-based **toolkit** for partnerships setting out the key steps involved in developing their offer from considering the needs of schools and young people in their area, through to designing effective interventions.
- **A community of practice** for Uni Connect partnerships to share their ideas and challenges.
- A series of **online events** on key topics of interest/relevance to attainment raising.
- **Individual support** for each partnership, including feedback meetings to discuss draft plans.

Feedback from partnerships on the toolkit was generally positive: most had engaged with this, were working through the steps and had found it useful in providing a structured approach to developing their plans. However, two elements of the toolkit were queried by partnerships. Firstly, **music and physical education** were identified as the subjects with the highest attainment gaps. While partnerships did not disagree with this analysis, they thought it was mainly owing to schools in working class areas not having access to high quality facilities or the resources/materials required to excel in these subjects – things that partnerships perceived they would be unable to address through the Uni Connect programme.

The second point raised by several partnerships was that a lot of the good practice activities and interventions identified in the toolkit were **costly to deliver**, including summer schools and one-to-one tuition. Again, partnerships did not disagree that these were the types of intervention with the greatest evidence of impact, but queried whether it would be feasible to deliver them at scale within the expected future funding constraints of the programme.

Causeway Education and CfEY arranged a series of individual meetings with each partnership between November 2022 and January 2023 to **review and give feedback on their draft attainment raising plans**. Those who had already attended these meetings at the time of the interviews expressed some

frustration at the feedback received, which in several cases resulted in them having to reconsider their plans. Key issues and concerns related to:

- **Lack of clarity on outcome and impact measures** – some partnerships were unclear on how attainment raising interventions would be measured. Some understood that proposed activities and interventions had to demonstrate evidence of impact on academic grades and queried how they could gather such evidence within the timescales available to develop their plans (which did not incorporate a full academic year). However, this was a misunderstanding – while the OfS would hope to see eventual evidence of improvement in grades, evidence of improvement in intermediate outcomes (such as improved academic self-efficacy, critical thinking or metacognitive strategies) from attainment raising activities would be acceptable. The onus is on individual partnerships to identify appropriate outcome measures for their interventions.
- **Expectations of how far developed plans would be** – one partnership received feedback that their plans were not very well advanced. They understood that these early feedback meetings were part of the development process and were surprised that the expectation was that they would be further ahead than they were.
- **Scope and scale of plans** – one partnership received feedback that they should focus on one or two projects rather than spread themselves too thinly. There was some frustration that this had not been communicated earlier as they had already put a lot of work into developing a suite of projects in collaboration with local partners.

The theme of the feedback was that partnerships would have appreciated greater clarity on these issues from the outset. This would have saved the time and resources spent developing plans that were not going to meet expectations and would need to be revised.

#### What are the key strengths and opportunities for developing an attainment raising offer?

Key strengths that Uni Connect partnerships bring to the development of an attainment raising offer are their **existing well-established infrastructure and networks** with both schools and higher education providers in their areas. This means that partnerships are uniquely well placed to engage with schools to understand their needs in relation to attainment raising, and to engage with higher education providers to understand what they are delivering and what else they could potentially offer. There was some evidence of higher education partnerships looking to Uni Connect partnerships to take the lead in this area.

What's been reassuring from my point of view is lots of individual [higher education] institutions have been looking to us for guidance in terms of waiting for us to move first because they're unsure about what to do in this space. **Partnership lead**

For some Uni connect partnerships, the development of an attainment raising offer **was not perceived as a major divergence from what they were already delivering**. Rather, it was viewed as an opportunity to build on their established strengths delivering outreach work with complementary activities and interventions aimed at raising attainment. As referenced earlier in this chapter, some also viewed it as an opportunity to demonstrate the impact of existing interventions on raising attainment.

I think one of the strengths is it actually might show that a lot of the work we do already supports the attainment raising agenda. Some of the feedback we've had from schools is what we want from you guys, from UniConnect, for attainment raising is what you're doing already – just more of it and that's the key bit. **Partnership lead**

There are certain projects that we can clearly demonstrate have an impact in terms of boosting attainment or those skills that students need to acquire to attain a higher level than they currently do. There are a few projects that we currently fund under targeted outreach that can easily be moved over to attainment raising. **Partnership lead**

Partnerships were keen to emphasise that attainment raising would have a greater impact if delivered alongside traditional outreach interventions aimed at supporting young people to understand different career options and pathways, make subject choices that align with their aspirations and gain exposure to higher education contexts.

#### What are the risks and challenges associated with developing an attainment raising offer?

The main challenge referenced by almost all partnerships was **uncertainty about future funding** and how much would be available to deliver attainment raising interventions. This was making it difficult to plan and there was reluctance to raise expectations with schools around what could be delivered in case these could not be met, thereby risking reputations developed over many years. As a result, some partnerships were concerned that they were 'under-aspiring' in terms of the number of schools they could work with and that they may end up with the capacity to do more. Partnerships were also facing challenges securing buy-in from higher education providers for collaborative interventions in the absence of clarity about funding.

You know, we have some really great relationships with senior leadership teams in schools and with some of our multi-academy trusts. I do not want to damage those relationships by going in too early and too hard with assumptions around attainment raising activities which then might not come to pass as we might want them to. **Partnership lead**

Another key challenge facing Uni Connect partnerships in developing their collaborative attainment raising offer was misalignment with the timings of **access and participation plans (APPs)**. Higher education providers have been asked to revise their APPs to include attainment raising interventions to be delivered from 2024-25 onwards – a year later than when Uni Connect partnerships are expected to start delivery of these. Partnerships viewed this as a missed opportunity to align priorities and anticipated less engagement from higher education providers as they have more time to develop their plans. There was also disappointment that the APP consultation did not mention Uni Connect as a potential vehicle through which higher education providers could deliver their attainment raising interventions.

Several Uni Connect partnerships were facing challenges **resourcing the development of attainment raising plans**. Many had lost key staff owing to the funding reductions and were already stretched trying to meet their existing strategic and targeted outreach commitments. Another factor was that existing staff were not educators or specialists in attainment raising and so did not feel best placed to take the lead on this.

I think at this moment in time we are probably a little bit slower off the mark, to be honest. Obviously being a Project Manager down, and we've obviously got a few other roles within the team vacant at the moment, I don't think we've been able to, maybe, put the time into it that we necessarily need to. **Partnership lead**

### 6.3 Types of activity being developed

The OfS has not been prescriptive with Uni Connect partnerships on the specific attainment raising activities to be developed. However, they are expected to support one or more of the following aims:

1. Upskilling and supporting existing teachers.



2. Providing targeted academic support to learners.
3. Tackling non-academic barriers to learning.
4. Supporting curriculum development.

At the time of the interviews for the formative evaluation, plans were still very much in development and partnerships had not yet finalised which attainment raising activities and interventions they were intending to deliver. As noted earlier in this chapter, some were still piloting and testing different approaches to determine which could have the greatest impact. However, there were emerging themes around the types of attainment activity being considered by partnerships.

**Tackling non-academic barriers to learning** was the most common aim that partnerships were looking to address through their attainment raising offer. These types of intervention were considered by partnerships to be most closely aligned to their existing outreach offer and therefore where they felt they could add most value. These types of intervention typically do not require specialist educational skills, teaching qualifications or academic input to deliver. Interventions aimed at addressing non-academic barriers to learning include those focused on developing study and research skills and metacognition skills.

### Example Of Tackling Non-Academic Barriers To Learning

Initially schools were all coming back to say different subject areas that they wanted us to focus on. We thought, 'Well it's a tiny programme – we can't run English in one school, maths in another, science in another.' So, we took it up a level and thought about overarching skills to help young people with their attainment in any subject. We've gone down the literacy, revision and study skills, and meta-cognition route. We worked over the summer with consultants to devise a programme and it's a series of six interventions – three before a half-term, three after a half-term. One of those, I think the penultimate one, includes a visit to a higher education provider. It's a progressive intervention and it takes the same group of students through the whole programme.

Where partnerships were planning to deliver **targeted academic support to learners**, this most commonly focused on developing literacy and numeracy skills. Partnerships discussed a wide range of reasons for focusing on these types of foundational skill, which included:

- **Higher education entry requirements** – most university courses require GCSE English and maths at Level 4 or above as a minimum and so not having grades at this level is a key barrier to progression.
- **Broad applicability** – good literacy skills enable students to engage effectively with subjects across the curriculum. An example was provided of where below average attainment in science subjects in one area was found to be the result of students not understanding the questions. Similarly, numeracy skills enable students to engage with a wide range of subjects beyond maths, including those relating to science and technology.
- **Identified need** – initial engagement and consultation with schools in some areas had identified support for literacy and numeracy as a key priority. In several areas, analysis of attainment data showed the largest attainment gaps in maths and English.



- **Measurement** – literacy and numeracy are measured in Year 7, which provides a useful benchmark for identifying areas, schools and students who could benefit from support. The availability of validated measures of literacy and numeracy also provided partnerships with confidence that they would be able to assess the impact of their interventions.
- **Alignment with existing Uni Connect offer** – as with tackling non-academic barriers to learning, partnerships were of the view that you didn't need to be an education expert or have a teaching qualification to support students with literacy or numeracy. The types of intervention being considered in this area included reading clubs and support to develop metacognition skills, which could be developed and delivered by existing Uni Connect staff.

While partnerships acknowledged that there was **good evidence on the impact of tutoring** on academic attainment, relatively few highlighted this as an area of activity they would be focusing on. This was partly owing to it requiring specialist input from academics or undergraduate students, but also because of a perception that it would be costly to deliver at scale.

There were also relatively few examples of where partnerships were planning to develop interventions aimed at **upskilling and supporting teachers**. The delivery of these types of intervention were considered by partnerships to be outside the core area of expertise and requiring specialist academic input from partners. There was one example of a partnership in early discussions with the education department of their institution about working collaboratively to develop a programme of CPD for teachers. Another was hoping to develop a training programme for teachers to enable them to deliver Uni Connect activities, which would help secure the longevity and sustainability of the programme. However, partnerships were not able to enter into formal agreements with higher education providers in the absence of clarity about available future funding for this element of the programme.

There were a couple of examples of interventions aimed at **developing the curriculum**, including a labour market programme that had been co-developed with local enterprise partnerships and was being rolled out to students in Years 7 to 11. This incorporated some training for teachers, academic input and employer engagement. Another partnership was developing a similar idea around careers and the curriculum, which was being received positively by schools who were struggling to achieve the Gatsby Benchmark relating to this.

However, some partnerships were of the view that **they were not best placed to add value to curriculum development** and that they would be unlikely to have any substantive involvement in this beyond signposting schools to available support from academic partners. One partnership was of the view that higher education providers were also not well placed to support secondary school curriculum development given that many were facing their own issues and challenges around curriculum development.

## 6.4 Engaging Schools

### How are partnerships engaging schools?

Partnerships have very well-established relationships with schools in their areas and have been taking a **considered and cautious approach** to engaging them in discussions about the development of an attainment raising offer. This engagement has included inviting schools to share their views on key attainment raising issues they were facing, what existing approaches were in place to address these and where Uni Connect partnerships could potentially add value. Some partnerships had arranged individual consultations with a selection of schools as part of their scoping work, while others had arranged larger

regional workshops or events or issued surveys to all schools in their area to gather feedback. The starting point for most was the schools they had existing relationships with through their outreach work.

Partnerships were clear that their plans **had to be guided by the needs of schools** if they were to secure buy-in and several were looking at options for co-designing activities and interventions with schools. Partnerships were conscious that they were not trained educators and so had to take a collaborative and sensitive approach to ensuring that schools did not feel put upon and that they were not overpromising on what they could deliver. At the time of the interviews, most partnerships had held back on sharing detailed information with schools about what they could potentially offer to avoid raising expectations.

So, we're not teachers, we're not educators, in that sense, so we've got to 100% make sure that the work we're delivering is of a high standard and a high calibre. **Partnership lead**

What is working well in engaging schools and what are the potential risks and challenges associated with this?

Most partnerships said that schools had been **positive and receptive** to initial discussions about developing an attainment raising offer. This was attributed to the existing good relationships that partnerships had developed with schools through quality delivery of outreach activities over many years. Schools could see a potential role for Uni Connect to expand their existing outreach offer to focus more directly on attainment raising and many had been happy to support delivery of pilots.

However, a small number of partnerships had faced some initial resistance from schools in their area to developing an attainment raising offer. This seemed to be partly owing to schools having **other competing priorities** and not having the time or resources to engage in discussions around this. This was particularly true of schools in disadvantaged areas who were often operating in difficult circumstances and didn't necessarily have the governance or capacity in place to enable them to make use of such interventions.

Schools were said by Uni Connect partnerships to value the existing outreach work that they were delivering and were **keen for them to continue to focus on this** as that was where the need was greatest. One partnership had a lot of multi-academy trusts in their area who had been put in place with a specific remit to raise attainment and were not looking for additional support for this from universities or other partners. Another had tried to engage schools and local authorities across their area in conversations about attainment raising but had had limited success in doing so.

## 6.5 Engaging Higher Education Providers

How are partnerships engaging higher education providers?

Most partnerships were still at an **early stage of engagement** with higher education providers in their area about potentially collaborating on attainment raising interventions. The focus of these initial discussions was on understanding what they were already doing in this space and what else they might be able to do. The starting point for partnerships was their own institution and those in their wider network. As with schools, initial engagements were taking the form either of individual meetings or group events or focus groups sometimes along with schools. In some cases, they were agenda items at partnership governance and steering group meetings.

## What is working well in engaging higher education providers and what are the risks and challenges associated with this?

Initial engagements with higher education providers were reported by partnerships to be going well, although these focused mainly on **mapping existing activity** rather than detailed discussions about potential collaborations. There were limited examples of where firm commitments had been made to work together. One partnership asked higher education providers in their area to sign up to a 'statement of intent' to work collaboratively on the development of attainment raising plans, but most did not have formalised agreements in place.

The key challenges faced by partnerships in progressing to formal agreements with higher education partnerships were:

- **Lack of clarity about future funding** – it was difficult for partnerships to negotiate and agree respective roles in any future collaboration without knowing how much funding and resources they could bring to this.
- **Capacity constraints of partners** – higher education providers were facing their own financial and capacity constraints, which were acting as a barrier to committing to collaborative interventions. Most partnerships did not think they would be able to secure financial contributions from partners to deliver attainment raising interventions but were hopeful that they could secure in-kind contributions in the form of staff or student time.

In conversations that we have had with our partner institutions, it's been quite clear that there won't be any additional funding, in real terms, available from them to give to us for attainment-raising work. So I think we're quite clear that we may not be able to secure actual funding from our university partners. **Partnership lead**

- **Focus on recruitment** – the resources that higher education partners did have available for access and participation was often focused on recruitment activities. In this context, delivering attainment raising interventions to secondary school students who are falling behind and unlikely to reach the level required for progression to higher education may not be considered a priority.
- **Misalignment to APPs** – as referenced earlier in this chapter, higher education providers were working to different timescales to Uni Connect partnerships in development of their attainment raising offer. There was less urgency from their perspective to get plans in place ahead of the 2023-24 financial year.

## 6.6 Monitoring and Evaluation of Attainment Raising

Uni Connect partnerships are used to planning, delivering and facilitating robust evaluation of their outreach activities and interventions, including long-term tracking of learner progression to higher education. A key area of concern raised by several partnerships was how they would be able to measure and attribute the impact of any interventions delivered on student attainment, given the wide range of factors likely to influence this. They were reluctant to go forward with interventions where they did not have evidence of impact and/or would be unable to measure this.

We don't want to go out and start delivering what we feel falls under an attainment raising category without the evaluation backing it up from the offset. **Partnership lead**

The other major challenge is evidencing impact of raised attainment. I know there is work being done nationally on that, but it will be a real challenge to be able to claim any causality of what we've done on actually improving the attainment of students. **Partnership lead**

Partnerships would welcome clearer guidance from the OfS on the **key metrics of success** for the attainment raising element of the programme. As noted earlier in this chapter, some partnerships were under the impression that attainment raising interventions could only be evaluated by demonstrating improvement in grades, which is not the case. Partnerships have autonomy to determine appropriate measures for their attainment raising interventions, which could include measures relating to intermediate outcomes such as improved academic self-efficacy, critical thinking or study strategies. However, it was clear from the feedback that not all partnerships were aware that the onus was on them to determine appropriate measures for their attainment raising interventions.

What are we baselining? Are we talking about GCSE pass rates? Is it Attainment 8? Progress 8? What is the actual measure? How are we going to quantify whether we've made a difference? **Partnership lead**

A small number of partnerships referenced the work that was being undertaken by NERUPI and TASO on the key factors that influence attainment raising and approaches to measuring these. They were hopeful that as this work continues to develop, it will be helpful in informing their approaches to monitoring and evaluating the impact of attainment raising interventions in future.

# 7 Key Findings: Signposting

## Chapter Summary

- Signposting was considered by partnerships to be a well-established and stable element of their offer. It has become a more prominent feature of the Uni Connect programme in recent years as result of a general shift to accessing online resources (driven by the pandemic).
- Several partnerships were enhancing their signposting offer to make content and resources available to those schools, colleges and learners that they were no longer supporting through targeted outreach, including Year 9 learners.
- Most partnerships were proactive on social media as part of their signposting offer and issued regular newsletters to schools, colleges and wider partners across their areas on outreach events and activities.
- Partnerships referenced their impartial approach to signposting as a key strength of this element of the programme. They aim to promote and showcase all outreach activity available within their region, including through searchable areas of their website and in newsletters and social media.
- Partnerships have been developing their website content over several years and these are now very rich sources of information. In addition to up-to-date information about outreach provision in their area, partnerships are increasingly including making accessible resources for students, teachers and parents available on their website.
- Some partnerships are working on making legacy resources available through their signposting work, including for Year 9 students and other groups they are no longer able to work with to the same extent as they did previously.
- The main challenge facing partnerships in relation to signposting was resourcing as many had let go or reduced marketing and communications staffing in response to funding reductions. Some were outsourcing this support, some had passed responsibility to project officers and one had hired a graduate intern to take the lead on their social media activity.

## 7.1 Introduction

Uni Connect partnerships are expected to continue to deliver signposting to help teachers and advisers find out about the outreach activity available in their area. Requirements in relation to this include acting as a point of contact for secondary schools and colleges to signpost to local outreach provision, supported by a website providing contact information and details of their Uni Connect offer. Partnerships are also expected to work with relevant stakeholders to ensure their signposting offer is coherent with other IAG and outreach offered in the local area for both young and adult learners. During 2022-23, partnerships are expected to make plans to expand their signposting offer to incorporate local attainment raising activities and interventions for schools delivered by higher education providers.

This chapter provides an overview of how partnerships are approaching their signposting activity, including discussion of what is working well and where there are challenges.

## 7.2 Approaches to Delivering Signposting

All Uni Connect partnerships have a **dedicated website** that acts as the central hub for their signposting activity. This was described by one partnership as a very well established and stable element of the programme. For many partnerships, signposting had become a more prominent feature of their overall offer in recent years. This was partly owing to the pandemic and resultant pivot to online provision and resources. It was also driven by funding reductions and partnerships looking at lower cost delivery models, as well as becoming more cognisant of the need to develop a legacy from the programme including for those schools, colleges and students they could no longer directly support.

Signposting takes on far more importance as we have had to reduce the number of schools that we offer support to directly. The schools that no longer get any kind of funding or provision from us, my team, my managers, are looking at how they can broker opportunities from other local partners. Signposting has changed and will continue to, in the sense that, we are looking to increase brokering of opportunities. **Partnership lead**

Most partnerships were also proactive on **social media** as part of their signposting offer and issued regular **newsletters** to schools, colleges and partners across their regions. A key element of their signposting work involved promoting events and opportunities being delivered by themselves or partners. One had established close links with each of the local authorities in their area to share information and resources. Most were **tracking engagement** with their signposting activity through data analytics to determine which approaches were most effective and using these insights to inform activity.

The signposting [...] like social media, and newsletters, and offices making sure they highlight upcoming events when they're delivering sessions. It's quite embedded into our work now. **Partnership lead**

### What is working well?

Several partnerships referenced their **impartial approach** to signposting as being a key strength of this element of the programme. They typically promote all outreach activity available within their region, including through searchable areas of their website and in newsletters, without giving themselves or others preferential treatment. Most partnerships have all schools and colleges in their region on their mailing lists, including those they are working with directly and those they are not.

Partnerships have been developing their website content over several years and these are now **very rich sources of information**. In addition to providing up-to-date information about outreach provision in their area, partnerships are increasingly including accessible resources and content on their websites. A number of partnerships have invested in development and upgrades to their websites in recent years.

We've developed an online e-curriculum that has links to university taster days etc so that's accessible to the public and to our schools and colleges. We have some amazing products on the website as well, the pay index and the access platform and we have a chat function so you can come and ask us questions. There are lesson plans, curriculum on there that some of our schools who we can no longer work in person, they're signposted through to. **Partnership lead**

Others are looking at developing CPD content for teachers to enable them to continue delivering outreach activities beyond the lifetime of the programme. One partnership was looking at whether they could offer **virtual assemblies** to schools and colleges through their signposted offer. They were based in a rural area and so this would save many staff travel time. This approach would enable them to broadcast into several classrooms at once at no extra cost.



We've also got the 52-week plan, which literally is a step-by-step guide to support a student throughout the year, potentially on to their journey to higher education, or it could be an apprenticeship, it could be work opportunities, that kind of thing. **Partnership lead**

### What are the challenges?

Several partnerships referenced challenges in **resourcing** the signposting element of the programme. Websites and newsletters have to be kept up to date on an ongoing basis or they quickly become redundant. This requires dedicated resource on an ongoing basis. The recent reductions in funding had resulted in some partnerships having to cut back or let go of marketing and communications staff who previously managed this element of the programme.

We do have a marketing and comms officer. She's only part-time. She was actually full-time last year but as part of the funding cuts we had to reduce her down. And probably if more cuts come, that possibly would be the next position to remove, unfortunately. As I mentioned, we want to try and retain those delivery staff. **Partnership lead**

One partnership was managing this by bringing in external support to keep their website up to date and others had passed responsibility for this element to project officers. One partnership had hired a graduate intern to take the lead on this element of the programme, which was working out well as they were more familiar and confident with the social media platforms most commonly used by young people.

TikTok has been the best way to engage young people. I don't have a TikTok account, I don't know how to use it, so yes, having a young person to do that is really useful for us. So, we can see that that has an impact and that's really helpful. That's why we have a graduate intern, to have that resource to do that. **Partnership lead**

# Annex A: Evaluation Questions

The table below lists the priority questions and associated sub-questions to be addressed through the formative evaluation of programme delivery during 2022-23.

	Sub-questions
<p><b>PRIORITY Q1: How have partnerships progressed with strategic outreach <u>planning</u> in phase three (building on outreach hubs)?</b></p>	Does the local infrastructure have the necessary engagement and sustainability to support strategic outreach?
	Do partnerships have clear and measurable outcomes with local evaluation built in to plans?
	Have partnerships completed a comprehensive and evidence informed assessment of local underrepresented groups' needs and outreach gaps to inform planning?
	Are clear objectives/priorities in place for partnerships' strategic outreach informed by local insights?
	Are strong strategic outreach activity plans in place that align with programme objectives and partnerships' strategic objectives/priorities?
	Are partnerships' strategic outreach plans identifying and responding to barriers for smaller underrepresented groups to unlock their potential?
<p><b>PRIORITY Q2: How have funding reductions and policy changes affected partnership infrastructure?</b></p>	What can we understand about partnerships' experience of handling the existing funding cuts to indicate how sustainable the programme infrastructure would be with large further cuts?
	What are partnership and key stakeholder views of the challenges, opportunities, and possible unintended consequences of the funding cuts, through the gradual reduction in targeted outreach and associated shift in focus to strategic outreach and pre-16 attainment raising?

## Sub-questions

**KEY Q: What are the opportunities and challenges for partnerships' strategic infrastructure to support our ambitions relating to pre-16 attainment raising in state secondary schools?**

What are the key strengths, opportunities, risks and challenges associated with ambitions relating to pre-16 attainment raising?

What are partnership and key stakeholder views on partnerships' ability to leverage funding from HE providers to deliver collaborative outreach and to deliver OfS ambitions relating to pre-16 attainment raising in state secondary schools?

What are the views of partnerships, schools, colleges and key stakeholders on how partnerships can play a brokering role between HE providers and schools/colleges to address OfS ambitions relating to pre-16 attainment raising in state secondary schools?

# Our Standards and Accreditations

Ipsos standards and accreditations provide our clients with the peace of mind that they can always depend on us to deliver reliable, sustainable findings. Our focus on quality and continuous improvement means we have embedded a “right first time” approach throughout our organisation.



## ISO 20252

This is the international market research specific standard that supersedes BS 7911/MRQSA and incorporates IQCS (Interviewer Quality Control Scheme). It covers the five stages of a Market Research project. Ipsos was the first company in the world to gain this accreditation.



## Market Research Society (MRS) Company Partnership

By being an MRS Company Partner, Ipsos endorses and supports the core MRS brand values of professionalism, research excellence and business effectiveness, and commits to comply with the MRS Code of Conduct throughout the organisation. We were the first company to sign up to the requirements and self-regulation of the MRS Code. More than 350 companies have followed our lead.



## ISO 9001

This is the international general company standard with a focus on continual improvement through quality management systems. In 1994, we became one of the early adopters of the ISO 9001 business standard.



## ISO 27001

This is the international standard for information security, designed to ensure the selection of adequate and proportionate security controls. Ipsos was the first research company in the UK to be awarded this in August 2008.



## The UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the UK Data Protection Act (DPA) 2018

Ipsos is required to comply with the UK GDPR and the UK DPA. It covers the processing of personal data and the protection of privacy.



## HMG Cyber Essentials

This is a government-backed scheme and a key deliverable of the UK's National Cyber Security Programme. Ipsos was assessment-validated for Cyber Essentials certification in 2016. Cyber Essentials defines a set of controls which, when properly implemented, provide organisations with basic protection from the most prevalent forms of threat coming from the internet.



## Fair Data

Ipsos is signed up as a “Fair Data” company, agreeing to adhere to 10 core principles. The principles support and complement other standards such as ISOs, and the requirements of Data Protection legislation.

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