



Uni Connect

Phase three guidance for 2021-22

Reference OfS 2021.21

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Publication date 14 July 2021 (updated 23 August 2021)

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Summary

1. This document sets out the aims, priorities and expectations of the Office for Students' (OfS) Uni Connect programme for phase three, covering 1 August 2021 through to 31 July 2022. It will be of particular interest to the Uni Connect partnerships as a source of information for the delivery of activity in the 2021-22 academic year.
2. We will issue further guidance during 2022 to cover the remainder of phase three of the Uni Connect programme, which should run until July 2025.

Introduction and background to the programme

3. The Uni Connect programme (formerly the National Collaborative Outreach Programme or NCOP) was established in January 2017 as an initial four-year programme. Uni Connect brings together 29 partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners to offer activities, advice and information on the benefits and realities of going to university or college.
4. Phase one of the programme started in January 2017 and ran until July 2019. It aimed to support the government's social mobility goals by rapidly increasing the number of young people from underrepresented groups who go into higher education. Partnerships focused work on local areas where higher education participation is lower than might be expected given the GCSE results of the young people who live there.
5. Phase two started on 1 August 2019 and is due to finish in July 2021. Building on phase one, it supports two main strands of activity:
 - Targeted higher education outreach within the local areas where evidence suggests we can have the most impact (these are the same areas targeted under phase one)
 - Outreach hubs within the 29 local partnerships with cross-England coverage to help schools and colleges access the higher education outreach they need and provide a platform for wider collaboration.
6. Throughout the previous two phases of the programme, partnerships have delivered a variety of activities, from one-off taster days, campus visits and summer schools (where learners gain an insight into what it is like to be a student in higher education), to mentoring and information, advice and guidance (IAG) which focuses on learners as individuals and is impartial. Partnerships should carefully identify when the most effective time is for activities to be delivered in a young person's educational journey and which activities are most effective, informed by evaluation evidence as it becomes available.
7. The OfS commissioned external evaluators to review emerging evidence on the impact of these activities during phase one and two. Evidence from the phase one programme evaluation¹ strongly supports the importance of outreach being delivered in a sustained and progressive way, working with the same learners over time, including by placing partnership staff in schools.
8. The latest evaluations published in May 2021 indicate that sustained engagement in multi-intervention programmes is necessary to improve learners' knowledge of higher education and build their confidence to make informed decisions.² Emerging evidence suggests more positive outcomes for those who participated in 3-6 hours (per academic year) or 7-8 engagements (over Years 12-13). A survey found that school and college staff involved in the programme valued Uni Connect for high-quality, impartial outreach which helped them to meet Ofsted's Gatsby benchmark requirements. However, many thought the programme

¹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/ncop-end-of-phase-one-evaluation-report/.

² See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/uni-connect/evaluating-uni-connects-impact/.

could be enhanced by more employer involvement and a wider range of subject insights. We expect partnership plans to reflect these findings in phase three of the programme.

9. Evidence of the programme's impact will continue to be generated and used by the partnerships in phase three to improve activity. The OfS will continue to assess data to evaluate the programme's longer-term impact, with the targeted outreach activity designed to have impact over five years of a learner's educational journey from Year 9.
10. Further information on the background and previous two phases of the programme can be found on our website.³

³ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/uni-connect/.

Section 1: Phase three overview

11. Phase three of the Uni Connect programme will commence in August 2021 and run through to July 2025. Funding for the programme is subject to confirmation and consultation on an annual basis.
12. We recently consulted on a proposed new approach to the Uni Connect programme⁴ for phase three. The consultation response has now been published⁵ and sets out the decisions made after taking full consideration of responses received. The aims and priorities for phase three of the programme are set out below.

Aims of the Uni Connect programme

Our investment in phase three of the Uni Connect programme aims to:

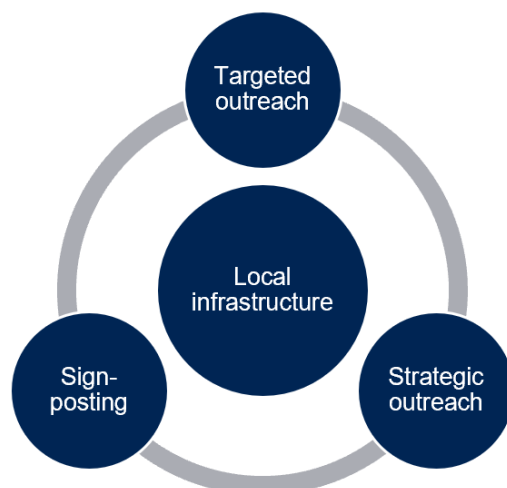
- a. Contribute to reducing the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups
- b. Equip young and adult learners from underrepresented groups to make an informed choice about their options in relation to the full range of routes into and through higher education and to minimise the barriers they may face when choosing the option that will unlock their potential
- c. 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
- d. Contribute to a stronger evidence base in respect of 'what works' in higher education outreach and strengthen evaluation practice across the sector.

13. The Uni Connect programme for 2021-22 consists of three broad elements: targeted outreach, strategic outreach and signposting. These are set out in Figure 1 below.

⁴ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/consultation-on-new-approach-to-uni-connect/.

⁵ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/a-new-approach-to-the-uni-connect-programme-from-2021-22-to-2024-25/.

Figure 1: Different elements of the Uni Connect programme in phase three (2021-22 only)



14. The 2021-22 academic year will be a transition year during which your partnership will develop the different elements of your approach and review any existing activity against the phase three programme aims and ambitions. An overview of the key elements of the programme in 2021-22 is set out in Annex A.

Phase three: Targeted outreach 2021-22

15. Your partnership will provide impartial sustained and progressive targeted outreach to help learners make well-informed decisions about their future education and to reduce gaps in higher education participation for the least represented groups.
16. In previous phases of the programme, your partnership has delivered impartial sustained and progressive targeted outreach within local areas, where higher education participation is lower than might be expected given the GCSE results of the young people who live there. Evidence from the programme evaluation⁶ has strongly supported the importance of outreach being delivered in a sustained and progressive way. This usually means providing tailored multi-intervention approaches with a learner through their educational journey. Engagement of this kind requires considerable investment and therefore it is essential that targeted outreach is directed to where it can have the most impact to make best use of public investment in the programme.
17. During 2021-22, your partnership will deliver targeted outreach to learners who live in the phase two Uni Connect target areas and are either in Years 9 through to 13 or are aged 19+ and attending a further education college.
18. Your partnership will use local intelligence, including information from your learner tracking service, to identify which schools and colleges to work with and support sustained engagement with target learners.

⁶ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/ncop-end-of-phase-one-evaluation-report/.

19. We also expect your partnership's plans to reflect the findings of evaluation during phase one and two of the programme.⁷ The latest evaluations, published in May 2021, indicate that sustained engagement in multi-intervention programmes is necessary to improve learners' knowledge of higher education and build their confidence to make informed decisions.⁸ Emerging evidence suggests more positive outcomes for those who participated in 3-6 hours (per academic year) or 7-8 engagements (over Years 12-13). A survey found that school and college staff involved in the programme valued Uni Connect for high-quality, impartial outreach which helped them to meet Ofsted's Gatsby benchmark requirements. However, many thought the programme could be enhanced by more employer involvement and a wider range of subject insights. We expect partnership plans to reflect these findings in phase three of the programme.
20. As a partnership, we expect you to collaborate with other Uni Connect partnerships and with other networks to share approaches, resources and good practice during phase three. Collaboration can bring economies of scale and provide value for money, minimise the risk of duplication, facilitate the involvement of key stakeholders who may struggle to engage across multiple local areas, and strengthen the likely impact or effectiveness of planned activities. In particular, we expect your partnership to collaborate in respect of:
- engagement with particular groups, including smaller groups of underrepresented learners (for example, care experienced learners or those with protected characteristics) and adult learners
 - evaluation
 - subject specialist pathways, such as the arts or agriculture
 - pathways involving higher education providers which might take a national approach to recruitment, such as highly selective providers and those whose focus is on distance learning.
21. For 2021-22 we will maintain the 20 per cent engagement measure as a programme goal for engagement with targeted younger learners. If your partnership is unable to achieve 20 per cent engagement, you must specify your estimated level of engagement and demonstrate that you are taking appropriate actions to maximise engagement with target learners. There is no minimum level of expected engagement with those over 19 years of age for 2021-22.
22. The Uni Connect baseline learner survey⁹ identified Year 12 to 13 learners studying at sixth form as being twice as likely to aspire to study at a university away from home as those currently studying at a further education college; and further education college learners as

⁷ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/uni-connect/evaluating-uni-connects-impact/.

⁸ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/ofs-programme-boosts-outreach-to-underrepresented-students/.

⁹ Available at <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180405115436/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2018/ncopyear1/>.

more than twice as likely to aspire to full-time work as those in a sixth form. This suggests that the type of support required by learners on different routes may vary.

23. Given the different aspirations of learners in school sixth forms, who are more likely to decide to progress to higher education compared with colleges, we expect partnerships to give an increased focus to target learners in Years 12 and 13 in further education colleges.
24. In phase three of the programme, we expect your partnership to explore expanding your delivery of targeted outreach with adult learners where appropriate. In 2021-22 your partnership should focus this engagement on adult learners aged 19 or above who are studying in a further education college.
25. We expect your partnership to support adult learners in making informed choices about their options in relation to the full range of routes into and through higher education and seek to minimise the barriers they may face when choosing the option that is right for them.
26. Adult learners in higher education are more likely than younger students to be from underrepresented groups and can face different barriers to accessing and succeeding in their studies¹⁰. We recognise that adult learners are not all the same and may face specific barriers which are different to those of younger learners.
27. We anticipate your partnership will need time to develop approaches to delivering outreach to underrepresented adult learners and your partnership may wish to use 2021-22 to develop your strategy so your partnership is equipped to deliver frontline engagement from 2022-23 onwards.

Phase three: Strategic outreach for 2021-22

28. As a partnership you will provide strategic outreach to address IAG and outreach 'cold spots' or gaps for underrepresented groups in your local area,¹¹ in particular by strategically facilitating and coordinating the most effective distribution of outreach delivery resources in your local areas to best support your underrepresented learners. By focusing on addressing outreach gaps and local prioritisation, we expect to minimise the risk of duplicating activity set out in providers' access and participation plans. Interventions might involve new activity but can also involve activity which aligns with existing outreach and strengthens or extends its impact. Not all activities and interventions supported by your partnership will involve the delivery of IAG or outreach, but we expect there to be a clear link between any activity that is funded by the programme and the closing of gaps in local IAG and outreach for underrepresented groups.
29. Strategic outreach is intended to address outreach gaps for underrepresented groups, including learners from underrepresented groups that, based on their small size, may be more appropriately tackled across the whole local partnership area than at school or college level. Examples of such groups are care leavers, children from military families, learners with disabilities and some ethnic minority groups. In doing this, your partnership will make an important contribution towards our strategic aims and therefore we consider this an important

¹⁰ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/mature-students/.

¹¹ See Annex B for further information and guidance on how to conduct a mapping exercise.

strand of activity within the programme. However, we recognise that Uni Connect resources are limited and our proposed approach is designed to be proportionate, allowing for local flexibility to target investment. We do not expect your partnership to work with all underrepresented groups or seek to close all local IAG and outreach gaps. As a partnership, you should engage with local stakeholders to prioritise, considering where the most value can be added by working collaboratively and taking into account local context and available resources.

30. We have provided your partnership with a four-stage process to help you determine your approach to strategic outreach, including understanding local outreach and IAG gaps. This is included in Annex B.
31. Within such an approach, your partnership is required to:
 - Work with partners (see Section 5: Engaging local partners) to undertake an assessment of local IAG and outreach gaps for underrepresented groups¹² in the geographical area covered by your partnership (strategic outreach wards), including with adult learners
 - Engage with local stakeholders to consider what your partnership wants to achieve from your strategic outreach, reflecting on: the gaps identified in your assessment; where collaborative activity can add most value; and taking into account local context and available resources
 - Determine which interventions and activities are likely to be most effective in achieving your goals, taking account of evidence in making these decisions, including from the Uni Connect evaluation as outlined above.
32. As a partnership, we encourage you to secure match funding for strategic outreach activity from local partners where possible. Match funding is one way in which we can gain assurance that a project has support and engagement from local partners. It also contributes to the project's sustainability.
33. Your partnership in phase two has worked collaboratively and strategically to understand the landscape of educational disadvantage, high-level skills needs and joined-up careers advice in the area, and to shape locally tailored approaches to address these challenges. In 2021-22, we expect your partnership to develop your strategic outreach plans and review any existing activity against your revised strategic outreach goals.
34. Strategic outreach activity should be collaborative, innovative, avoid duplication with existing activity, and take account of the local context and available resources. It should be directed towards activity that can have the most impact in terms of supporting progression into and through higher education for underrepresented learners.
35. As a partnership, you are expected to collaborate with other Uni Connect partnerships and with other networks to share approaches, resources and good practice relating to

¹² For more detail on which groups the OfS considers to be underrepresented, see www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance/.

engagement with different underrepresented groups, including with adult learners. This will deliver economies of scale and minimise the risk of duplication.

Phase three: signposting for 2021-22

36. As in phase two, in 2021-22 your partnership is required to continue providing signposting to primarily help teachers and advisers find out about the outreach activity available in the area. Within such an approach:
 - a. Your partnership will act as a point of contact for all state secondary schools and colleges in your local area. Drawing on the assessment of local IAG and outreach gaps for underrepresented groups undertaken as part of your approach to strategic outreach, you will signpost to your own provision as well as other local outreach provision, where such provision exists and is available.
 - b. Your partnership will host a website providing contact information and details of your Uni Connect offer to support your 'point of contact' role. This will mean our national OfS programme website can link to all partnerships. It will also help schools and colleges (including teachers and advisers), and learners, parents and carers (where appropriate) to access relevant resources and support.
 - c. Your partnership will work with relevant stakeholders to ensure your signposting offer is coherent with other IAG and outreach offered in the local area for both young and adult learners.
37. We expect greater collaboration and coordination between partnerships in respect of the coherence of your IAG and outreach offer, particularly between neighbouring partnerships in a geographical region. We also expect your partnership to engage with Discover Uni as a useful resource for IAG (see Section 2).
38. We recognise that there may be times when school or college outreach needs cannot be met through existing provision, either within the programme or externally. Where this highlights a systemic gap or 'cold spot' in outreach provision for underrepresented groups, we expect your partnership to explore this further as part of your strategic outreach activity. However, where this is not the case, we acknowledge that signposting may not always lead to a school or college finding appropriate outreach provision.
39. Your partnership should prioritise engagement with schools and colleges to focus the most effort where you can have the greatest impact. This means focusing on the schools and colleges you are working with to provide targeted and strategic outreach. Signposting activity should therefore be a relatively small part of your partnership's activities, recognising that other aspects of the programme will deliver the most impactful engagement with schools and colleges.
40. The programme infrastructure is well-suited to identifying and signposting locally available outreach. As a partnership, we expect you to work with relevant stakeholders to ensure your signposting offer coheres with other IAG and outreach offered in the local area for both young and adult learners. Understanding what outreach is available locally will enable your partnership to shape your targeted and strategic outreach offers.

41. We recognise that many schools and colleges have existing relationships with universities and other outreach providers. Where these links exist, we do not expect your partnership to duplicate this engagement through your signposting activity.
42. As a minimum, your partnership is expected to maintain a basic website to support your 'point of contact' role and to enable us to link to your partnership information from the national website. As a partnership, you may want to consider providing further signposting support via your website, including details of local and national outreach available if it is practical to do so. Although your partnership is not required to provide this detail on your webpages, you must still ensure you have knowledge and up-to-date information about available local outreach in order to fulfil the signposting element of the programme.
43. We recognise that digital approaches, both to signposting and outreach delivery, have taken on a more significant role within Uni Connect because of the pandemic. Therefore, although it is not an expectation, if your partnership does have a more extensive website offer this is welcomed. We expect greater collaboration and coordination between partnerships in respect of the coherence of your digital IAG and outreach offer where appropriate.

Impact of coronavirus (COVID-19)

44. We recognise the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on young and adult learners and their families, particularly those from more socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds and ethnic minority communities. Schools, colleges and universities have faced – and still face – challenges in continuing to deliver teaching to their pupils and students, adapting their delivery to digital and/or blended learning modes, and trying to meet and support students' needs.
45. In phase three, Uni Connect will continue to provide long-term, coordinated outreach to support student progression to further and higher education. Providing coordinated, high quality and relevant outreach and IAG to schools and colleges will mean they can focus their resources on young and adult learners from underrepresented groups who have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.
46. Since March 2020, when the UK first went into lockdown, we have issued guidance¹³ on our expectations of how the programme can support learners, particularly those who are likely to have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic, for example those in transition years (Years 11 and 13). We supported the shift to digital approaches to outreach, which were critical to the delivery of the programme during the initial national, and subsequent local and national, lockdowns. Recognising that wholly digital activity delivered online presents challenges, there have also been demonstrable advantages to digital delivery.
47. We will, therefore, continue to support and encourage the development of digital activity as part of a blended approach to outreach in phase three. This will facilitate greater access to targeted and strategic IAG and outreach activity for underrepresented students. Programme resources are limited and need to be targeted to ensure best use of this investment. This

¹³ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/uni-connect-programme-an-update-from-the-office-for-students/.

requires the programme to be structured in a way that supports your partnership in directing your efforts to where your IAG and outreach activities can have the most impact.

48. By seeking to target support to the students, or groups of students, who are most likely to benefit from this engagement, we can ensure the most efficient, effective and economic use of resources and value for money. The three elements of signposting, strategic outreach and targeted outreach, set out in this document, are designed to do this in a way that balances national direction with local flexibility.

Supporting the fullest range of routes into and through higher education

49. We have strengthened our expectations for the involvement of further education colleges in the programme for phase three. This means there should be an increase in:
 - a. the involvement of further education colleges in your partnership's governance
 - b. the proportion of programme IAG and outreach directed towards learners in further education colleges
 - c. the proportion of programme IAG and outreach that relates to the routes through higher education that are particularly enabled by further education colleges.
50. In order to meet the needs of learners in further education colleges, tailored programmes are needed which recognise that those learners are likely to have different requirements to learners based in schools and sixth form colleges. These programmes will include high quality, impartial IAG and support, covering a broad range of opportunities in higher education (academic and technical) and career pathways. As a partnership, you are expected to work with local stakeholders, drawing on your knowledge and insights of local skills needs, to develop and deliver relevant programmes of activity with the further education colleges in your regions.
51. As a partnership, you are expected to share with each other any relevant research and effective approaches for successfully engaging further education learners, as well as supporting different learner pathways. We will also provide further insights and case studies where possible from the programme evaluation as findings emerge.
52. The enhanced focus on working with further education colleges and adult learners is aligned with the government's white paper, Skills for jobs: Lifelong learning for opportunity and growth¹⁴ and the subsequent Skills and Post-16 Education Bill.¹⁵ The Bill outlines a lifetime skills guarantee, which is intended to enable everyone to access the education and training that they need throughout their lives. Further education colleges have been identified by the government as critical to delivering the skills needed locally to support its levelling up agenda. This includes strengthening links between employers and further education colleges in order to tailor courses to meet the skill needs of local businesses.

¹⁴ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-for-jobs-lifelong-learning-for-opportunity-and-growth>.

¹⁵ See <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/2868/publications>.

53. Through phase three of the programme, we intend to prioritise activity which supports different learner journeys through further and higher education, including vocational and technical higher education. This aligns with the role of Institutes of Technology and Higher Technical Qualifications set out in the government's technical education reforms.
54. As a partnership, you will need to keep up to date on developments in respect of technical education and more flexible forms of learning at higher levels as part of your delivery of impartial IAG. This includes continuing to develop strong relationships with bodies such as the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC), National Citizens Service (NCS), sector skills councils, etc., so that you can respond quickly and coherently to new priorities.

Section 2: Effective engagement with learners

Progression framework

55. Higher education outreach is most effective when delivered as a progressive, sustained programme of activity and engagement over time. For phase three, your partnership is required to review your current progression framework with regard to our revised expectations for 2021-22. This should include the recognition of the full range of routes into and through higher education and the progression pathways for adult learners aged 19+ where possible.
56. The progression framework, submitted by your partnership to us at the same time as the operating plan, should set out a clear statement of the specific changes that are expected for an individual learner over time as a result of the activities undertaken as part of Uni Connect targeted outreach. All activities delivered through Uni Connect targeted outreach will be part of your partnership's progression framework and contribute to the learner journey. Activities facilitated through Uni Connect strategic outreach may not necessarily read across to the progression framework, due to the different nature of this work. However, as a partnership, you are encouraged to consider whether there are opportunities to broaden the scope of the progression framework to encompass some or all of the activity facilitated through strategic outreach.
57. The formative evaluation survey with schools and colleges conducted by Ipsos Mori found that schools valued Uni Connect outreach as it helped them to meet elements of the Baker Clause and Gatsby Benchmark 7: Encounters with further and higher education.¹⁶ As part of the review of the progression framework, your partnership should indicate clearly in your revised version where Uni Connect activities can assist schools with meeting specific elements of Gatsby Benchmark 7.
58. The Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) Careers Hubs and the Enterprise Adviser Network provide communities of practice for schools and colleges working towards the Gatsby Benchmarks. By 2024 all schools and colleges will be expected to be members of a Careers Hub. As a partnership, you are expected to connect with your local delivery teams (via Local Enterprise Partnerships or rdorney-savage@careersandenterprise.co.uk). Connecting to the local Careers Hub will provide opportunities to:
 - co-create programmes
 - pool funding
 - engage with the planning and delivery of encounters
 - share practice
 - use the Careers Hub as a route to disseminate projects and information
 - strategically shape the direction of local provision
 - access data on the current levels of achievement for benchmarks.

¹⁶ See <https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/schools-colleges/gatsby-benchmarks/gatsby-benchmark-7>.

59. Further information on careers and the Gatsby Benchmarks can be found on the Careers and Enterprise website in the 'Careers in Context 2020: A can-do guide'.¹⁷

Appropriate activities

60. The activities and approaches delivered by your partnership should be driven by your progression framework (as above) and be guided by the evidence of effective practice emerging from the programme evaluation, particularly when deciding on the types of activities to deliver for learners at different stages of their journey and the intensity and frequency of engagements. Approaches can be shaped to meet the needs of the local areas and learners who live there. However, all outreach activities and interventions delivered through the programme must be impartial and should align with the expectations set out in the terms and conditions of funding and the grant objectives and purposes. In particular, your partnership is expected to:

- deliver activity that demonstrably improves equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access higher education
- be informed by evidence and focused on activity that has greatest impact on access outcomes
- maximise opportunities to develop and deliver effective outreach collaboratively and in partnership with schools, colleges, stakeholders, other Uni Connect partnerships and others to create a shared vision and aims
- be transparent and accountable so that partners (including learners) and the wider community can understand the work taking place
- provide value for money
- be focused on continuous improvement drawing on robust evidence of what works and in what context, to address the challenges of improving access
- increase the involvement of further education colleges in the programme, including through your partnership governance, increase the proportion of IAG and outreach directed towards learners in further education colleges (where appropriate), and promotion of routes through higher education particularly enabled by further education colleges.

61. The targeted outreach element of the Uni Connect programme is directed at areas where the attainment data of young people suggests that they could be on a trajectory to higher education but choose not to pursue it as an option. For this reason, attainment may not be the most important factor for these young people in terms of accessing higher education, but it may be a factor in terms of increasing the range of options that may be open to them and the choices they make. Therefore, although attainment raising activity is not a primary focus

¹⁷ See <https://resources.careersandenterprise.co.uk/resources/careers-context-2020-can-do-guide-career-leaders>.

for your partnership, you would be expected to reflect on how your activity influences the expectations of young people which may itself influence their attainment levels.

62. In addition, specific activity to help raise attainment above the minimum requirement at GCSE level will open up a wider range of options for young people. Therefore, your partnership may wish to work closely with schools serving your target wards to determine whether young people from those wards with the potential to go onto higher education would benefit from limited attainment raising activity. As a partnership, you should ensure that the rationale for any attainment raising activity is clearly expressed in your progression framework.

Discover Uni

63. Discover Uni is a useful resource that your partnership should engage with when delivering targeted and strategic IAG and outreach. Discover Uni¹⁸ is the official OfS¹⁹ website that helps applicants research and finalise their course choices and for teachers and advisers to support them through the higher education application and admissions process. These resources pull together all the relevant information, advice and guidance on the application cycle for the relevant year, as well as providing useful links to other sources of information to support teachers, advisers and applicants to make the best choice for them.
64. As well as a range of impartial information, advice and guidance to support applicants, teachers and advisers, Discover Uni provides course information and the Unistats data, including insight from the NSS and other student surveys. Prospective students can explore and compare different higher education courses and find information on student finance, application deadlines and examinations.²⁰
65. Discover Uni is a one-stop-shop for information about applying to higher education to support your students in making the best decisions for them.

¹⁸ See <https://discoveruni.gov.uk/>.

¹⁹ See <https://discoveruni.gov.uk/how-do-i-choose-course/downloadable-resources/>.

²⁰ See <https://discoveruni.gov.uk/how-to/>.

Section 3: Programme funding

66. Funding for phase three of the Uni Connect programme has been confirmed for academic year 2021-22. For the avoidance of any doubt, where the terms and conditions of the grant (including any specific conditions imposed on a partnership) are inconsistent with this guidance, the terms and conditions of the grant will prevail.
67. As a partnership, you are required to submit an operating plan, an updated progression framework and self-assessment of evaluation to ensure that you are meeting the terms and conditions of funding for phase three. Your operating plan will need to be approved by us **by 31 August 2021** and will form part of your partnership's ongoing funding agreement.
68. Given that further funding decisions are yet to be made on the full period of phase three (from 2022-23 onwards), your partnership will submit an operating plan in summer 2021 to cover the 2021-22 academic year only. We expect that an operating plan to cover the period 2022-23 – 2024-25 will be required from your partnership in spring 2022.
69. Your partnership may have received an uplift in your strategic outreach allocation due to changes made to the funding methodology for 2021-22. The purpose of this increase is to protect the infrastructure of the smaller partnerships, ensuring viability. Additional funding provided through this route should be used to support activity across all the different elements of the programme, including targeted outreach. This retains the approach, which commenced in phase two, of your partnership having flexibility to use some of your strategic outreach allocation in support of targeted outreach if you choose to do so.
70. As a partnership, we expect you to use your targeted outreach allocation to meet the costs associated with your targeted outreach activity, including an appropriate share of partnership costs directly attributable to supporting Uni Connect activity. The amount of Uni Connect funding used to support strategic outreach activity should not exceed the strategic outreach allocation given to the partnership.
71. All members of your partnership are expected to support your partnership and the lead provider in meeting the expectations of the programme. Membership may change over the course of phase three and your partnership should ensure that monitoring returns are accurate at the time of submission, with any new members added and old members removed.

Programme expenditure and value for money

72. As a partnership, you must, unless otherwise agreed in writing by us, use programme funding only for eligible expenditure in accordance with paragraph 4 of the terms and conditions of funding.
73. As a partnership, you are permitted to use Uni Connect funds to cover maternity, paternity and adoption leave costs should they arise. This is an allowable cost under Uni Connect funding and should be included in 'Staff costs'.

74. As a partnership, you may incur liability for redundancy costs of staff who were recruited to work on the programme for either all or part of their time. Uni Connect funds can be used to cover the costs of staff redundancy as follows:
- a. The redundancy payments should be reasonable and in line with the statutory minimum. Should staff be employed on enhanced contracts, the employer should cover any additional benefits associated with redundancy.
 - b. Uni Connect funds should only be used to cover the period of time the individual has worked on Uni Connect, irrespective of their overall period of employment.
 - c. Uni Connect was designed as a time-limited programme. Therefore, your partnership must demonstrate that reasonable steps were taken to recruit in a way that sought to control and minimise staff costs. This would include consideration given to whether posts would be temporary or permanent, the drafting of employment contracts, and so on.
 - d. We will not provide additional funds to cover redundancy, so any costs will need to be taken from the funds already allocated.
75. If Uni Connect funding is used to cover redundancy costs, your partnership will need to confirm that payments have been made in line with the above guidance. Reporting will form part of the normal monitoring process.
76. Only lead provider or host costs that are directly attributable to supporting your partnership are permitted; Uni Connect funding should not be used for more general estate costs and services at the provider.
77. As a partnership, you are required to accurately report Uni Connect spending in accordance with our monitoring and reporting requirements of the terms and conditions of funding and any operational monitoring guidance we issue.
78. As a partnership, you are reminded that Uni Connect is a publicly funded programme and, as outlined in the terms and conditions of funding, value for money considerations should be at the forefront of all expenditure.
79. Following the results of the programme audit of the first two years, we advise that your partnership does not use Uni Connect funding for:
- a. **Overseas visits or activities:** Unless there is direct correlation to a particular higher education subject (for example, foreign languages). If your partnerships would like advice on the appropriateness of an overseas visit, please check with our Uni Connect team.
 - b. **Capital spending:** For example, the purchase of office equipment, refurbishment of office space or large-scale equipment or asset purchases. If you are unsure whether a request falls into this category, you are advised to contact us before expenditure is committed.

- c. **Marketing and student recruitment:** Uni Connect funding is strictly for the provision of impartial outreach, advice and guidance to students, so must not be spent on marketing materials or the recruitment of students to particular providers.

- 80. We expect the majority of Uni Connect funding provided to your partnership to be spent on outreach, which includes outreach staffing and the delivery of outreach activities, including both targeted and strategic outreach activities. We will review expenditure through future monitoring returns and will contact your partnership where this is not the case.
- 81. As a partnership, your governing boards should have oversight of what is funded and scrutinise expenditure, ensuring that activities are evidence-based and fit with your partnership's progression framework and the terms and conditions of funding. Your partnership should focus clearly on meeting the programme goals and ensure value for money.
- 82. As outlined in the terms and conditions of funding, any unspent funds remaining at the end of the 2021-22 academic year will be recouped from your partnership.
- 83. As a partnership, you are not permitted to set aside any funding for contingency purposes. We will request further information where we are unclear about what has been included in the funding categories or where the funding set aside for 'other costs' is high in relation to other categories of spending.
- 84. As a partnership, you are permitted to spend some of your budget on marketing costs, including branding or promotion of your work, where this will directly benefit the successful delivery of activities as part of your partnership's approach. As a partnership, you should not use Uni Connect funds to pay for branded materials which play no active part in activities provided to young learners.

Subcontracting

- 85. It is not a requirement of the programme that your partnership works with third-party providers, but your partnership can commission other organisations (including third-sector organisations which have particular expertise) to deliver activity on your behalf as part of this programme. We advise that your partnership conducts thorough research on the effectiveness and track record of any third-party provider before committing funding. Your partnership's governing board and the lead provider will remain fully accountable to the OfS for the funding and delivery of all of the partnership's activity, including that of third-party providers. Your partnership's governing board is required to monitor the risks and mitigations of such arrangements with third-party providers to ensure they are delivering activity in line with the principles and goals of the programme.

Match funding

- 86. Match funding means any contribution to Uni Connect funded activities from a third party.
- 87. Our investment in strategic outreach is intended to provide an infrastructure to support wider activity with schools, colleges and other partners across the strategic outreach geography.

We expect any activity of this kind to be done in partnership with local agencies and to align with other initiatives.

88. The provision of match funding is one way in which we gain assurance that a project has support and engagement from local partners, as well as contributing to the sustainability of such activity.
89. While not an expectation of the programme, your partnership is encouraged to seek funding contributions from other sources to secure the ongoing sustainability of strategic outreach activity. We will seek confirmation of your partnership's plans for continuing to secure or increase other investment through match funding opportunities through operating plans. Such plans for 2021-22 might be provisional at the time of submitting the operating plan, so we will use future monitoring returns to gauge how this develops over the year.
90. Where new collaborative activity is identified and involves a financial contribution from Uni Connect, we would normally expect this funding contribution to be matched by other partner contributions as appropriate. As a partnership, you are required to ensure that any additional funding secured is genuine match funding and will not result in double funding of activity, as outlined in the funding terms and conditions. Where Uni Connect funding is being invested into strategic activity, the governing board is expected to make the decisions on what is deemed proportionate for your partnership and partners to contribute.
91. Examples of match funded projects can be found in the Ipsos Mori evaluation report,²¹ published in May 2021.
92. Uni Connect funding should not be used in place of other government funding, including other grant funding from us, or funding which would ordinarily be expected to be provided by another organisation.
93. In phase three we will no longer collect details of in-kind match funding contributions. Strategic engagement with other organisations, through in-kind contributions towards collaborative projects, is still encouraged but your partnership will only have to report any financial match funding contributions in monitoring returns.

²¹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/uni-connect-phase-two-formative-evaluation/.

Section 4: Partnership governance

94. As a partnership, your governing board and steering group should have sufficient oversight of the range of activities that are being offered through the programme, so that appropriate scrutiny of the fit with the principles of the programme is provided. In supporting the lead provider to fulfil the requirements of the programme, your partnership's governing board plays a critical role in ensuring successful delivery of the programme and should challenge your partnership where it has concerns about the use of funding.
95. As a partnership, your governing board and steering group should be focused on setting the strategic vision and direction for your partnership and establishing links with other policy initiatives, such as Opportunity Areas, to ensure Uni Connect contributes to wider social, cultural and economic objectives. Senior leaders within partner organisations are often best placed to achieve and maintain this synergy.
96. We expect the chair of your governing board to engage with our ongoing chairs and leads meetings, ensuring that messages about the programme and issues raised by the funder are understood and can be communicated effectively through your partnership.
97. When considering the approach to governance and management for phase three, your partnership should consider the findings in the Ipsos Mori 'Formative evaluation of Uni Connect phase two' report,²² which identified that the following practices appear to be supportive of effective governance:
 - Encompassing a leadership group comprised of appropriate senior leaders such as vice-chancellors, deputy or pro vice-chancellors and vice and deputy principals
 - Focusing on strategy not operations
 - Ensuring a shared vision amongst those working in your partnership and beyond
 - Good succession planning and handovers.
98. For phase three, there is an enhanced focus on the role of further education colleges in programme delivery, and an expectation that your partnership will include the perspectives of further education provider partners in the governance structure and will be able to provide input into strategic decisions.

Membership

99. Programme evaluation highlights the importance of ensuring that all core partners are represented on strategic and operational bodies. Your partnership may also want to consider the merits of inviting colleges and wider stakeholders to join your strategic governance group to provide external perspectives and challenge decisions.
100. Core partners are those who sit on your partnership governing board or steering group, and they are involved in either the strategic direction or the design and delivery of activities to support the aims of the programme. They will be key to decision making and contributing to

²² See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/uni-connect-phase-two-formative-evaluation/.

strategy. They will be higher education and further education providers, and they may also include local authority, council or Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP) representation.

101. Wider partners will contribute to, and potentially deliver, outreach activities and work in collaboration with your partnership to address identified gaps, but will not make strategic or operational decisions about your partnership or its delivery. They are likely to be other education providers (schools, sixth form colleges) and other organisations and employers.
102. The third definition of partnership role is 'Other'; this would apply to any other organisation that does not meet the definition of core or wider member.

Devolved partnerships

103. As set out in the 'National Collaborative Outreach Programme: Year one report of the national formative and impact evaluation':²³

'A degree of central control from consortia is needed to ensure the Uni Connect offer is coherent and coordinated. More effort is needed in highly-devolved funding models to ensure overarching aims and objectives are effectively communicated, understood and adhered to.'

104. As a result, we recommend that, if your partnership has a devolved funding model, the governing board particularly scrutinises the relationship with partners to provide some assurance of the coherence and consistency of the Uni Connect offer and to ensure funding is spent in line with the principles of the programme.

Programme risk

105. We are predominantly interested in strategic risks to collaborative working and to the success of your partnership in achieving the objectives you have defined for yourself as detailed in the operating plan. We welcome the delivery of innovative activity where it can be effectively evaluated. As a partnership, you will wish to capture a mixture of risks and opportunities within and outside your control. We would expect your partnership's governing board to receive updates on the risks to your partnership as part of its assessment of your partnership's progress against its plans.
106. An assessment of risk will be captured through programme monitoring and evaluation, but we encourage your partnership to make us aware of changes to risk which may affect the delivery of the programme aims and objectives.

Intellectual property

107. As a partnership, your governing board needs to consider how resources will be developed across your partnership and decide how any intellectual property will be managed between partners. We would expect your partnership to share effective practice and resources you develop with other Uni Connect partnerships, and to put in place mechanisms to enable this dissemination.

²³ See

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180405115436tf/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2018/ncopyear1/>.

Section 5: Engaging local partners

108. As a partnership, you are expected to build upon the models of strategic collaborative activity that have developed during phase two of the programme, particularly to support the successful delivery of strategic outreach in phase three.
109. There are particular organisations, programmes and initiatives which your partnership should consider when developing your approach to strategic engagement in phase three, as detailed below. This list is not intended to be exhaustive and there may be other organisations with which your partnership may also wish to engage based on your local context.
- Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC)
 - Employers
 - Housing associations
 - Jobcentre Plus
 - Local authorities
 - Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs)
 - National Careers Service
 - National Citizen Service (NCS)
 - National Tutoring Programme
 - NHS Trusts
 - Opportunity Area leads
 - Student Loans Company (SLC)
 - Institutes of Technology.

The Careers and Enterprise Company

110. The Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) supports schools, special schools and colleges to strengthen their approach to careers through its network of Careers Hubs and Enterprise Advisers. Following the publication of the national Careers Strategy in 2018, all schools and colleges are expected to work towards the achievement of the Gatsby Benchmarks as evidence of a high quality careers programme. Careers Hubs are being created in all areas to support this aspiration.
111. Working through LEPs or Combined Authorities, Careers Hubs and their Enterprise Coordinators work with schools and colleges to illustrate best practice and broker relevant activity. Many have already developed positive strategic, operational and funding relationships with the Uni Connect partnerships. We expect your partnership to build on and strengthen the engagement and relationships you have formed with Careers Hubs in your area to ensure a joined-up offer to all schools and colleges.

112. Schools and colleges within the CEC Network are encouraged to use the Compass and Compass+ tools to self-assess their approach to careers and to record and manage their career programme. These tools could help support schools and colleges as they seek to join up their Uni Connect activity with their wider careers offer; your partnership should work with schools and colleges to ensure Uni Connect activity is recorded in Compass and Compass+. Your partnership may also wish to include relevant information in the CEC's 'find a provider' directory.
113. The development of Careers Hubs has seen the initial North-East pilot extended through a national trial of 20 Hubs, to a full national rollout with every school and college being offered access to a Hub by 2024. Careers Hubs are groups of secondary schools and colleges located in the same geographic area, working together, and with partners in the business, public, education and voluntary sectors to deliver the eight Gatsby Benchmarks of excellent careers education. This includes encounters with higher education and helping young people to understand the full range of learning opportunities that are available to them.
114. CEC also works directly with Careers Leaders to provide training and CPD, increase awareness of best practice and provide a range of resources which support excellent careers education.
115. It is important that your partnership aligns your strategic outreach and targeted outreach activity with existing and future Careers Hubs, to maximise the outcomes of this investment for learners, schools, colleges and communities.

Employers

116. In the recent formative evaluation report,²⁴ several partnerships mentioned an increased focus on working with local employers through outreach hubs in phase two. This was perceived as important to developing an understanding of both local skills needs and skills gaps, and identifying progression pathways to local opportunities, including through higher level apprenticeships. The formative evaluation survey with school and college staff²⁵ also highlighted a desire for more employer engagement through the programme. Relationships with local employers are therefore likely to be increasingly important to partnerships in phase three.

Job Centre Plus support for schools

117. Through the Job Centre Plus support for schools programme,²⁶ local Job Centre Plus advisers are helping schools to meet their statutory duties around careers. This is a demand-led service which can respond flexibly to the needs of individual schools. There is a strong focus in the work of the advisers on working with employers and understanding the local

²⁴ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/uni-connect-phase-two-formative-evaluation/.

²⁵ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/formative-evaluation-of-uni-connect-phase-two-survey-of-school-and-college-staff/.

²⁶ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/evaluation-of-jobcentre-plus-support-for-schools-programme-national-roll-out-evaluation>.

labour market. As a partnership, you are encouraged to develop links with the advisers operating in your area to coordinate and align activities where appropriate.

Local Enterprise Partnerships

118. LEPs have an important remit focused on local economic growth, job creation, infrastructure and skills. There are 38 LEPs across England and LEP boards include representatives from educational institutions, most often local higher education providers. In many areas, the LEP is a key partner for some of the initiatives mentioned above, such as the Enterprise Adviser Networks, Careers Hubs and Opportunity Areas.
119. Given the breadth of geography covered by Uni Connect partnerships, the LEPs remain an increasingly important local partner, so as a partnership, you are expected to actively seek their involvement. This might include the formal involvement of the LEP on your partnership governing body. It is acknowledged that LEPs have varying capacity for such engagement and that their focus on this agenda may be limited. In such circumstances, providers involved in your partnership may consider what role your senior management teams could play in helping to strengthen links between Uni Connect and the LEP.
120. We recognise that your partnership may not always map across to local LEP boundaries. Some Uni Connect partnerships may operate across two LEP geographies. In this situation, your partnership is expected to consider the most appropriate focus for your engagement, as well as the geographies of the surrounding Uni Connect partnerships. Where a Uni Connect partnership is the sole partnership operating in a LEP area, it is expected to take necessary steps to develop its engagement with that LEP.

National Citizen Service

121. National Citizen Service (NCS) is a government-backed initiative that brings together young people aged 15 to 17 from different backgrounds, giving them the chance to undertake a programme of personal and social development, and community action. As with our own partnerships, NCS has reacted to the COVID-19 pandemic by adapting its provision to support the needs of young people, ensuring programmes and activities support them in the next stages of their development.
122. There is potential to more closely align activity delivered by your partnership and NCS. Since 2018, we have encouraged your partnership to consider how you could work together with the NCS, especially in the Opportunity Areas. As a partnership, you are encouraged to explore whether there are further opportunities to simplify the landscape for schools and colleges by greater collaboration with the NCS. For more details on how to collaborate with NCS, please email the NCS Education Engagement Team via education@ncstrust.org.uk.

National Tutoring Programme

123. The National Tutoring Programme (NTP), a government-backed initiative, aims to support schools in providing a sustained response to the coronavirus pandemic and to provide a longer-term contribution to closing the attainment gap.
124. Through NTP Tuition Partners, schools will be able to access subsidised high quality tuition from an approved list of providers. The Education Endowment Foundation will be leading the

delivery of this part of the programme and has been provided with £80 million from the Department for Education to fund activity in 2020-2021.

125. Through NTP Academic Mentors, trained graduates will be employed by schools in the most disadvantaged areas to provide intensive support to their pupils. Teach First will be supporting the recruitment, training and placement of the first cohort of Academic Mentors and have been provided with £6.4 million to fund this work. The salaries of Academic Mentors will be funded by the government.
126. Both pillars are funded as part of the government's £350 million allocation to tutoring, through the £1 billion coronavirus catch-up package. Further information about catch-up funding, including for early years settings and post-16 providers, is provided on the Department for Education website.²⁷

Opportunity Areas and Opportunity North East

127. The government is supporting tailored interventions in 12 Opportunity Areas across England that experience significant educational challenges. The programme was expanded in July 2020 to address the impact of coronavirus on lost learning time.²⁸ In addition, in October 2018 the government launched a £24 million programme (over three years) for the North East to improve opportunities for young people in the region.²⁹ If your partnership delivers targeted outreach or strategic outreach in areas that overlap with an Opportunity Area or Opportunity North East, you are expected to align your activities where appropriate.
128. A further £18 million expansion of the Opportunity Area programme was announced in May 2021, to help vulnerable young people from the most disadvantaged areas in the country.

Student Loans Company

129. The Student Loans Company (SLC) is a non-profit-making, government-owned organisation that administers loans and grants to students in colleges and universities in the UK. It has played an important stakeholder role for Uni Connect partnerships in previous phases of the programme and we continue to expect engagement with the SLC going forward. Importantly, the SLC can provide accurate and up-to-date information and resources to your partnership and your learners on student finance, in particular through their Funding Information Services (FIS) account managers.
130. The FIS account managers are a team of regionally based student finance professionals who actively engage with and provide Matrix accredited levels of training, support, information and guidance to an extensive practitioner/partner network. This includes but is not limited to: national organisations; regional networks; charities; local authorities; careers advice services; and providers from across the further, higher and postgraduate education sector.

²⁷ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/catch-up-premium-coronavirus-covid-19>.

²⁸ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/opportunity-areas-programme-to-support-young-people-hit-hardest-by-pandemic>.

²⁹ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/opportunity-north-east-delivery-plan>.

131. The FIS Team's service offer and delivery varies greatly and includes: in-depth staff training sessions on aspects of SLC policies and procedures; individual discussions on complex assessments; working closely with institutions and networks to analyse application patterns and trends; providing and reviewing content for student-facing resources and materials.
132. The service recognises that effective student finance advice is not limited to 'one size fits all' messages. The delivery content reflects this and is demonstrated through engagement with IAG practitioners and funding information partner organisations and networks who support students falling into targeted or vulnerable groups. These groups include care leavers, those estranged from family, disabled students, mature students, or those under a protected immigration status such as refugee or humanitarian protection.
133. For more information about the FIS Team, the regions covered and contact details, please see: www.practitioners.slc.co.uk/about-us/funding-information-services-account-managers.

Section 6: Evaluation, research and tracking

Commitment to evaluation

134. Evaluation will continue to be a critical part of Uni Connect programme delivery and we expect strategic commitment from your partnership to evaluation. One of Uni Connect's key aims is to: 'Contribute to a stronger evidence base around 'what works' in higher education outreach and strengthen evaluation practice in the sector'. There are high expectations for your partnership's local evaluations and contributions to the programme evaluation.
135. Robust evaluation requires strategic commitment from your partnership and support from your partner organisations, alongside the schools and colleges that you work with to deliver outreach activities. As a partnership, you must work with partners and other key stakeholders to gain their commitment to supporting local and national evaluation activity to ensure that it can be appropriately robust.
136. As a partnership, we expect you to have strong evaluation plans in place and deliver robust evaluation of your activity. These plans must be appropriately resourced with skilled staff to underpin your partnership's ability to generate high quality insights and strong evidence. The primary evaluation objectives should be to understand whether and how the partnership's outreach work is effective, to improve its activities and contribute to the wider evidence base.
137. As a partnership, you may be asked to submit revised evaluation plans and/or evaluation self-assessment tools for review by us or our appointed expert supplier during the programme. We may ask to see your partnership's current evaluation plans in some circumstances. The circumstances for requesting the submission of a revised evaluation plan may include where there are concerns about your partnership's evaluation approach, where there is a lack of evidence being submitted or inappropriate levels of engagement with the national programme evaluation.
138. As a partnership, you should review your own evaluation plans regularly (at least annually) as a matter of good practice to account for learning and programme changes, regardless of OfS submissions. A peer or expert review from outside your partnership is also considered good practice in the review process.

Learning and generating evidence from evaluation

139. Evidence reviews of impact evidence generated by your partnership will capture and share programme learning. Local evaluation activity should be planned so that your partnership is able to submit strong qualitative and/or quantitative evaluation impact evidence regularly (at least annually) to the national programme evaluation. As a partnership, you are expected to submit robust evidence to the national evaluation, whether that demonstrates positive, negative or no difference findings.
140. Evidence generated by your partnership's evaluations which are submitted to the national evaluation for review and/or synthesis will also be made available to the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO).³⁰ This evidence is

³⁰ See <https://taso.org.uk/>.

an important resource for the wider sector to understand and improve effective outreach practice.

141. Learning from evaluation and translating findings into practice are vital to ensure evaluation contributes to improved practice and greater impact. As a partnership, you must have effective mechanisms in place, through which the evaluation findings can inform your strategic decision making and outreach practice. Evaluation should be coordinated so that relevant findings are timely to feed into your partnership's wider strategic and operational planning cycles for delivery.

National programme evaluation

142. As a partnership, you are expected to continue to engage and communicate with the national programme evaluation activity as requested, including best efforts to collect accurate evaluation data from Uni Connect learners. As a partnership, you should act on any learning which the national programme evaluation generates, where appropriate.
143. We will keep your partnership updated regularly on the national programme evaluation to support your planning and programme learning.
144. We commission external evaluators to work on our behalf in evaluating Uni Connect at a programme level and we may also commission other external research. To support data collection for evaluation and research, we will share the name and contact details of project staff (as submitted in the Operating Plan and ongoing monitoring submissions) with external evaluators and researchers. As a partnership, you will be advised through OfS communications when there is evaluation and research being conducted. Therefore, please note:
- Your data may be shared so you can be contacted by external evaluators and researchers to enable data collection for the purposes of the evaluation and/or research.
 - The legal basis for sharing your personal data is performance of public task in accordance with Article 6(1)(e) of the General Data Protection Regulation 2018.
 - Your data will be shared securely and stored on secure servers within the UK.
 - Your details will be retained for one month after the end of the evaluation and/or research then securely disposed of.
 - You may contact our Data Protection Officer (dp@officeforstudents.org.uk) with any queries or concerns you have about the sharing of your personal information.
 - Our full privacy notice is available on the OfS website.³¹

³¹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/ofs-privacy/privacy-notice/.

Partnership research

145. We recognise that research activity can be valuable to help design and target activities effectively. However, research is not one of the main aims or expected outcomes of Uni Connect funding; therefore we do not expect spend in this category to be high. As a partnership, you must ensure that any Uni Connect-funded research and related insight is unique, relevant and accessible:
- a. **unique** – not duplicating other research in partnerships and/or the wider sector. Your partnership is encouraged to collaborate on research projects where there are shared areas of interest to ensure value for money and economies of scale.
 - b. **relevant** – to the activity your partnership delivers to meet Uni Connect’s programme goals.
 - c. **accessible** – insights are available and shared with other partnerships, the OfS and the wider sector.

Legal basis for monitoring and evaluation

146. Robust national and partnership monitoring and evaluation are required as these enable us to understand whether and how resources are used efficiently and effectively. We have a statutory duty through the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA) to deliver value for money for students and taxpayers: *“In performing its functions, the OfS must have regard to— the need to use the OfS’s resources in an efficient, effective and economic way”* (Section 2 (1)(f)). Section 69 of HERA enables us to arrange for studies designed to improve economy, efficiency and effectiveness where appropriate. Further details of our approach more broadly are included in our Regulatory framework³² and Value for money strategy.³³

Longitudinal tracking

147. Good quality longitudinal tracking data is vital to good governance and understanding the programme’s impact. The data supports robust monitoring and evaluation which in turn helps improve efficiency and effectiveness and understand value for money. The data your partnership collects is an essential requirement for monitoring, partnership evaluation, and national programme evaluation. Missing or poorly collected data will have significant negative consequences for understanding the level of delivery and the quality of evidence Uni Connect is able to generate.
148. As part of the terms and conditions of funding, your partnership is required to work with one of the recognised Uni Connect tracking services (HEAT, EMWPREP or Aimhigher West Midlands) and to submit accurate and timely data into the tracking service.

³² See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/the-regulatory-framework-for-higher-education-in-england/.

³³ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/value-for-money-strategy/.

149. As a partnership, you must track all learners who participate in activity which is paid for, either wholly or partly, using Uni Connect funding. This includes target learners, non-target learners, targeted outreach and learners engaged in other strategic outreach.
150. As a partnership, you must make best efforts to gain accurate learner participant data where possible and enter this promptly into your nominated tracking systems. Your partnership is likely to need to consider engagement activity to gain commitment from different partners and other key stakeholders to support this. Where outreach activity is not Uni Connect-funded, tracking participants is recommended if possible and appropriate, but not required (for instance, where your partnership only signposts to existing provider-level outreach).
151. As a partnership, you must comply with the data protection law, including the Data Protection Act 2018, General Data Protection Regulation and any successor legislation and regulation enacting provisions relating to the processing of personal data. This means your partnership must have an appropriate legal basis, relevant and requisite data sharing agreements and privacy notices in place to share outreach participant data with the tracking services and capture accurate data through the tracking systems. This is likely to require supporting activity to gain commitment from different partners and other key stakeholders.
152. The tracking services will continue to share your partnership's activity and individualised participant data with national programme evaluators and the OfS at periodic intervals for analysis during the programme. As a partnership, you must ensure compliance with data protection legislation to support this data sharing process. Your partnership should note that relevant and requisite data sharing agreements and privacy notices should cover the sharing of tracking and monitoring data with both the OfS and the appointed national evaluation suppliers for the purposes of the national evaluation.
153. As a partnership, you are expected to respond to specific tracking requirements to support monitoring data collection, which will be issued prior to each monitoring period as appropriate.
154. As a partnership, you should be aware that we engage external evaluators and researchers to work on our behalf in evaluating Uni Connect. To support data collection for the evaluation, we may from time to time share data and your partnership contact details with relevant external contacts.

Section 7: Monitoring

Monitoring purpose

155. The purpose of monitoring is to enable us to:

- understand how the programme aims are being met
- gain assurance about programme funding
- integrate monitoring information with the programme's evaluation, including seeking information about value for money and return on investment.

156. As a partnership, you will be asked to provide six-monthly updates to ensure that financial profiles and budgets are on track, to monitor your partnership's progress against operating plans and in relation to school or college and learner engagement. We will continue to work with the tracking services to develop the tracking report submission as part of monitoring, which ensures monitoring data is collected efficiently and accurately. Tracking data submitted to the OfS as part of the monitoring process is aggregate and does not include individualised data. Monitoring guidance for phase three will be issued separately ahead of the submission dates for monitoring returns which are expected in February and September each year. For the interim monitoring return (February 2022), we will aim to reduce burden on your partnership by requesting a minimal level of data for funding assurance purposes.

157. As a partnership, you are expected to comply with the monitoring and reporting requirements as outlined in the terms and conditions of funding and with any monitoring deadlines set by us. Failure to do so may result in delays to payments. As set out in the terms and conditions of funding, we also reserve the right to suspend, terminate or recover the grant if any of its monitoring requirements are not met.

158. Any slippage in expenditure will be managed in discussion with your partnership. All instances of underspending will be dealt with on a case-by-case basis and will take into account the rationale or explanation provided by your partnership.

159. We may require enhanced engagement or additional monitoring requirements where there are concerns or risks that your partnership is not delivering or using funding in accordance with the terms and conditions of funding and aims of the programme. For more information, see Section 9: When a partnership fails to deliver.

160. The OfS may from time to time share performance data from your partnership with other partnerships in order to incentivise good performance. We will provide further details of any sharing at the time of any request for information.

Section 8: Communications

Our communications

161. We will formally publish communications about the programme in emails or documents, reports and pages on the OfS website, but will also use more informal mechanisms such as social media. We will continue to request effective practice case studies from your partnership to publish on our website and promote through social media.
162. We reserve the right to publish aggregated monitoring data and case study content from your partnership's monitoring returns as well as other outputs from the programme, including evaluation outputs, as part of disseminating the findings of monitoring and evaluation for the benefit of the sector. We would contact your partnership ahead of doing this. We will also use these outputs for internal purposes, such as policy development. If your partnership believes the report, or elements of it, are confidential and should not be published, your partnership should state the reasons why in advance and we will consider them.
163. Key information that requires action, or gives guidance to your partnership, will most likely be communicated via letter or a direct formal email to your partnership manager or lead, the chair of your partnership governing board, and if appropriate the lead provider, as identified to us. We expect that any information sent to your partnership manager will be appropriately disseminated to partners.
164. We will continue to use the Uni Connect community platform (<https://groups.officeforstudents.org.uk/login>) to post guidance and share other information with your partnership; however, it is primarily a tool for your partnership to use to communicate with other partnerships.

Partnership communications

165. As a partnership, you are encouraged to share your work both locally and nationally where appropriate and to consider key audiences and influencers, for example teachers and parents and carers.
166. We have previously issued guidance³⁴ in respect of Uni Connect branding, including a logo. As a partnership, you should use this logo on resources, materials, websites and digital resources developed by your partnership.
167. As a partnership, you should advise us of any upcoming media coverage of your partnership by emailing unicconnect@officeforstudents.org.uk.
168. Our contribution to your partnership should be acknowledged in press releases, which should also make reference to the wider Uni Connect programme.
169. The Uni Connect community platform is funded by us for your partnership to use and communicate with other partnerships and its continued use is encouraged. Many partnerships also use the Uni Connect distribution list on Jiscmail, which remains an effective

³⁴ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/uni-connect-branding-guidelines/.

way of communicating with the wider Uni Connect community. If you would like to subscribe to this distribution list, please email uniconnect@officeforstudents.org.uk.

170. When posting about Uni Connect on social media, partners should @Officestudents and use the hashtag #UniConnect.

Section 9: How we will work with partnerships

How we will work with your partnership

171. Communication will normally be with the lead contact for your partnership, but this may include the chair of the steering group and other partners and stakeholders as necessary.
172. To run a successful programme, we will foster open and transparent relationships with Uni Connect partnerships. In order to do this, we will aim to:
- listen to what you have to say on all aspects of the programme
 - champion effective practice through case studies and video clips on our website, in our publications and through social media
 - email your partnership chairs or leads (as appropriate) directly with key information or action that needs to be taken
 - respond to emails sent to the Uni Connect inbox within five working days.

What we expect from partnerships

173. We expect your partnership to be open, clear and honest in your communications with us.
174. As a partnership, you should use the Uni Connect email address (unicconnect@officeforstudents.org.uk) as the first point of contact.
175. We expect your partnership chairs and leads to disseminate information throughout your partnership as and when necessary.
176. As a partnership, you are required to respond to requests for information in accordance with the timeframes set by us. In general, we would expect partners to respond to requests for information or queries from us within five working days, but we will consider whether it is appropriate to set a shorter or longer timeframe depending on the particular circumstances.

Section 10: When a partnership fails to deliver

177. The terms and conditions of funding (which include our standard funding terms and conditions) confirm the circumstances in which we would withhold or suspend payment of funds or require repayment.
178. As a partnership, you are required to send financial updates to us every six months through monitoring returns, as detailed in Section 6. We expect your partnership to keep us informed of any delivery or financial issues or risks that might arise.
179. Where there are concerns about the use of the funding, we will in the first instance contact your partnership manager and lead provider to investigate further. We reserve the right to audit any funding allocated, and we would do this through your lead provider with responsibility for the funding.
180. As a partnership, your members are encouraged to contact us via the Uni Connect email inbox (unicconnect@officeforstudents.org.uk) in the first instance if an issue needs to be brought to our attention; we would advise early contact whenever possible, before matters escalate. We expect your partnership members to notify us of any event or circumstance that materially affects or could materially affect your partnership's ability to comply with the terms and conditions of funding. Equally, there might be instances when an issue is reported to us anonymously, by way of 'whistle-blowing'. While our powers do not extend to investigating individual complaints, these matters may be of regulatory interest in circumstances where they are relevant to a provider's compliance with the conditions of registration or the terms and conditions of the grant. The process for notifications is available on our website.³⁵

A step-based approach

181. We recognise that plans may change and that there may be unavoidable slippage in progress or a delay in programme activity or expenditure. We will always work flexibly with your partnership, taking a risk-based approach to support you in meeting your own objectives and the delivery of the programme. Without prejudice to any other steps we may take in accordance with the terms and conditions of funding, the following steps set out our expected approach to working with your partnership when things do not go to plan:
 - a. **Step 1:** Where we become aware of issues of slippage in progress against your partnership's operating plan through informal updates or programme monitoring, we would normally expect, in the first instance, to arrange a discussion with the chair of your partnership's governing board, your partnership manager and a representative from your lead provider (if this person is not the chair). The aim of this will be to understand the reasons for your partnership's lack of progress and what your partnership is doing to address it. We may ask your partnership to draw up an action

³⁵ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/office-for-students-notifications/what-is-a-notification/.

The OfS will not be able to provide an update on the progress or outcome of any issue raised. This is because our statutory powers do not extend to investigating individual complaints and because of the confidential nature of any decisions we take about the regulatory affairs of a provider.

plan setting out those tasks which will get it back on track in a specified timeframe. We may also re-profile funds if this forms part of the action plan approach.

- b. **Step 2:** We will expect regular updates on the implementation of your partnership's action plan. If it appears that the timescales or requests within it are not on track, or if the original action plan was in response to a significant issue, we may escalate to the senior management of your lead provider. We may want to engage with your lead provider to ensure that strategic resource is provided to ensure your partnership's progress is brought back into line with the expectations set out in an updated action plan and your partnership's original operating plan. As a partnership, your governing board should also be informed of these issues and be updated on progress by your partnership.
- c. **Step 3:** Circumstances in which we would consider your partnership to be persistently failing include:
- if it has not delivered on its operating plan
 - if it is significantly behind or repeatedly underperforming against its objectives
 - where it does not respond to our requests appropriately or in a timely manner.

If any of these circumstances arise, we can consider withholding or suspending payment of the grant, requiring repayment of all or part of the grant, or both, as well as recommissioning the related wards. We expect that this will be taken forward through engagement between us and representatives of your lead provider and your partnership (including the chair of the governing board). Subsequent steps may be taken forward through notice to the accountable officer of your lead provider and our directors or board where necessary. Our standard funding terms and conditions provide further clarification on the circumstances by which we would withdraw funding from your partnership.

182. Correspondence for all steps will be issued by us and sent to your partnership manager, your partnership chair and your lead provider representative.

Section 11: Relationship with condition of registration

183. As a partnership, you are reminded that compliance with the terms and conditions of funding is a mandatory requirement under condition G2 of the conditions of registration.³⁶

³⁶ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/conditions-of-registration/.

Annex A: Overview of key elements within the programme in 2021-22

Element	Aim	Coverage	Activities	Funding
Signposting	<p>Help teachers and advisers find out about the outreach activity available in the area</p> <p>Cut through competitive barriers and offer an efficient and low-burden route for schools and colleges to engage</p>	<p>All state secondary schools and colleges in the area (phase two outreach hub geography)</p> <p>Young and adult learners; underrepresented groups</p>	<p>Your partnerships will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> act as a point of contact for all state secondary schools and colleges signpost to local outreach provision, where such provision exists and is available host a website providing contact information and details of your Uni Connect offer to support your 'point of contact' role work with relevant stakeholders to ensure your signposting offer is coherent with other IAG and outreach offered in the local area for both young and adult learners. 	<p>OfS Uni Connect funding (strategic outreach allocation)</p>
Strategic outreach	<p>Address IAG and outreach 'cold spots' for underrepresented groups in the area</p> <p>Help recipients make well-informed decisions about their options in relation to the full range of routes into and through higher education and minimise the barriers they may face when choosing the option that will unlock their potential</p> <p>Contribute to reducing gaps in higher education participation for the least represented groups</p>	<p>Phase two outreach hub geography</p> <p>Young and adult learners; underrepresented groups</p>	<p>Your partnerships will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> undertake an assessment of local IAG and outreach gaps for underrepresented groups in the geographical area covered by your partnership, including with adult learners engage with local stakeholders to consider what your partnership wants to achieve from your strategic outreach, reflecting on the gaps identified in your assessment, where collaborative activity can add most value, and taking into account local context and available resources 	<p>OfS Uni Connect funding (strategic outreach allocation)</p> <p>Match funding</p>

Element	Aim	Coverage	Activities	Funding
	<p>Contribute to a stronger evidence base around 'what works' in higher education outreach and strengthen evaluation practice across the sector</p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> determine which interventions and activities are likely to be most effective in achieving your ambitions, taking account of evidence in making these decisions, including from the Uni Connect evaluation review existing activity against local strategic outreach ambitions collaborate with each other and with other networks to share approaches, resources and good practice relating to engagement with different underrepresented groups, including with adult learners. 	
<p>Targeted outreach</p>	<p>Help recipients make well-informed decisions about their options in relation to the full range of routes into and through higher education and minimise the barriers they may face when choosing the option that will unlock their potential</p> <p>Contribute to reducing gaps in higher education participation for the least represented groups</p> <p>Contribute to a stronger evidence base around 'what works' in higher education outreach and strengthen evaluation practice across the sector</p>	<p>Phase one and two targeted outreach areas</p> <p>Young learners in Years 9 to 13 who live in the target areas</p> <p>Adult learners aged 19+ who are studying at a further education college</p>	<p>Your partnership will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> provide programmes of impartial sustained and progressive outreach to target learners collaborate with other partnerships and with other networks to share approaches, resources and good practice relating to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (i) engaging with different underrepresented groups, including adult learners (ii) subject specialist pathways and pathways involving higher education providers which might take a national approach to their recruitment. 	<p>OfS Uni Connect funding (targeted outreach allocation)</p> <p>OfS Uni Connect funding (strategic outreach allocation) may also be used to support targeted outreach</p>

Annex B: Guidance on determining the approach to strategic outreach

1. This guidance is intended to assist your partnership with determining your approach to strategic outreach using a four-stage process:
 - Stage One: Assess local IAG and outreach gaps
 - Stage Two: Develop and prioritise strategic objectives
 - Stage Three: Design and shape interventions and activities
 - Stage Four: Evaluate and review.
2. As a partnership, you will determine your approach to strategic outreach by undertaking an assessment of local IAG and outreach gaps for underrepresented groups³⁷ in the geographical area covered by your partnership.
3. Uni Connect resources are limited and your partnership is not expected to work with all underrepresented groups or seek to close all local IAG and outreach gaps. As a partnership, you will need to engage with local stakeholders to prioritise your efforts, considering where the most value can be added by working collaboratively and taking into account local context and available resources.
4. Through a focus on addressing outreach gaps and local prioritisation we expect to minimise the risk of duplication with provider access and participation plan activity. Interventions can involve activity to align existing outreach to strengthen or extend its impact, as well as the development of new activity. Not all activities and interventions supported by your partnership will involve the delivery of IAG or outreach, but there should be a clear link between any activity that is funded by the programme and the closing of gaps in local IAG and outreach for underrepresented groups.
5. Strategic outreach activity is intended to be designed and delivered in collaboration with local higher education providers, schools, colleges, local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, employers and others. The provision of match funding is one way in which we gain assurance that a project has support and engagement from local partners, as well as contributing to the sustainability of such activity.
6. The academic year 2021-22 will be a transition year for strategic outreach activity as your partnership works through the stages above to develop your plans and review your existing activity against your future ambitions for strategic outreach. From 2022-23 we expect your partnership to have an agreed approach, ensuring all strategic outreach activity funded by the programme is aligned with it.

³⁷ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance/.

Stage one: Assess local IAG and outreach gaps

7. The first stage of determining your partnership's approach to strategic outreach is an assessment of IAG and outreach gaps for underrepresented groups in the geographical area covered by your partnership.
8. The assessment should consider:
 - What are the IAG and outreach needs of different underrepresented groups in your area?
 - What IAG and outreach is currently being provided for these groups in your area?
 - What are the IAG and outreach gaps for these groups in your area?
9. As a partnership, you should use local and national data sources and other information, including any intelligence gathered through your previous signposting activity and from your local partners, to inform your assessment.
10. To support greater alignment between Uni Connect and providers' access and participation plans, we have used the definition of underrepresented groups outlined in Regulatory notice 1: Access and participation plan guidance. We therefore consider underrepresented groups to include students with the following characteristics:
 - Students from areas of lower higher education participation, lower household income and/or lower socioeconomic status groups
 - Some black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students
 - Some mature students
 - Disabled students (those in receipt of disabled students' allowance (DSA) and those who have declared a disability but are not in receipt of DSA)
 - Care leavers (this will include learners still in care in some cases as many learners will be under the age of 18).
11. We recognise that these characteristics can combine to increase underrepresentation. For example, white British men and women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds are among the most underrepresented groups in higher education. Therefore, within its definition, we include male and female students in combination with the characteristics above.
12. We also recognise that there are smaller groups of students where we can identify gaps in equality of opportunity for access to higher education and who may benefit from strategic outreach activity. These groups include:
 - Carers
 - People estranged from their families
 - People from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities

- Refugees
- Children of military families.

Stage two: Develop and prioritise strategic objectives

13. Having undertaken an assessment of local IAG and outreach gaps, your partnership should consider what you want to achieve from your strategic outreach work. Strategic objectives should reflect the gaps identified in your assessment but should also be informed by considering where your partnership can best add value by working collaboratively. This may mean a greater focus is placed on addressing the outreach needs of smaller underrepresented groups that, based on their small size, may be more appropriately tackled across your whole local partnership area than at school or college level.
14. Uni Connect resources are limited and your partnership is not expected to seek to work with all underrepresented groups or seek to close all local IAG and outreach gaps. As a partnership, you will need to engage with local stakeholders to prioritise your efforts, taking into account the local context and available resources.

Stage three: Design and shape interventions and activities

15. Once your partnership has agreed its strategic objectives, informed by an assessment of local IAG and outreach gaps, it should then determine which interventions and activities are likely to be most effective in achieving its ambitions. As a partnership, you are expected to have regard to evidence³⁸ in making these decisions, including from the Uni Connect evaluation and TASO. As a partnership, you can collaborate and co-design strategic outreach activity with partners and local stakeholders to ensure it is fit for purpose.

Stage four: Evaluate and review

16. Evaluation remains at the heart of the programme and we expect your partnership to put in place appropriate arrangements to evaluate and review your strategic outreach. Evaluation of new activities is important to gain understanding of whether and how the activity works for participants and programme goals.

³⁸ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/uni-connect/evaluating-uni-connects-impact/.

List of abbreviations

CEC	Careers and Enterprise Company
EMWPREP	East Midlands Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Partnership
FIS	Funding Information Services
HEAT	Higher Education Access Tracker
IAG	information, advice and guidance
LEP	Local enterprise partnership
NCOP	National Collaborative Outreach Programme
NCS	National Citizen Service
NTP	National Tutoring Programme
OfS	Office for Students
POLAR	Participation of Local Areas
SLC	Student Loans Company
TASO	Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes



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