

# **An independent evaluation of Uni Connect's impact on intermediate outcomes for learners**

A report for the Office for Students on the first three waves of the longitudinal survey of Uni Connect target learners

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# Glossary

AWM	Aimhigher West Midlands – tracking organisation
BAME	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
EMWPREP	East Midlands Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Partnership – tracking organisation
FEC	Further Education College
HE	Higher Education
HEAT	Higher Education Access Tracker – tracking organisation
LAG	Information, advice and guidance
NCOP	National Collaborative Outreach Programme – previous name for Uni Connect
OfS	Office for Students
PSM	Propensity Score Matching – technique used to create a comparison group
SFC	Sixth Form College
TASO	Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education – affiliate What Works Centre
UC	Uni Connect
VFM	Value for money
Wo	Baseline learner survey (Autumn 2017)
W1	Wave 1 – first follow-up of the learner survey (Autumn 2018)
W2	Wave 2 – second follow-up of the learner survey (Autumn 2019)

# Executive summary

Uni Connect is a national outreach programme, funded by the OfS, that supports 29 partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners across England. The programme aims to increase the number of young people from under-represented groups who go into higher education (HE) through the provision of high quality, sustained outreach. The partnerships focus on local areas where HE participation is lower than might be expected, given the GCSE results of the young people who live there. Uni Connect is a diverse programme delivering a range of activities and information, advice and guidance (IAG) on the benefits and realities of going to university or college. During its first two years (Phase One), when it was known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme, Uni Connect supported over 300,000 target learners.<sup>1</sup> In Phase Two, partnerships are continuing to deliver sustained and progressive outreach to target learners through direct engagement with schools and colleges and via Outreach Hubs.

This report forms part of a long-term, independent evaluation of the impact of Uni Connect. The central plank of the evaluation is a longitudinal survey that tracks changes in Uni Connect target learners' knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about HE over the first four years of the programme. The survey analysis presented in this report looks at the extent of the change in intermediate outcomes for Uni Connect target learners between 2017 and 2019, whether these changes are associated with particular learner characteristics and how learners engage with the programme, and whether they can be attributed to Uni Connect.

## METHODOLOGY

The longitudinal survey has been conducted annually between 2017 and 2019. The survey measures change in outcomes against a set of indicators to understand the impact of Uni Connect and the extent to which it is meeting its aims. The indicators and outcomes broadly cover:

- Learners' knowledge and understanding of HE and its benefits
- Learners' ability to make informed and effective choices about their education
- The likelihood learners will apply for a HE course when they finish school or college aged 18

Our analysis and key findings are presented in three parts:

- **Top line analysis** which looks at the extent of change without taking account of learners' characteristics or their level of engagement in Uni Connect

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<sup>1</sup> The OfS (2019) [National Collaborative Outreach Programme: Two years on](#)

- **Comparative analysis** which compares the outcomes of learners who have taken part in Uni Connect with the outcomes of those who have not, to understand whether change can be attributed to Uni Connect at the programme level
- **Regression analysis** which explores the learner characteristics and specific elements of the Uni Connect programme that are associated with changes that have occurred

The analysis is based on a sample of 4,282 learners who completed the longitudinal survey in 2017 and 2019 and who could be linked to data collected by three tracking organisations.<sup>2</sup> Tracking data was used to create the comparison group of target learners who have not taken part in Uni Connect, but share similar characteristics. There are some limitations in the data which have implications for the analysis and the interpretation of the findings. These are set out in detail in the technical annexe,<sup>3</sup> but include: the size of the sample and the extent to which it is representative of Uni Connect learners overall; the data used to create the comparison group and the extent to which the outcomes achieved by this group have been affected, directly or indirectly, by Uni Connect; and an inability to account for wider factors that could influence outcomes, such as learner motivation and prior attainment, in the analysis.

Combining the different types of analysis, along with insights from partnerships' local evaluation evidence and existing research on the impact of outreach, helps to overcome these limitations. However, it is important to note that the impact of Uni Connect could be under-stated as a result of them. Furthermore, there are features of the programme design and the wider landscape that could also affect the extent of the impact achieved, including that Uni Connect is developed at a partnership rather than national level which leads to inconsistencies in content, targeting and delivery. It is also being delivered alongside a raft of other outreach interventions provided by individual HE providers (as part of their access and participation plans) and third sector organisations. All these factors, combined with the limitations in the data, could help to explain why much of the change in outcomes observed over the two years cannot be attributed to Uni Connect at this stage. There is, however, evidence that elements of the programme are having a positive effect, and these are summarised in the key findings below.

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<sup>2</sup> [HEAT](#), [EMWPREP](#) and [AWM](#)

<sup>3</sup> The [technical annexe](#) is published alongside this report

# KEY FINDINGS FROM THE LONGITUDINAL LEARNER SURVEY

## Impact of Uni Connect on knowledge of the HE offer

This section of the report explores learners' knowledge of the subjects and types of courses on offer, the application process, student life, the costs of HE and the financial support available.

- According to the top line analysis, most target learners' knowledge of all aspects of HE has increased since baseline.
- Although most of these changes cannot be attributed to the programme based on current data, the comparative analysis shows that changes in learners' knowledge about the costs of HE are attributable to Uni Connect.
- The regression analysis demonstrates there is a positive association between the number of hours spent engaging in Uni Connect activities and mentoring and changes in knowledge about the HE offer.
- Total number of activities and mentoring are also associated with positive change in knowledge about HE accommodation options.
- The signs are that by Year 13 most students have the information they need to make informed choices about HE.
- The level of change in learners' knowledge is lower among less advantaged learners, those who do not know someone who has gone to HE and those who would be the 'first in family' to attend.
- There are still some learners who report limited knowledge of the costs of HE and the financial support available in particular.

## Impact of Uni Connect on knowledge of the benefits of HE

This section of the report explores learners' knowledge of the potential financial benefits of HE, such as enhanced employment prospects and future earnings, and the non-financial benefits, such as the intellectual challenge, broadening of horizons and the development of valuable life skills.

- According to the top line analysis, there has been a positive shift in learners' perceptions of the financial and non-financial benefits of HE, with the exception of 'HE will give me valuable life skills'.
- The financial benefits of HE are among the main reasons why learners report they want to go to HE. The desire to work and earn money is also among the most common reasons why learners do not want to go to HE.
- Changes in learners' perceptions about the benefits of HE cannot be attributed to Uni Connect at the programme level based on current data, but elements of the programme are having a positive effect.



- The number of hours spent engaging in Uni Connect is associated with positive change in perceptions about the financial and non-financial benefits of HE.
- Not knowing anyone in HE is associated with more negative perceptions of the non-financial benefits of HE; there is also an association between learners with a disability and negative perceptions of the extent to which HE will provide valuable life skills and enhance social life.

### **Impact of Uni Connect on perceived ability to succeed in HE**

This section of the report explores impact of the programme on learners' motivation, self-belief, self-efficacy, confidence, and social identity.

- According to the top line analysis, there has been an increase in all aspects of motivation and self-efficacy between baseline and W2.
- The change in learners' self-belief and confidence in their academic ability to succeed and fit in is less pronounced overall.
- Learner perceptions of whether 'HE is for people like me' fluctuate over time.
- Positive change in learner motivation and confidence in academic abilities, particularly for Cohort 1 (Y11 at W2), can be attributed to Uni Connect at the programme level.
- Negative change in College Level 2 learners' perceptions of self-efficacy can be attributed to Uni Connect at the programme level.
- Changes in social identity cannot be attributed to the programme.
- Perceptions of self-efficacy and social identity are not associated with activity type, frequency, or duration of participation in Uni Connect.
- Though female learners are more motivated to do well in their current studies, they along with disabled learners are less likely to agree that they can achieve the grades necessary for further study.
- Disabled and White learners are less likely to agree that 'HE is for 'people like me', that 'they could go to HE if they wanted to' and would 'fit in' than BAME learners and those without a disability.

### **Impact of Uni Connect on future plans**

At each wave of the survey, learners have been asked what they plan to do after their current studies and who has influenced their decisions. This section of the report explores these influences, along with learners' plans at the end of their next phase and the likelihood they will apply to HE aged 18 or 19.

- The top line analysis demonstrates that the proportion of Cohort 3 learners intending to apply to HE has remained stable over time, from a high base. Family is a key influence on learners' decisions, but the strength of this influence diminishes over time.

- Increases in the likelihood of applying to HE can be attributed to Uni Connect, particularly for College Level 3, Year 2 learners.
- Total number of hours, but not the number of activities, is positively associated with an increase in the likelihood of learners applying to HE.
- There is a positive association between gender and ethnicity and likelihood of applying to HE with females and BAME learners more likely to apply
- Those who have spoken to family, friends, teachers and careers advisers have a higher likelihood of applying to HE aged 18 or 19 than those who have not.
- Learners who would be the first in the family to go to HE have a lower likelihood of applying to HE.

## CONCLUSIONS

Evidence to date suggests that intermediate outcomes have improved for most target learners. Uni Connect is contributing to this change but is not the cause according to available data. Insight from analysis of the survey findings suggests that the fundamental principle of Uni Connect – to provide sustained support throughout Key Stages 4 and 5 – is well-founded and should continue so as to maintain progress and ensure the programme achieves its objectives in the long run.

The evaluation has highlighted that knowledge, attitudes and intentions towards HE differ by learner characteristics and that more could be done through Uni Connect to address the needs of specific sub-groups. Financial concerns, especially perceptions of cost, continue to deter some learners from considering HE, exacerbated by a lack of awareness of financial support and the financial benefits, particularly among learners from more disadvantaged and BAME backgrounds. Prevailing views about the types of people who go to and ‘fit in’ at HE, and a lack of understanding of the non-financial benefits, are also acting as deterrents, particularly for disabled learners.

Parents/carers and family members often share their own perceptions of HE when advising young people. These, often partial, views can strongly encourage or deter learners from considering HE. The evaluation highlights the important role Uni Connect is fulfilling in ensuring that young people, and in some instances their parents, have access to accurate and impartial IAG to inform their decision-making. However, current evidence on the impact of individual interventions, including IAG, is limited. It is not possible to say whether most activities are effective (or not) or to make recommendations about whether partnerships should continue to deliver them based on the survey data alone. However, strong evidence on ‘what works’ is starting to emerge from partnerships’ local evaluations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See: CFE (2020) [An independent review of evaluation evidence submitted by Uni Connect partnerships](#)

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARTNERSHIPS

### Gaps in knowledge and understanding

- Address gaps in knowledge about cost, financial support, and the benefits of HE, particularly among disadvantaged and BAME learners.
- Explore the reasons for learners' negative perceptions of HE. Develop interventions that help to challenge these views and address gaps in understanding, so they do not act as barriers to progression.
- Explore the reasons why some target learners report lower levels of self-belief, particularly in their ability to achieve the grades necessary for further study. Ensure interventions address identified issues and encourage learners to apply to selective/higher tariff providers where appropriate to prevent learners being 'undermatched'.

### Target groups

- Help learners who do not know anyone with experience of HE to connect with people they can identify with who can share their knowledge and experience, in addition to providing information about HE to learners directly.
- Also encourage those who do not have access to informal sources information and advice to engage with teachers, careers advisers and/or student/graduate ambassadors who can address concerns about the 'returns' from HE.
- Address the specific concerns of disabled learners that could deter progression to HE through tailored interventions that focus on how HE can help to develop life skills and social networks.
- Target multi-intervention programmes at those who are achieving lower outcomes and could therefore benefit from more intensive support.

### Interventions

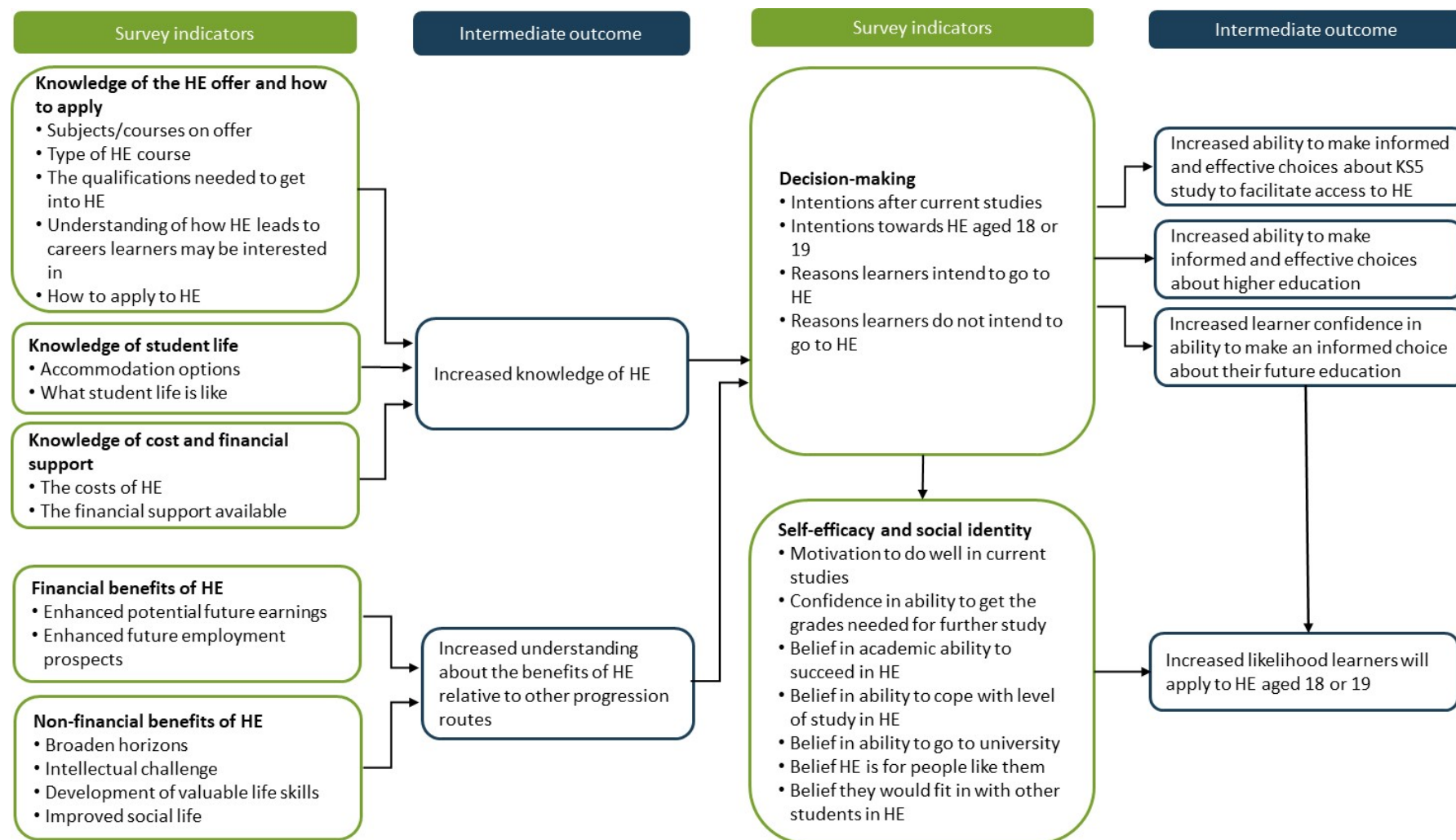
- Consider what knowledge learners need and when to ensure they have access to information appropriate to their age/stage to inform their decision-making.
- Ensure early and sustained engagement to reinforce messages and maximise impact, particularly on learner self-efficacy and social identity towards HE.
- Consider offering mentoring to address gaps in learners' knowledge of the wider, more practical elements of HE.

## NEXT STEPS

The data analysed in this report was collected prior to the coronavirus pandemic which started in the UK in March 2020. We are currently compiling a short report on the impact of the pandemic on the design and delivery of Uni Connect and learner engagement based on the findings from research and evaluation conducted by the partnerships. The fourth wave of the longitudinal survey will close at the end of March

2021. This data will be analysed alongside the findings from the most recent (January 2021) and planned (summer 2021) meta-reviews of local evaluation evidence to understand the impact of Uni Connect following another year of delivery. This data will also allow us to add to our understanding of the impact of the pandemic. The findings will be summarised in a report to be submitted to the OfS in autumn 2021.

## Mapping of survey indicators and the intermediate outcomes being measured



# 1. Introduction

Uni Connect is a national outreach programme, funded by the OfS, that supports 29 partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners across England. It aims to increase the number of young people from under-represented groups who go into higher education (HE) through the provision of sustained outreach. The partnerships focus on 997 local areas<sup>5</sup> where HE participation is lower than might be expected, given the GCSE results of the young people who live there. Uni Connect is a diverse programme delivering a range of activities and information, advice and guidance (IAG) on the benefits and realities of going to university or college. By the end of Phase One<sup>6</sup>, partnerships had worked with 666,284 young people in 1,613 schools, including 302,512 target learners.<sup>7</sup>

The aim of Uni Connect in Phase Two<sup>8</sup> is to support the Office for Students (OfS) to achieve its strategic objective that *“all students, from all backgrounds, with the ability and desire to undertake higher education, are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education”*.<sup>9</sup> It will do this by continuing to support learners to make well-informed decisions about their education and act on their intentions towards HE. Uni Connect continues to be delivered by 29 partnerships through direct engagement with schools and colleges and via Outreach Hubs. The Hubs have been introduced to enable partnerships to co-ordinate the access activities individual HE providers deliver.<sup>10</sup> The Hubs signpost all state-funded schools and colleges to wider outreach opportunities, including activities funded through providers’ access and participation plans.<sup>11</sup>

This report forms part of a long-term, independent evaluation of the impact of Uni Connect. The central plank of the evaluation is a survey that tracks changes in learners’ knowledge and attitudes towards HE over the first four years. The survey analysis presented here looks at the extent of the change in intermediate outcomes for learners between 2017 and 2019, whether these changes are associated with particular learner characteristics and how they engage with Uni Connect, and whether they can be attributed to the programme. It should be read in conjunction with the latest meta-review of local evaluation evidence published separately.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Uni Connect learner population estimates are [available online](#)

<sup>6</sup> Phase One ran from 1<sup>st</sup> January 2017 to 31<sup>st</sup> July 2019.

<sup>7</sup> The OfS (2019) [National Collaborative Outreach Programme: Two years on](#)

<sup>8</sup> Phase Two runs from 1<sup>st</sup> August 2019 to 31<sup>st</sup> July 2021.

<sup>9</sup> See information on the [OfS’s strategy](#)

<sup>10</sup> The OfS (2020) [Consultation on a new approach to Uni Connect from 2021-22 to 2024-25](#)

<sup>11</sup> The OfS (2019) [National Collaborative Outreach Programme: Two years on](#). Page 16, paragraph 49

<sup>12</sup> Partnerships will submit local evaluation evidence for review by the national evaluation team via three formal calls in Phase Two. The first was conducted in March 2020 and the findings are published in a separate [report](#). Two further calls will be conducted in January and July 2021.

## 2. The Phase Two impact evaluation

Uni Connect is based on a Theory of Change that high quality, impartial, sustained and progressive outreach will reduce barriers to access and increase the rate of progression to HE among learners who have the ability, but who are less likely to go than other groups. This theory has been summarised in a logic model (see Appendix 1). This provides the framework for the national impact evaluation by setting out the inputs (OfS funding) and outputs (activities delivered by partnerships) that are anticipated to lead to outcomes for target learners and impacts for the sector in the longer term. A bank of indicators has also been developed to measure the extent to which the outcomes and impacts are achieved.

### AIMS

The aim of the national impact evaluation being delivered by CFE Research is to measure the change in intermediate outcomes for learners and establish whether this can be attributed to their engagement in Uni Connect. Future OfS analysis of national datasets will establish whether Uni Connect leads to longer term outcomes, including an increase in the proportion of target learners who successfully apply and progress to HE.<sup>13</sup> To achieve its aim, the national impact evaluation involves:

- tracking learners in schools and colleges where partnerships are delivering Uni Connect-funded activities over four years through a longitudinal survey to capture changes in intermediate outcomes, and
- undertaking a meta-review of partnerships' local evaluation evidence on the impact of Uni Connect activities to understand what works, in what context and why.

This chapter outlines the approach adopted for the longitudinal learner survey and associated analysis. Further details of the method, sample characteristics, considerations and rationale for the counterfactual group of learners, and data limitations are provided in the technical annexe published separately.<sup>14</sup> This annexe also contains the data tables that provide the basis for the findings in this report.

### THE LONGITUDINAL LEARNER SURVEY

The first wave of the learner survey (Baseline – Wo) was conducted in the autumn term of the 2017-18 academic year before partnerships had started delivering most Uni Connect activity in schools and colleges. The survey design was informed by the

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<sup>13</sup> Further details of the national evaluation being undertaken by CFE (external) and the OfS can be found on the [OfS website](#)

<sup>14</sup> The [technical annexe](#) is published alongside this report.

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national evaluation framework<sup>15</sup> and developed in collaboration with partnerships to ensure the data could be used for local as well as the national evaluation. Existing validated measures were incorporated into the survey where appropriate. There are two parts to the survey:

- **Part one** contains core questions, including student demographics, that all respondents answer (see Appendix 2 for full list of survey questions). Figure 1 overleaf maps the core survey questions to the outcomes in the national evaluation framework to illustrate how changes are assumed to lead to an increased likelihood of learners applying to HE in the future.
- **Part two** contains questions designed by some of the partnerships to support their local evaluations. Only learners engaged with the relevant partnership answer these questions. This data is not analysed as part of the national impact evaluation.

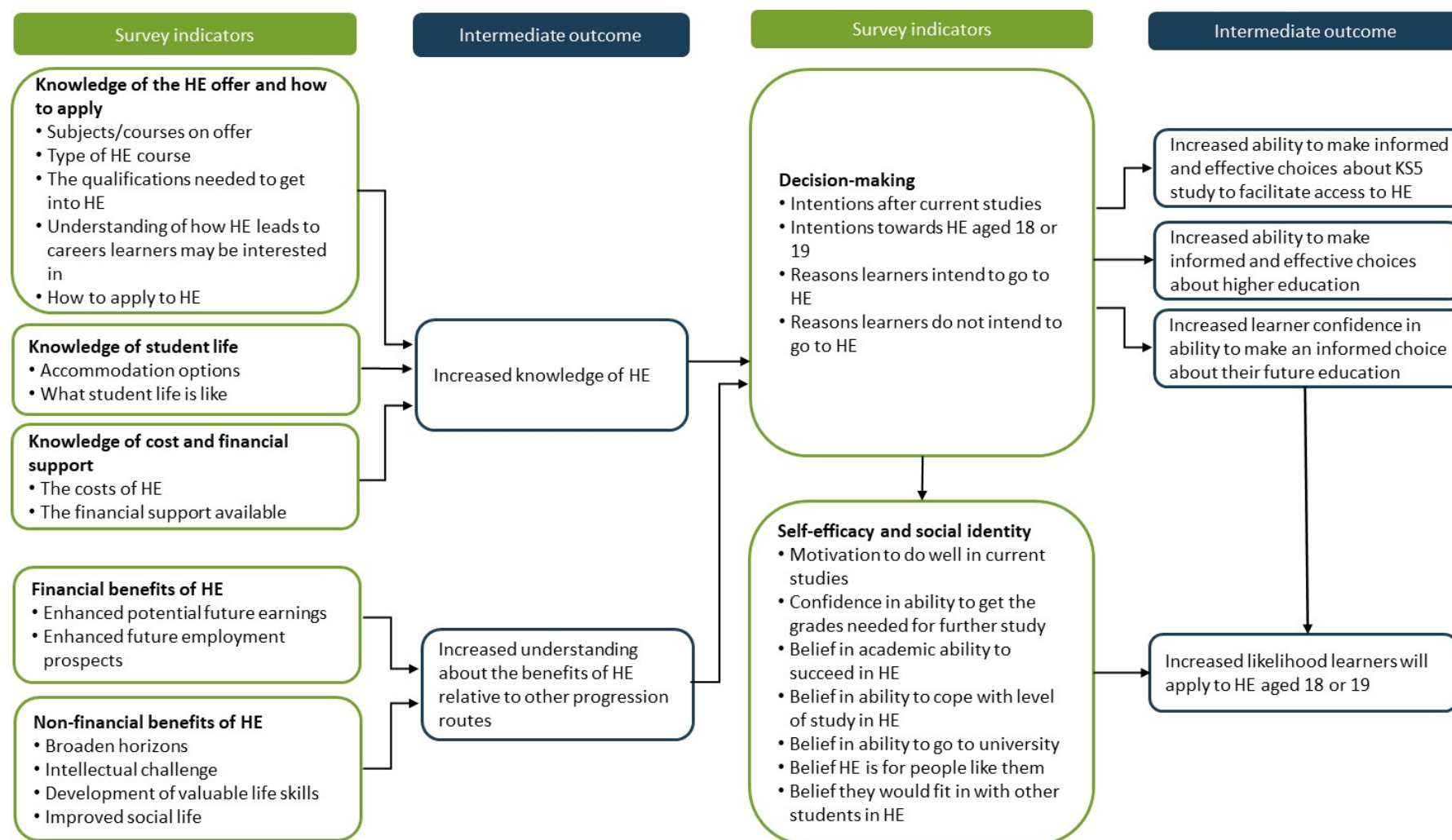
Follow-up surveys were conducted in autumn 2018 (Wave 1 – W1) and autumn 2019 (Wave 2 – W2). The survey remained largely unaltered to enable change over time to be measured. At W2, an additional core question was added to establish the main reason why learners may or may not want to go to HE. Wave 3 (W3) was conducted between November 2020 and March 2021. Additional questions (see Appendix 3) were included in this survey so that the impact of COVID-19 on learners and their intentions towards HE can be taken into account in the analysis for the end of Phase Two.

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<sup>15</sup> See Appendix 1 of the [End of Phase One report](#) for the logic chain and indicator bank that provided the basis for the national evaluation framework. This has subsequently been updated. This updated version is provided in Appendix 1 of this report.



**Figure 1: Mapping of survey indicators and the intermediate outcomes being measured**



## WAVE 2 (W2) SURVEY ADMINISTRATION

As with previous survey waves, the W2 survey was administered by partnerships via schools and colleges on behalf of CFE. Learners completed the survey online (using a survey link provided by CFE or generated by a partnership using their own survey software) or by 'paper and pencil'. The W2 survey closed before any restrictions were put in place in response to COVID-19.

A total of 20 out of 29 partnerships participated in the W2 survey.<sup>16</sup> As with previous waves, whole classes, even year groups, were often invited to complete the survey to minimise logistical burden on schools and colleges. Although every effort was made by partnerships to ensure learners who had responded to a previous wave completed the survey, a significant number of other learners also responded including: Uni Connect target learners who moved into Year 9 in the 2019-20 academic year; target learners in year groups 10 to 13 who did not respond at baseline or W1 and who may or may not have engaged in Uni Connect; and some non-target learners. The data provided by these other learners is not analysed for the purposes of the national evaluation, but it is used by partnerships to inform their planning and local evaluations.

## SAMPLE FOR ANALYSIS

At the outset of the programme, partnerships were tasked with engaging a minimum of 20 per cent of the Uni Connect target population, approximately 104,163 learners. There was a total of 86,190 respondents to the baseline survey, of which 31,737 were Uni Connect target learners (30% of the 20% target number). Of these, 26,158 (82%) respondents were in year groups 9 to 11, the three cohorts which provided the basis for the analysis at W2. A total of 11,564 target learners from these year groups responded at W2; 5,287 (46%) could be matched to a baseline response using five personal identifiers: forename, surname, date of birth, home postcode and school. The demographic characteristics<sup>17</sup> of the matched and unmatched samples were compared and some small differences were identified:

- There are slightly fewer disabled students (10%) in the matched sampled compared with the unmatched sample (13%)
- There are slightly more females (59%) and fewer males (39%) in the matched sampled compared with the unmatched sample (54% and 43% respectively)

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<sup>16</sup> To be included partnerships had to meet the criteria of achieving a sample size of 400 or more Uni Connect learners at baseline and/or 30 per cent of their 20 per cent target population of Uni Connect learners.

<sup>17</sup> The characteristics compared are gender, ethnicity, whether the respondent has disability, whether the respondent would be the first in their family to go to HE, and whether the respondent knows someone who has gone to HE.

- There is a lower proportion of learners who would be the first in their family to attend HE in the matched sample (27%) compared with the unmatched sample (32%)

This dataset was then matched with activity data collated by the tracking organisations.<sup>18</sup> The final dataset used for the analysis presented in this report comprises 4,282 learners from three year-group cohorts, as summarised in Figure 2.

**Figure 2: Cohorts of respondents in the final matched dataset**



## ESTABLISHING IMPACT

Linking learners' responses to the baseline and W2 surveys enables changes in intermediate outcomes to be measured over time and to establish whether these changes are associated with particular learner characteristics. Linking the survey data to tracking information also makes it possible to establish whether changes in outcomes are associated with a particular type of activity, the number of activities or number of hours of outreach received. However, it is not possible to establish whether the changes can be attributed to Uni Connect based on this data alone.

Where practical and appropriate, the most robust way to establish whether impact is attributable to a programme is to compare the outcomes of individuals who have been randomly-assigned to a treatment group (those who receive the intervention) and a control group (those who do not receive the intervention). In view of the target-driven, locally-determined nature of the programme, it was not feasible to adopt this approach for the evaluation of Uni Connect. Alternative options for creating a comparison group were therefore considered and a preferred model agreed.

Uni Connect partnerships were tasked with engaging a minimum of 20 per cent of the target population. As such, there is a group of learners who meet the eligibility criteria but do not receive any intervention. The comparison group for this analysis was created using the tracking data to identify respondents in the target group who had not participated in Uni Connect activity. Propensity score matching (PSM) was

<sup>18</sup> [HEAT](#), [EMWPREP](#) and [AWM](#)

then used to identify a comparison group that matched the characteristics of the treatment group in terms of year of study, gender and ethnicity. There are limitations when creating a comparison group in this way. These, and other limitations in the analysis that are likely to impact on the results and the extent of the impact detected are outlined in Table 1 and in further detail in the technical annexe.

**Table 1: Data limitations**

Limitation	Implications
Sampling approach	A suitable sampling frame of schools/colleges or individual learners was not available for use in this evaluation. It was therefore necessary to work through partnerships to administer the survey to all schools and colleges that were willing to take part as they came on board with the programme. Surveys were distributed by schools and colleges in different ways and most learners were required to give their informed consent to take part. The aim was to maximise the response rate at baseline so that the sample was large and robust enough to withstand inevitable attrition between survey waves (including Year 13 cohorts leaving the study). In practice, the number of responses to the baseline achieved by each partnership was variable and was dependent on the number of schools they had engaged at the point at which the survey was administered. As a result of the low number of responses achieved at baseline by some partnerships, learners from nine partnerships were not represented in subsequent waves of the data. This, coupled with the size of the final sample achieved at W2, means it is possible that there are unobservable biases in the data.
Sample size	Challenges targeting individual learners for follow-up surveys have resulted in a high attrition and poor match rate between W0 and W2. This has significantly reduced the sample for the analysis. The characteristics of the matched sample are broadly representative in terms of gender, ethnicity, eligibility for free school meals and prior experience of HE in the family of the population and the unmatched sample. However, sample size limits the amount of analysis that is possible at the sub-group level and for some activities, such as summer schools, which relatively few learners participate in.
Incomplete activity data	According to end of Phase One monitoring data, 246,204 of the 302,512 target learners who took part in Uni Connect have been tracked, indicating that data is not available for approximately a fifth of learners who may or may not have received support. There is a possibility that some learners in the comparison group have not consented to tracking but have in practice received activity. This group could have received outreach activity in another way, e.g. through an institution's access and participation plan.
Spillover effects	The learners in the comparison group attend the same schools as those in the treatment group. It is therefore possible that they have indirectly benefited from Uni Connect, for example, by receiving information from a friend who has taken part in a Uni Connect activity.

‘Unobservable’ factors	<p>The outcomes of any programme can be influenced by a range of factors. Randomisation is the best way to account for these and isolate the effects of one programme. Where randomisation is not possible, some factors can be accounted for in the analysis, but not all. A number of factors are likely to have impacted on the size of the effect of Uni Connect at the programme level. These include the methods used to select schools/colleges and target learners and differences in learners’ motivations. We know that learners were selected in a variety of ways, including a ‘blanket’ approach (whereby whole classes or year groups, including non-target learners, were selected), individual targeting and self-selection, but there is no data to enable this to be accounted for in the analysis. Learners’ motivation is likely to vary depending on how they are selected to take part and it is not possible to account for this either.</p>
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## DATA ANALYSIS

Three types of analysis were undertaken to understand the extent of change in learners’ intermediate outcomes, the reasons for the change and the extent to which it can be attributed to Uni Connect at the programme level, as set out in Table 2 overleaf.

Each of the findings sections in this report begins with a description of the changes that have occurred since baseline. This insight is based on the top line analysis which does not take account of learners’ characteristics or their level of engagement in Uni Connect. To understand whether this change can be attributed to Uni Connect at the programme level, we draw on the analysis comparing the outcomes of learners who have taken part in Uni Connect with the outcomes of those who have not, to identify any differences. Where the difference is statistically significant,<sup>19</sup> it is possible to conclude that it is the result of the programme. In all cases, but particularly where impact cannot be attributed to Uni Connect at this stage, we draw on the regression (multivariate) analysis to understand the learner characteristics (gender, ethnicity, year group cohort, whether the respondent has disability, whether the respondent would be the first in their family to go to HE, and whether the respondent knows someone who has gone to HE) and specific elements of the programme (type of intervention, number of different interventions engaged in and number of hours of outreach engaged in) that are associated with the change to help to explain the reasons.

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<sup>19</sup> Please note that the \* = 0.1 level of significance is used as the minimum threshold in reporting comparative analysis findings. Adopting this significance level can increase the risk of Type I errors and rejecting the null hypothesis when it should be retained– i.e. 10% of comparisons will be significant when they are not.

**Table 2: Analysis undertaken and sample used**

Type of analysis	Purpose	Sample
Top line	The actual change in individual learners' intermediate outcomes between the baseline (W0) and second follow-up (W2) surveys.	Target learners in the W0-W2 dataset matched to the activity tracking dataset (matched dataset, n = 4,282)
Multivariate analysis	Multiple linear and logistic regression to understand the impact of activity type, duration, and frequency of participation on learners' outcomes and the combination of learner characteristics associated with outcomes	Target learners in the W0-W2 dataset matched to the activity tracking dataset (matched dataset, n = 4,282)
Comparative analysis	Comparison of Uni Connect target learners in receipt of interventions (treatment group) with target learners who have not received any outreach activity (control group) to understand the extent to which the outcomes achieved can be attributed to Uni Connect.	Matched baseline (W0) and Wave 2 (W2) dataset containing 3,942 learners (3,041 treated and 901 non-treated learners) <sup>20</sup>

Given the limitations in the data and analytical approach, it is possible that the impact of Uni Connect is under stated. It is therefore important to draw on the range of analysis and evidence available, including partnerships' local evaluations of the impact of Uni Connect activities as well as formative, qualitative and process evaluation, to fully understand the impact of the programme in context. Where appropriate, we draw on the findings from the latest meta-review of local evaluation evidence<sup>21</sup> to add insight to the survey data and understand the outcomes achieved.

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<sup>20</sup> Not every learner in the treatment group could be matched to a suitable learner in the control group resulting in a smaller sample for the comparative analysis.

<sup>21</sup> CFE (2020) [An independent review of evaluation evidence submitted by Uni Connect partnerships](#)

### 3. Impact of Uni Connect on knowledge of HE

Lack of knowledge and understanding about HE can act as a barrier to progression and inhibit a learner's ability to make an informed choice about whether HE is the best option for them. Uni Connect aims to ensure learners develop a thorough understanding of HE and make informed decisions by providing them with the information they need. This chapter explores the changes in learners' knowledge and understanding of HE over the two academic years since the baseline, and the extent to which these changes can be attributed to their engagement in Uni Connect.

#### KEY FINDINGS

The top line analysis demonstrates:

- Most target learners' knowledge of all aspects of HE has increased since baseline. However, there are still some learners who report limited knowledge of the costs of HE and the financial support available.

The comparative analysis shows:

- Only changes in knowledge about the costs of HE can be attributed to Uni Connect at the programme level. None of the other changes in knowledge of HE are attributable.

According to the regression analysis:

- Total hours spent engaging in Uni Connect activities and mentoring are associated with positive changes in knowledge about the HE offer.
- Total number of activities and mentoring are associated with positive change in knowledge about HE accommodation options.
- Learner characteristics including year group, socio-economic status, ethnicity, whether a learner has a disability or not and whether a learner knows someone who has been to HE are all associated with increased knowledge of HE, with the exception of knowledge about student life.

#### KNOWLEDGE OF THE HE OFFER

At baseline, the majority of respondents reported that they knew something or a lot about the HE offer:

- 79 per cent knew at least something about the subjects on offer
- 69 per cent knew at least something about types of course

These proportions increased to 96 percent and 87 percent of learners overall at W2.



There was a small group of learners who knew nothing about the HE offer prior to their involvement in Uni Connect. The top line analysis demonstrates that over the course of their involvement in the programme, these learners' knowledge increased. At W2, the majority of those who knew nothing about the subjects on offer at baseline know at least something; just 7 per cent of these learners report they still know nothing.

There is a similar, but slightly less pronounced shift in learners' knowledge about the different types of courses they could take. Just over four-fifths of learners (81%) who said they knew nothing about the different types of courses at baseline now report that they know something. However, this means a gap remains in the knowledge of a substantial minority of learners (19%).

The majority of Cohort 3 learners who said they knew nothing at baseline subsequently report that they know something about the subjects on offer (92%) and the types of courses they could take (92%). This positive shift is particularly important for this cohort because they need this information to make a final, informed decision about their post-18 destination. Cohort 1 learners also demonstrated increases in knowledge with the majority of those who report that they knew nothing at baseline, subsequently reporting knowing something about the subjects (95%) and different courses they could take (82%). In contrast, a smaller proportion of Cohort 2 learners who said they knew nothing at baseline subsequently said they knew something about the subjects (87%) and different types of courses (75%), suggesting that there is a substantial minority within this cohort who could develop their knowledge further.

According to the comparative analysis, changes in learners' knowledge about the HE offer cannot be attributed to Uni Connect at the programme level. However, the regression analysis suggests that the amount of time spent engaging in the programme and specific activities within it can contribute to increased knowledge. Mentoring along with total hours spent engaging in Uni Connect, are both positively associated with increases in knowledge about the HE offer.

Also according to the regression analysis, target learners who are relatively advantaged and those who know someone who has been to HE show more positive changes in their level of knowledge of HE than those who are relatively disadvantaged and do not know anyone who has been to HE. This suggests that personal networks can have more of an influence on learners' knowledge than interventions such as Uni Connect for these groups.

## **KNOWLEDGE OF HOW TO APPLY**

At baseline, the majority of respondents reported that they knew something or a lot about two aspects of the HE application process, while only one-fifth knew something or a lot about how to apply.

- 79 per cent knew at least something about the qualifications and grades needed to get into HE



- 66 per cent knew at least something about where to find information about applying to HE
- 21 per cent knew at least something about how to apply to HE

By W2, these proportions had increased to 90 per cent, 85 per cent and 78 per cent respectively.

Once again there was a small group of learners who knew nothing about how to apply to HE prior to Uni Connect. The top line analysis shows that most of these learners increased their knowledge about key elements of the HE application process over time, but that a minority still have gaps in their understanding:

- 16 per cent still do not know which qualifications and grades they need to get into HE
- 21 per cent still do not know where to find information about applying to HE
- 24 per cent still do not know how to apply

These gaps in knowledge appear to be more evident among Cohorts 1 and 2, who are furthest from the point of applying to HE and therefore may be expected to have less knowledge about these aspects of the process. The majority of Cohort 3 learners who said they knew nothing at baseline subsequently report that they know something about the qualifications and grades needed (90%), where to find information (90%) and how to apply (90%). Cohort 1 learners were less likely to report increases in knowledge with the majority of those learners who report that they knew nothing at baseline, subsequently reporting knowing something about the qualifications and grades needed (85%), where to find information (79%) and how to apply (76%). Similarly, smaller proportions of Cohort 2 learners who said they knew nothing at baseline subsequently said they knew something about the qualifications and grades needed (80%), where to find information (73%) and how to apply (69%).

Comparative analysis shows that changes in knowledge about the application process cannot be attributed to Uni Connect at the programme level. It is important, however, to acknowledge that the majority of the sample (81%) are in Cohorts 1 and 2 (Years 11 and 12 at W2) and, at the time that the W2 survey was administered, were still some distance away from applying to HE. Although the regression analysis demonstrates that Cohort 2 learners and those who would be the first in their family to go to HE show less positive shifts in their knowledge of the application process, gaps at this stage are not necessarily problematic. The application process is likely to provide the focus for interventions for learners as they progress through Year 12 ahead of reaching a final decision about whether to apply to HE in Year 13. Importantly, this analysis reveals that those in Cohort 3 who were already at that point at W2 report more positive changes in their knowledge.

## KNOWLEDGE OF STUDENT LIFE

At baseline, the majority of respondents reported that they knew something or a lot about elements of the student experience:

- 67 per cent knew at least something about accommodation options
- 81 per cent knew at least something about what student life is like

By W2, these proportions had increased to 77 per cent and 86 per cent respectively.

As with other aspects of HE knowledge, there was a small group of learners who reported knowing nothing about these elements at the outset of the programme. The top line analysis demonstrates that over the course of the first two years of Uni Connect, knowledge levels have increased. Of those who knew nothing at baseline:

- 66 per cent now report that they know at least something about the accommodation options available for students studying in HE
- 76 per cent now report that they know at least something about what student life is like

The comparative analysis shows that changes in knowledge about the student experience that have occurred cannot be attributed to Uni Connect at the programme level. Once again, it is important to acknowledge the age and stage of the learners in the sample when interpreting this result. Given the high proportion of the sample that is still some distance from the transition to HE, it is perhaps not surprising that some learners are not fully aware of practical considerations such as accommodation options.

The regression analysis demonstrates that older learners (Cohort 3) are more likely to show a positive change in their knowledge of the student experience. This is important given this group is at the stage in the journey when the final decision about HE is taken. It also suggests that interventions delivered to this cohort prior to this stage are equipping learners with information they need. The regression also reveals a positive association between mentoring and knowledge of accommodation options, with those who had taken part in mentoring sessions more likely to show positive change in their knowledge. Participation in a higher number of outreach activities is also associated with a positive change in learners' knowledge of accommodation options. However, changes in knowledge about student life are not associated with any learner or programme characteristics.

## KNOWLEDGE OF COST AND FINANCIAL SUPPORT

At baseline, over half of respondents reported that they knew something or a lot about the financial aspects of HE:

- 68 per cent knew at least something about the costs of HE
- 55 per cent knew at least something about the financial support available

By W2 these proportions had increased to 80 per cent and 71 per cent respectively.

In contrast with the changes in learners' knowledge of other aspects of HE, a substantial minority of those who reported they knew nothing about these issues at baseline also reported that they knew nothing at W2:

- 30 per cent still know nothing about the costs of HE
- 39 per cent still know nothing about the financial support available

However, the comparative analysis demonstrates that those who have participated in Uni Connect show more positive change in their level of knowledge than those who have not taken part, indicating that this change is attributable to the programme.

Given their stage in the learner journey, it is essential that learners in Cohort 3 (Year 13 at W2) have access to financial information to inform their final decisions about HE. The regression analysis demonstrates that this group know more about the costs of study and the financial support available compared with Cohort 1 learners, who were in Year 11 at W2. The regression analysis also provides insights into the groups who may be less knowledgeable about the costs of HE and the financial support available: target learners from less advantaged and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds both have lower levels of knowledge about financial aspects of HE than more advantaged and White students.

## LEARNING AND INSIGHTS

**Gaps in knowledge:** Many students enter Uni Connect with relatively high levels of knowledge about a range of aspects of HE. Although gaps in knowledge remain after two years of the programme, this is not necessarily a cause for concern or an indicator of shortcomings in the provision given the age and stage of the majority of learners in the sample. The findings from the meta-review of local Uni Connect evaluation evidence highlight the importance of ensuring activities are timed and tailored appropriately so learners get the information they need when they need it. The signs are that by Year 13 most students have the information they need to make informed choices about HE.

**Perceptions of cost:** The cost of HE is commonly perceived as a barrier to progression, particularly for disadvantaged groups. Wider research suggests that this could be exacerbated by a lack of understanding of student finance.<sup>22</sup> The survey findings suggest that target learners' knowledge of costs and financial support is among the weakest for disadvantaged and BAME learners. Cultural practices and beliefs prevent some BAME learners and religious groups from accessing some sources of financial support. Lack of awareness of the range of financial support available (including those that do not incur bank interest) and misconceptions about

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<sup>22</sup> Fagence, S. & Hansom, J. (2018). [The influence of finance on higher education decision-making](#). London: Department for Education

cost could continue to act as a barrier to progression for these groups in particular, if it is not addressed.

**Importance of social networks:** The analysis suggests that learners who have access to people with experience of HE are able to draw on their knowledge to increase their own understanding of HE and inform their decisions. The impact of Uni Connect on learners' knowledge could be increased if it supported learners, who do not have access to these networks, to make these connections, in addition to providing information to learners directly.

**Role of mentoring:** Mentoring is the only activity that is positively associated with changes in learners' knowledge of the HE offer and accommodation options. This reflects the findings from a previous evidence review,<sup>23</sup> which found a positive association between mentoring and knowledge of HE, and from the meta-review of local Uni Connect evaluation evidence.<sup>24</sup> The meta-review findings suggest that mentoring (and other interventions such as campus visits) are particularly effective when student ambassadors contribute to delivery. They are able to draw on their lived experience to provide learners with insights into a range of issues, including the HE offer, student life and accommodation options during mentoring sessions.

**Importance of sustained and progressive engagement:** Total number of hours engaged in outreach and total number of activities are positively associated with increased knowledge about some aspects of HE. This chimes with the findings from the meta-review which suggest that a single type of intervention delivered as a series and multi-intervention programmes are more effective than one off, ad hoc activities for achieving outcomes for learners. Given limits on resources, it is unlikely to be possible for partnerships to deliver multi-intervention programmes for all target learners. The analysis suggests that there are some groups who may benefit more from this intensive support to enhance outcomes, in particular learners with a disability, females and those who would be the 'first in family' to go to HE. The meta-review provides evidence that some groups of White learners, particularly males from lower socio-economic groups, can also benefit from more intensive support.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Address gaps in knowledge about cost and financial support, particularly among disadvantaged and BAME learners,** to ensure they have accurate information on which to base their decisions. The number of activities a learner engages in is associated with positive changes in knowledge about financial support. Integrating financial information into a range of activities could therefore be an effective way to ensure learners receive the information they need.

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<sup>23</sup> Robinson, D., & Salvestrini, V. (2020). [The impact of interventions for widening access to higher education](#). London: Education Policy Institute.

<sup>24</sup> CFE (2020) [An independent review of evaluation evidence submitted by Uni Connect partnerships](#)

- **Consider what information learners need and when to inform their decision-making.** Ensure information about the HE application process and the practicalities of student life are provided by the end of Year 12 to ensure learners have a holistic understanding to inform their final decision-making.
- **Help learners who do not know anyone with experience of HE to connect** with people they can identify with who can share their knowledge and experience of HE, in addition to providing information about HE to learners directly.
- **Expand access to mentoring** to address gaps in wider, more practical knowledge of HE. Consider ways to involve student ambassadors in delivery to maximise impact.
- **Target multi-intervention programmes** at those who are achieving lower outcomes and could therefore benefit from more intensive support, including target learners with a disability, females, White learners (particularly males from lower socio-economic groups) and those who would be the first in their family to go to HE.

## 4. Impact of Uni Connect on knowledge of the benefits of HE

To make an informed decision about whether to go to HE, and what and where to study, learners need to be able to weigh up the pros and cons, including whether they are likely to achieve a ‘return on their investment’, measured in either financial or other terms. This chapter explores the changes in learners’ understanding of the financial and wider benefits of HE and the extent to which these changes can be attributed to their engagement in Uni Connect.

### KEY FINDINGS

The top line analysis demonstrates:

- There is a positive shift in learners’ perceptions of the financial and non-financial benefits of HE overall, with one exception: ‘HE will give me valuable life skills’.

The comparative analysis shows:

- The changes in learners’ perceptions about the benefits of HE cannot be attributed to Uni Connect at the programme level.

According to the regression analysis:

- Total number of hours spent engaging in Uni Connect activity is associated with positive change in perceptions about the benefits of HE.
- Knowing someone in HE and speaking to family, friends, teachers and careers advisers about HE are associated with more positive perceptions about the benefits at W2.
- Not knowing anyone in HE is associated with more negative perceptions about the non-financial benefits of HE; there is also an association between learners with a disability and negative perceptions of the extent to which HE provides learners with valuable life skills and enhances their social life.
- The financial benefits of HE, including future earning potential, are among the main reasons why learners report they want to go to HE. The desire to work and earn money is also among the most common reasons why learners do not want to go to HE.

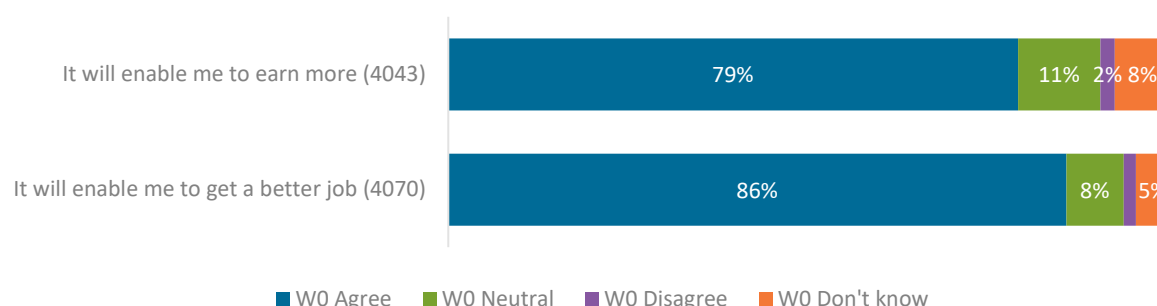
### FINANCIAL BENEFITS OF HE

At baseline, the majority of respondents (84%) reported that they knew a little or a lot about how HE leads to careers they may be interested in. This increased to 90 per cent of learners overall at W2. There was, however, a small group of learners who knew nothing about this prior to their involvement in Uni Connect. The top line

analysis demonstrates that over the course of their involvement in the programme, learners' knowledge increased. Over four-fifths of learners (83%) who knew nothing about 'how HE leads to careers they may be interested in' at baseline now know at least something.

At baseline the majority of learners agreed or strongly agreed with the statements 'HE will enable me to earn more' and 'HE will enable me to get a better job'.

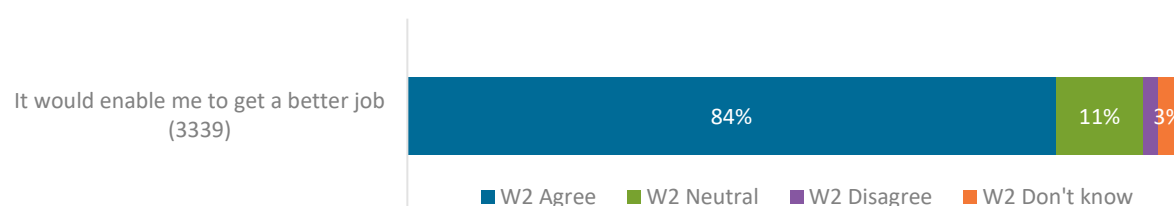
**Figure 3: Level of agreement with statements about the financial benefits of HE at baseline (Wo) (all learners)**



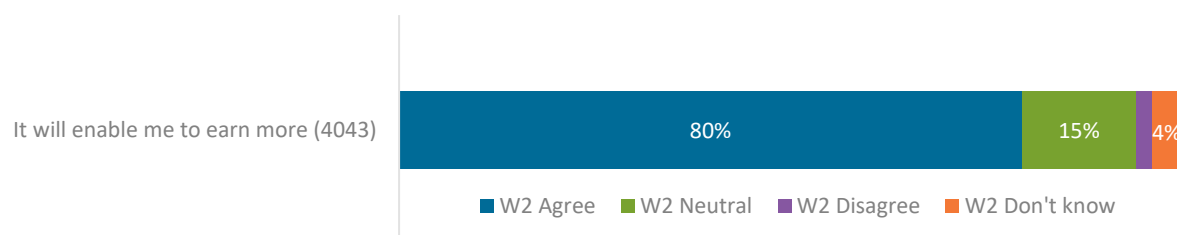
As Figure 3 illustrates, a small proportion of learners disagreed or were uncertain about these statements at baseline. However, the top line analysis reveals there has been a positive shift in these learners' perceptions. Three-quarters (75%) of those who disagreed that 'HE will enable me to earn more' now agree with this statement and two-thirds of those who disagreed that 'HE will enable me to get a better job' (68%) now agree.

There is, however, a proportion of learners who have moved from a position of agreement to uncertainty or disagreement about the financial benefits of HE (Figure 4 and Figure 5).

**Figure 4: Change in learners' level of agreement with the statement 'HE will enable me to get a better job' from a position of agree at baseline (Wo) (all learners)**



**Figure 5: Change in learners' level of agreement with the statement 'HE will enable me to earn more' from a position of agree at baseline (Wo) (all learners)**



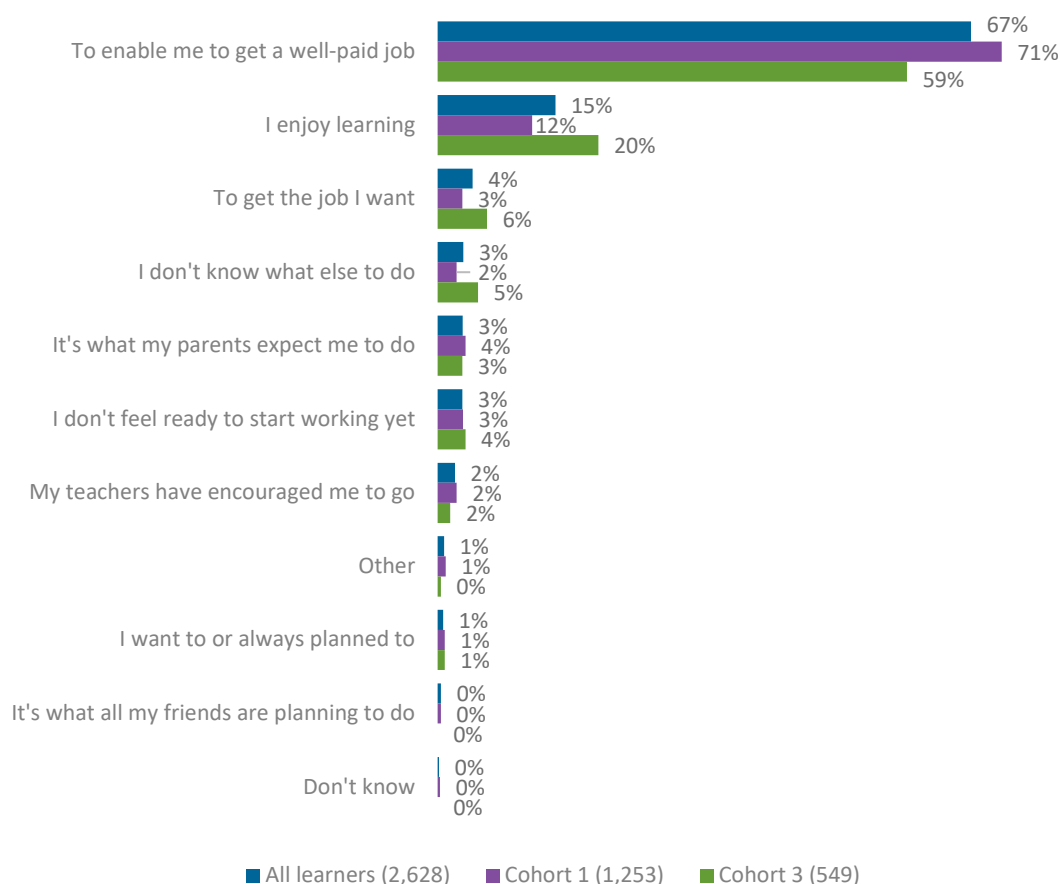
The comparative analysis demonstrates that these changes in learners' perceptions of the financial benefits of HE cannot be attributed to Uni Connect at the programme level. However, the regression analysis reveals that there are elements of the programme and learner characteristics that are associated with positive change. The number of hours spent engaging in Uni Connect activity is associated with positive change in learners' knowledge about the financial benefits of HE. Several characteristics are also associated with more positive perceptions about the employment prospects and earning potential of those who go to HE. In particular, younger learners (Cohorts 1 and 2) and those who speak to family, friends, teachers and careers advisers are more likely to agree that HE will enable them to earn more than other groups at W2.

Some of main reasons why learners are either likely or unlikely to apply to HE aged 18 or 19 are financial. Just over one-tenth (11%) of those who have not yet applied to HE reported that they are unlikely to apply aged 18 or 19. One of the most common reasons this group of learners are unlikely to apply is that they would prefer 'to work and earn money'. Conversely, three-quarters (75%) of those who have not yet applied to HE reported they are likely to do so aged 18 or 19. The main reason they want to go is 'to enable them to get a well-paid job'. (The changes in learners' intentions towards HE and the likelihood they will apply is explored further in Chapter 6.)

Top line analysis by cohort reveals that a higher proportion of Cohort 1 learners (Year 11 at W2) than Cohort 3 learners (Year 13 at W2) report that the main reason they are likely to apply to HE is to 'get a well-paid job'. A higher proportion of Cohort 3 learners recognise that they need an HE qualification 'to get the job they want' (irrespective of the level of future earnings), perhaps demonstrating their more nuanced understanding of the graduate labour market. A higher proportion also want to go because they enjoy learning, signalling that learners' reasons for going to HE extend beyond the financial returns (Figure 6).



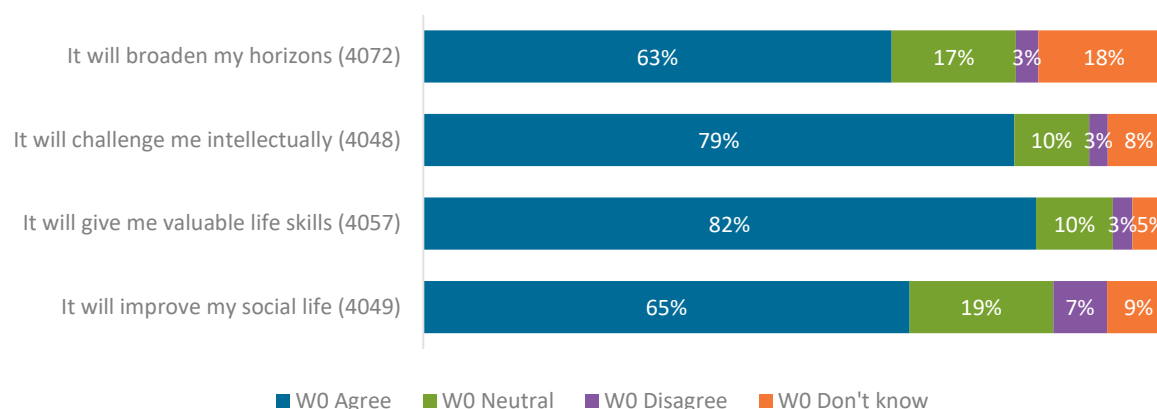
**Figure 6: The main reason learners want to go to HE by cohort (learners who state they are likely to apply to HE aged 18 or 19 at W2)**



## NON-FINANCIAL BENEFITS OF HE

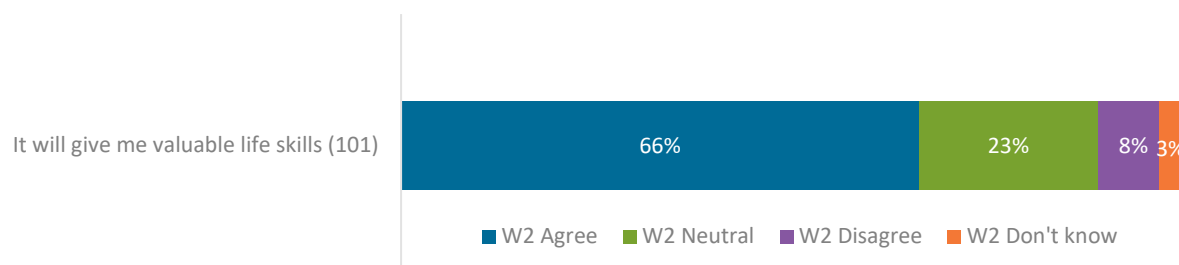
At baseline the majority of learners agreed or strongly agreed with the series of statements about the non-financial benefits of HE (Figure 7). The proportion of learners overall reporting that they agreed with these statements increased at W2 (74%, 84%, 67% respectively), with the exception of the statement 'HE will give me valuable life skills', where the proportion declined slightly (80%).

**Figure 7: Level of agreement with statements about the non-financial benefits of HE at baseline (Wo) (all learners)**



A small proportion of learners disagreed or were uncertain about these statements at baseline. Mirroring the changes in learners' perceptions of the financial benefits of HE, there has been a positive shift in the proportions of learners who agree with the statements about the non-financial benefits between baseline and W2. The shift from a position of disagreement with the statement 'HE will give me valuable life skills' to agreement is particularly pronounced, as illustrated in (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Change in learners' level of agreement with the statement 'HE will give me valuable life skills' from a position of disagree at baseline (Wo) (all learners)**



The comparative analysis demonstrates that these changes in learners' perceptions of the non-financial benefits of HE cannot be attributed to Uni Connect at the programme level. However, the regression analysis reveals that there are elements of the programme and learner characteristics that are associated with positive change. Total of number of hours engaged in outreach is positively associated with these changes, indicating that more intensive engagement in Uni Connect could have an impact on learners' perceptions. The regression analysis also indicates that gender, whether a learner has a disability or not and whether a learner knows someone with experience of HE are all associated with changes in learner perceptions, as discussed below.

Female learners are more likely than males to recognise the non-financial benefits of HE, in particular that HE would broaden their horizons and could help to improve their social life. Family, friends, teachers and careers advisers are important sources

of information about the non-financial as well as the financial benefits of HE. This factor is consistently associated with higher levels of learner agreement with all of the statements. Conversely, not knowing anyone in HE is associated with higher levels of disagreement with some of the statements, particularly that HE would provide valuable life skills.

Only a very small proportion of learners moved to a position of disagreement or uncertainty about the statements on the non-financial benefits of HE at W2. This includes learners with a disability who are more likely than those with no disability to move from a position of agreement to disagreement that HE would provide them with ‘valuable life skills’ and ‘improve their social life’.

## LEARNING AND INSIGHTS

**Existing understanding of the benefits of HE:** There could be a number of reasons changes in learners’ perceptions of the financial and non-financial benefits of HE cannot be attributed to Uni Connect. One explanation could be the high proportion of learners who recognised the benefits of HE prior to their engagement in the programme and the relatively small proportion of learners who shifted their position. There is, however, evidence that sustained engagement in the programme does have a positive impact on perceptions of the benefits of HE which could help to encourage learners to apply to HE in the future – a key objective of Uni Connect.

**Importance of social connections:** Perhaps the most interesting and potentially concerning finding to emerge is that there is a proportion of learners who are less positive about HE and the financial benefits, in particular at W2. Older learners (Cohort 3), those who have not spoken to family, friends, teachers, or a careers adviser about HE, those who do not know anyone who has gone to HE, and disabled learners are more likely to develop negative perceptions, particularly in relation to the impact of HE on future earning potential. Given that finance-related issues appear to be a main driver influencing whether a learner will apply to HE or not, this change could act as a barrier to progression for these groups. The evidence from the meta-review, although relatively limited at this stage, suggests that formal IAG, when it is delivered over several sessions, can be an effective way to increase learners’ understanding of the relative benefits of HE compared with other post-18 options.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Explore the reasons for learners’ negative perceptions of HE**, in particular why some learners are now less likely to agree that HE will enable them to get a better job and enhance their future earning potential.
- **Challenge negative perceptions** and address gaps in learners’ understanding through tailored interventions to address concerns, particularly in the context of COVID-19 and the implications for the economy and the labour market.

- **Ensure all learners understand the benefits of HE and the potential returns** by encouraging those who do not have access to informal sources of IAG (e.g., friends and family) to engage with teachers, careers advisers and/or student/graduate ambassadors who can address concerns about the ‘returns’ of HE. Ensure trusted advisers sustain their engagement and follow-up with learners to reinforce messages.
- **Address the specific concerns of disabled learners** that could deter progression to HE through tailored interventions that focus on how HE can help to develop life skills and social networks.

## 5. Impact of Uni Connect on perceived ability to succeed in HE

A lack of confidence and self-belief can be a barrier to HE progression and deter some from acting on their intentions towards HE. The aim of some Uni Connect activities, particularly mentoring and masterclasses, is to enhance learners' self-efficacy by challenging ideas of social identity and developing learners' confidence, motivation, and study skills. This chapter explores the changes in learners' perceptions of their ability to succeed in HE over the past two years since baseline and the extent to which this change can be attributed to Uni Connect.

### KEY FINDINGS

The top line analysis demonstrates:

- There has been an increase in all aspects of motivation and self-efficacy between baseline and W2.
- The change in learners' self-belief and confidence in their ability to fit in and succeed academically is less pronounced overall.
- Learner perceptions of whether 'HE is for people like me' fluctuate over time.

The comparative analysis shows mixed results:

- Positive change in learner motivation and confidence in academic abilities, particularly for Cohort 1 (Y11 at W2) can be attributed to Uni Connect at the programme level.
- Negative change in College Level 2 learners' perceptions of self-efficacy can be attributed to Uni Connect at the programme level.
- Changes in social identity cannot be attributed to the programme.

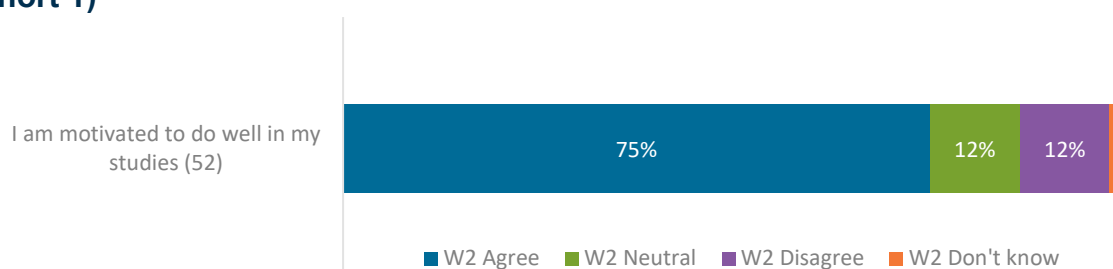
According to the regression analysis:

- Perceptions of self-efficacy and social identity are not associated with activity type, frequency or duration of participation in Uni Connect.
- Though female learners are more motivated to do well in their current studies, they along with disabled learners are less likely to agree that they can achieve the grades necessary for further study.
- Disabled and White learners are less likely than BAME learners and those without a disability to agree that HE is for 'people like me', that they 'could go to HE if they wanted to' and they 'would fit in'.

## MOTIVATION TO DO WELL IN STUDIES

At baseline, 90 per cent agreed that they were motivated to do well in their studies, while only 3 per cent disagreed. Although the proportion who agreed overall remained unchanged at W2, the top line analysis reveals some positive shifts across all three cohorts of learners, but for Cohort 1 (Year 11 at W2) in particular. The vast majority of those in this cohort who were not motivated at baseline, report they are now motivated (Figure 9).

**Figure 9: Change in learners' level of agreement with the statement 'I am motivated for my current studies' from a position of disagree at baseline (W0) (Cohort 1)**



According to the comparative analysis, learners in Year 11 (Cohort 1) who have taken part in Uni Connect activities are more likely to report being motivated in their current studies than those in Year 11 that have not engaged in the programme; as such, this increase can be attributed to Uni Connect. However, findings from the regression analysis show that neither the number of Uni Connect activities, nor the total number of hours of outreach activity engaged in are significantly associated with learner motivation to do well.

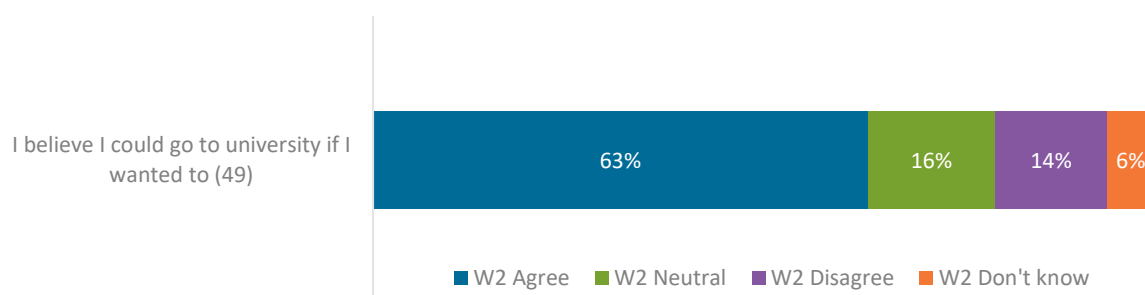
## SELF-BELIEF AND ABILITY TO PROGRESS TO HE

At baseline, 77 per cent of learners agreed that they could go to university if they wanted to, compared to 2 per cent who disagreed. The proportion who agreed decreased slightly to 74 per cent at W2. However, the top line analysis demonstrates that the outcomes for some of those who lacked some elements of self-belief at the outset are improving and some are now likely to believe HE is an option for them.

Cohort 1 are the furthest from the point of transition to HE than the other two cohorts. Encouragingly, the top line analysis shows that almost three-fifths of respondents in Cohort 1 (59%) who strongly disagreed with the statement 'I could go to university if I wanted to' in Year 9 (W0), now agree or strongly agree with this statement in Year 11. Furthermore, a higher proportion of these learners reported that they are confident 'they could get the grades needed to progress to further study', setting them on the pathway to HE. Almost three-quarters of learners in Cohort 1, who strongly disagreed with this statement at baseline either agreed (46%) or strongly agreed (25%) with it at W2, compared with 82 per cent of learners overall.

The top line analysis also demonstrates that the increase in learners' confidence in their ability to 'get the necessary grades' and 'gain a place on a good course at university if they wanted to' are more pronounced for Cohorts 2 and 3, which are closer to the transition. The majority of those who disagreed with this latter statement at baseline moved to a positive position at W2 (63%) (Figure 10).

**Figure 10: Change in learners' level of agreement with the statement 'I could go to university if I wanted to' from a position of disagree at baseline (Wo) (Cohorts 2 and 3)**



There is, however, a note of caution. The comparative analysis highlights that within Cohort 1, College Level 2 learners who have engaged in Uni Connect are less likely to believe that 'they could get the grades needed for further study' and 'go to university if they wanted to' than learners who did not participate in Uni Connect activities. This suggests that Uni Connect has had a negative impact on this outcome for this group of learners. One explanation for the negative outcome could be that 'treated' learners have received more information about HE and have a better understanding of what is required to secure a university place than those who have not participated in Uni Connect. As such, the treated group is in a position to make a more informed judgement about whether they could get the grades required for further study and go to HE if they wanted to than those in the untreated group. A further explanation could be that increased information for 'treated' learners could result in them feeling less confident.

Insights from the regression analysis shows that although they report higher levels of motivation to do well in their studies, females are more likely to report lower levels of belief that they can achieve the grades needed for further study. The regression analysis also shows that disabled learners are less likely to believe that they can achieve the grades required for further study and they, along with White learners are less likely to believe they could go to university if they wanted to. It is important to note that data on actual attainment was not available at the time the analysis was completed so it was not possible to explore whether current level of attainment is associated with learner confidence in their ability to 'get the necessary grades' at this stage.

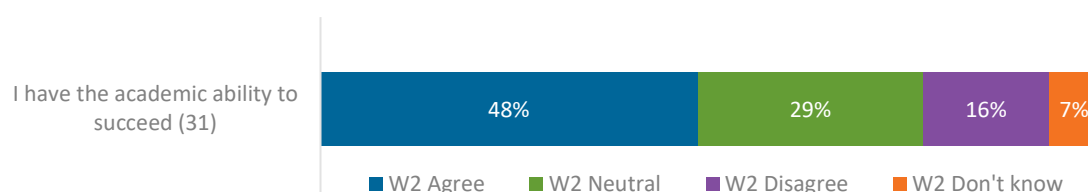
## LEARNER CONFIDENCE

Learners may be deterred from progressing to HE by a lack of confidence in their academic abilities and concerns about whether they would be able to cope with the demands of higher-level study. As such, some Uni Connect activities are designed to improve learner confidence by developing their academic study skills.

At baseline, 72 per cent of Cohort 3 learners agreed they had the academic ability to succeed in HE. There were slightly lower levels of agreement with this statement among learners in Cohorts 1 (64%) and 2 (70%) and this remained largely unchanged at W2 (64% and 69% respectively).

Almost half (48%) of those among Cohort 3 who disagreed at baseline agreed at W2, compared with 38 per cent in Cohort 1 and only 27 per cent in Cohort 2. This suggests that as learners move closer to the point of transition to HE, confidence in their academic ability increases and they are more likely to perceive that they can succeed in HE.

**Figure 11: Change in learners' level of agreement with the statement 'I have the academic ability to succeed' from a position of disagree at baseline (Wo) (Cohort 3)**



According to the comparative analysis, increases in learners' confidence in their academic ability to succeed in HE can be attributed to Uni Connect. Target learners who have participated in Uni Connect activities are more likely to report increased confidence in their 'academic ability to succeed in HE' than those who have not. This finding is particularly significant for younger (Cohort 1) learners.

The regression analysis highlights that females and learners with a disability are less positive about their ability to succeed in HE. White learners are also less likely to agree that they have the academic ability to succeed compared with BAME learners.

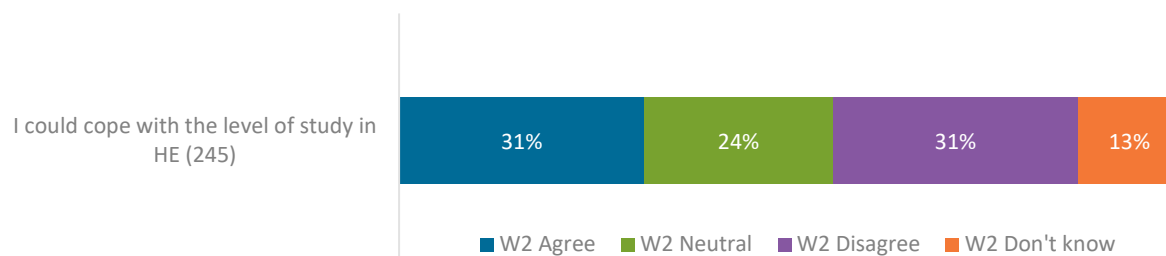
## ABILITY TO COPE WITH LEVEL OF STUDY

At baseline, 59 per cent of learners agreed that they could 'cope with the level of study required' and 6 per cent disagreed. According to the top line findings, there have been limited changes in learners' confidence between baseline and W2. Figure 12 shows that more than two-thirds of learners (69%) who did not agree that they had the ability to cope with the level of study in HE at baseline still did not agree at W2. Perceptions of ability to cope could be expected to increase as learners get older and understand more about the level of study required in HE. This assertion is borne



out in the top line analysis: two-fifths (41%) of those in Cohort 3 who disagreed at baseline with this statement subsequently agreed at W2, compared with 28 per cent in Cohort 1 and 30 per cent in Cohort 2.

**Figure 12: Change in learners' level of agreement with the statement 'I would be able to cope with the level of study in HE' from a position of disagree at baseline (Wo) (all learners)**



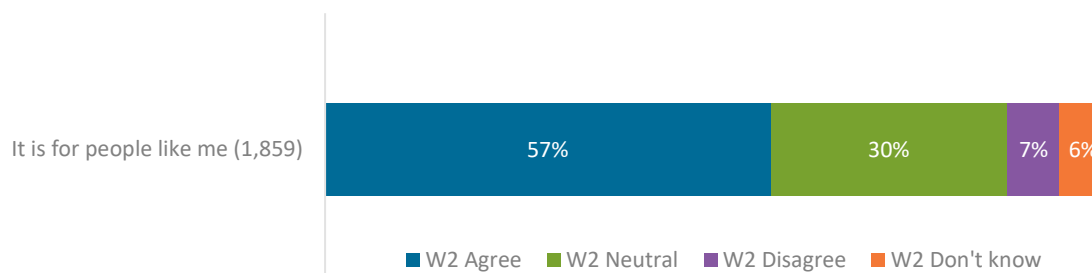
Comparative analysis indicates that changes in learner perceptions cannot be attributed to Uni Connect at the programme level. Regression analysis does not identify any elements of the programme that are associated with positive changes, but it does identify some learner characteristics that are. Females and learners with a disability are less positive about their ability to cope with the level of study required.

## SOCIAL IDENTITY

At baseline, less than half of learners (47%) agreed that HE is for people 'like them'. Just 8 per cent disagreed and the remainder were unsure. The top line analysis demonstrates there has been considerable change in learners' perceptions of HE over time and that while some are now more likely to believe HE is for people 'like them', the proportion of learners who agree with this statement overall has decreased to 44 per cent at W2.

Figure 13 shows that while 57 per cent of those who agreed that 'HE is for people like me' at baseline still agreed at W2, a substantial proportion (30%) moved to a neutral position and 7 per cent changed their mind completely. Top line analysis by cohort does not reveal any significant differences.

**Figure 13: Change in learners' level of agreement with the statement 'HE is for people like me' from a position of agree at baseline (Wo) (all learners)**



A similar picture emerges in relation to learners' perceptions of the extent to which they would fit in in the HE environment. At baseline, just over half of learners (53%) agreed that they would 'fit in well with others in HE', while 8 per cent disagreed and 39 per cent were unsure. These proportions have remained largely unchanged at W2 (54% agree). Almost two-fifths of those who did not know if they would fit in well with others at baseline reported that they now agree (35%) or strongly agree (4%) with this statement. This shift was more pronounced amongst older learners; of those who did not know if they would fit in well with others at baseline, 45 per cent of Cohort 3 and 47 per cent of Cohort 2 subsequently agreed with this statement at W2. This contrasts with 34 per cent of Cohort 1.

According to the comparative analysis, changes in learner perceptions regarding whether HE is for people 'like them' and whether they would 'fit in well with others in HE' cannot be attributed to Uni Connect. Findings from the regression analysis shows no significant association between these perceptions of social identity and the type, duration or frequency of participation in Uni Connect. However, findings from the regression analysis show two specific learner characteristics associated with lower levels of social identity are consistent with the characteristics associated with self-efficacy. Learners with a disability are less likely to agree at W2 that HE is 'for people like them' and that they would 'fit in well with others' compared with learners without a disability. White learners are also less likely to agree that they would 'fit in well with others' compared with non-White learners.

## LEARNING AND INSIGHTS

A lack of identification with HE and prevailing misconceptions about the types of people who go to HE can act as a barrier to progression. Previous research<sup>25</sup> has suggested that young people from under-represented groups, and their parents, often do not perceive that 'people like them' go to university and as a consequence they are deterred from applying by a fear that they won't 'fit in'.

### **Timing of outreach and the importance of early and sustained**

**interventions:** Achievement at Key Stage 4 is one of the main predictors of attainment at Key Stage 5 and progression to HE. The positive association between Uni Connect and learner motivation with their current studies for Cohort 1 at this critical stage in the learner journey is particularly significant. This cohort will receive the maximum input from Uni Connect during the initial four years of funding. This presents the opportunity for partnerships to maintain support to ensure early impacts on this group's confidence in their ability to succeed are sustained through

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<sup>25</sup> For example, CFE Research (2015) [Understanding Progression into higher education for disadvantaged and under-represented groups](#). BIS Research Paper No. 229.

the next Key Stage, when most make their final decision about their post-18 options.<sup>26</sup>

**Inconclusive evidence that type, duration and frequency of participation in Uni Connect is associated with learner self-efficacy and social identity:**

Although our analysis suggests that change in learners' perceptions about their ability to succeed in HE and to cope with the level of study required cannot be attributed to the programme, the findings from the meta-review of local partnership evidence suggest that masterclasses/workshops could be an effective way to address self-efficacy by boosting learners' confidence, self-belief and motivation as well as subject knowledge and attainment, particularly for White males from lower socio-economic groups, who are achieving lower outcomes according to the survey analysis. The limited local evaluation evidence on the impact of summer schools suggests that this may also be an effective way to change learners' perceptions about whether they would 'fit in' in HE by exposing learners to student life and the diversity of people on campus. Learners with disabilities are among the groups least likely to perceive that they would 'fit in' in HE; they in particular may benefit from this type of intervention.

**Importance of understanding how learner characteristics are differentially associated with perceptions of self-efficacy and social identity:**

A number of individual learner differences regarding self-efficacy and social identity are shown. For instance, College Learners (in particular Level 2) are less like to believe they could 'go to HE' or 'get the grades needed'. There are a number of possible explanations including level of current attainment and perceptions of the grades and qualifications needed to attend HE, whether they have all the information required to make informed decision, or whether the increased engagement in outreach and additional information somehow adversely impacts on their confidence levels. Lack of self-belief can have implications for learners, including those who do progress, and can result in a 'mismatch'<sup>27</sup> between learners' actual achievements and the grades required to secure a place at their chosen institution or course.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Previous research by CFE for BIS map the points in the learner journey when decisions are made and the key influences on those decisions. See CFE Research (2015) [Understanding Progression into higher education for disadvantaged and under-represented groups](#). BIS Research Paper No. 229.

<sup>27</sup> Mismatched students can be under- or over-matched. 'Undermatch' occurs when students attend universities/courses that are less selective than might be expected given their academic credentials, 'overmatch' when they attend universities/courses that are more selected than might be expected given their academic credentials.

<sup>28</sup> Campbell, S., Macmillan, L., and Wyness, G. (2019). [Mismatch in higher education: prevalence, drivers and outcomes](#).

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Implement tailored multi-intervention programmes** for specific learner groups who do not appear to be benefiting as much from Uni Connect, including females, disabled and White target learners, to help them develop the self-belief, confidence and resilience needed to progress to HE.
- **Explore the reasons why some target learners, including college students, females, disabled learners and those from a White background, report lower levels of self-belief**, particularly in their ability to achieve the grades necessary for further study. Ensure interventions with these groups address identified issues and encourage learners to apply to more selective/higher tariff providers where appropriate to prevent learners being ‘undermatched’.
- **Ensure early and sustained engagement** to maximise impact on learner self-efficacy and social identity towards HE.

## 6. Impact of Uni Connect on future plans

At each wave of the survey, learners have been asked what they plan to do after their current studies and who has influenced their decisions. In this chapter we explore these influences, along with learners' plans for the end of their next transition phase and the likelihood they will apply to HE aged 18 or 19.

### KEY FINDINGS

The top line analysis demonstrates:

- The proportion of learners intending to apply to HE has remained relatively stable over time, from a high base.
- Family is a key influence on learners' decision-making, but the strength of this influence diminishes over time.

The comparative analysis shows:

- The increase in likelihood of applying to HE can be attributed to Uni Connect, particularly for College Level 3, Year 2 learners.

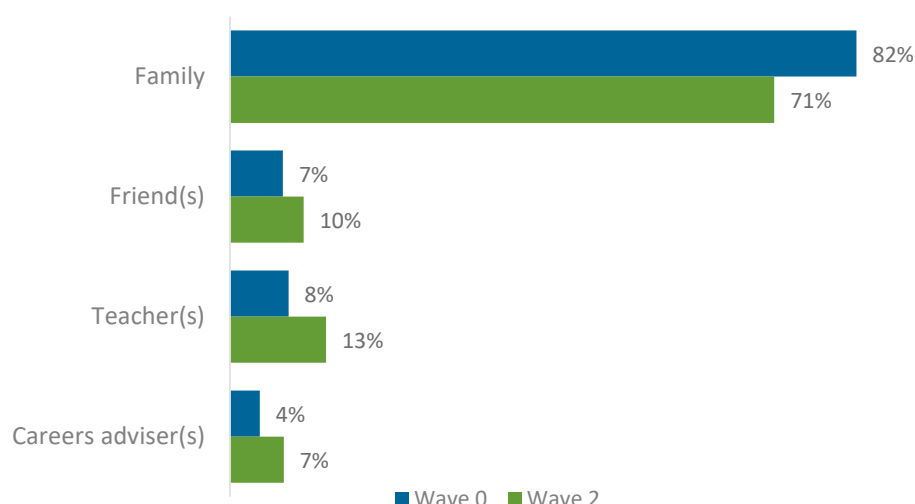
According to the regression analysis:

- Total number of *hours*, but not the number of *activities*, is positively associated with an increase in the likelihood of learners applying to HE.
- There is a positive association between gender and ethnicity and likelihood of applying to HE, with females and BAME learners more likely to apply
- Those who have spoken to family, friends, teachers, and careers advisers have a higher likelihood of applying to HE aged 18 or 19.
- Learners who would be the first in the family to go to HE have a lower likelihood of applying to HE.

### INFLUENCES ON DECISION-MAKING

The top line analysis shows that, by Year 13, most young people have spoken to a member of their family, a friend, a teacher and/or a careers adviser about HE. Family, in particular, is a key influence, but the closer a young person gets to the transition at age 18, the greater the influence of other sources of IAG (Figure 14).

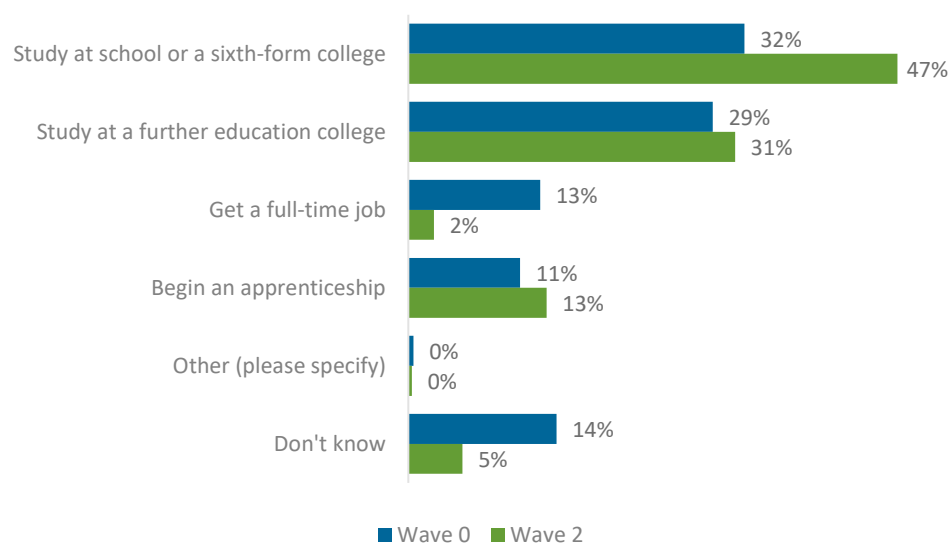
**Figure 14: Changes in who has the greatest influences on decisions about what to do next between baseline and Wave 2 (bases: W0 = 3618; W2 = 3882.) (learners who selected one of the top four responses)**



## TRANSITIONS AT THE END OF KEY STAGE 4

Cohort 1 learners were at the point of transition from Key Stage 4 to Key Stage 5 at W2. The top line analysis demonstrates that there has been a positive shift in the proportion of Cohort 1 learners who report they intend to continue with their studies. At W2, the majority report they intend to remain in education, going on to study at school, sixth form or a further education college, which are all routes to HE. The proportion of learners intending to move on to an apprenticeship or other form of training has also increased slightly between baseline and second follow-up. These increases are explained by a decline since baseline in the proportion of learners who intend to pursue full-time employment or who are unsure about their next steps (Figure 15).

**Figure 15: Changes in learners' intentions for after they finish their current studies (Cohort 1 bases: W0 = 2031; W2 =2070)**

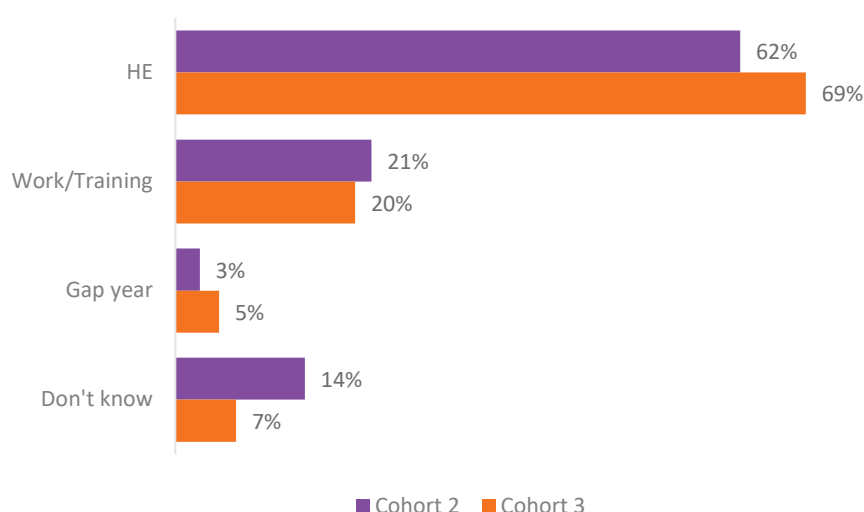


## INTENTIONS TOWARDS HE

### Transitions at the end of Key Stage 5

Findings from the top line analysis show that the majority of learners in Cohort 2 (Year 12 at W2) and Cohort 3 (Year 13 at W2) intend to progress to HE after their current studies. This includes HE in further education, HE at a HE provider close to home or elsewhere, or a higher/degree apprenticeship. Approximately a fifth of learners in both cohorts are intending to progress to full or part-time work or work with training, including lower-level apprenticeships. A higher proportion of those in Cohort 2 are undecided about what they want to do next than in Cohort 3, who are closer to the point of transition (Figure 16).

**Figure 16: Learners plans for when they finish their current studies at W2 (Cohort 2 base = 1003; Cohort 3 base = 753) (top three answers and don't know)**



## LIKELIHOOD OF APPLYING TO HE

At baseline, three-quarters of learners (75%) (who were in Years 9 to 11 at that stage) indicated that they were likely to apply to HE aged 18 or 19 and just over one in ten (11%) reported that they were unlikely to apply. The proportion of learners<sup>29</sup> who report they are likely to apply at W2 has decreased overall (67%). This is a reflection of the fluctuation in the likelihood that learners will apply over time<sup>30</sup> and is largely accounted for by learners in Cohorts 1 and 2 (now in Years 11 and 12) who are currently less likely to apply than they were at baseline. Importantly, the proportion of learners in Cohort 3 (who are now in Year 13 and approaching their post-18 transition) who are likely to apply to HE, but have not yet done so, has *increased* from 74 per cent at baseline to 76 percent at W2 (Figure 17).

A total of 305 learners reported that they had already applied to HE at W2. Of these, almost nine out of ten (89%) reported that they were likely to apply to HE aged 18 or 19 at baseline (when they were in Year 11). Very few of these learners (n = 35) therefore changed their position between the baseline and second follow-up:

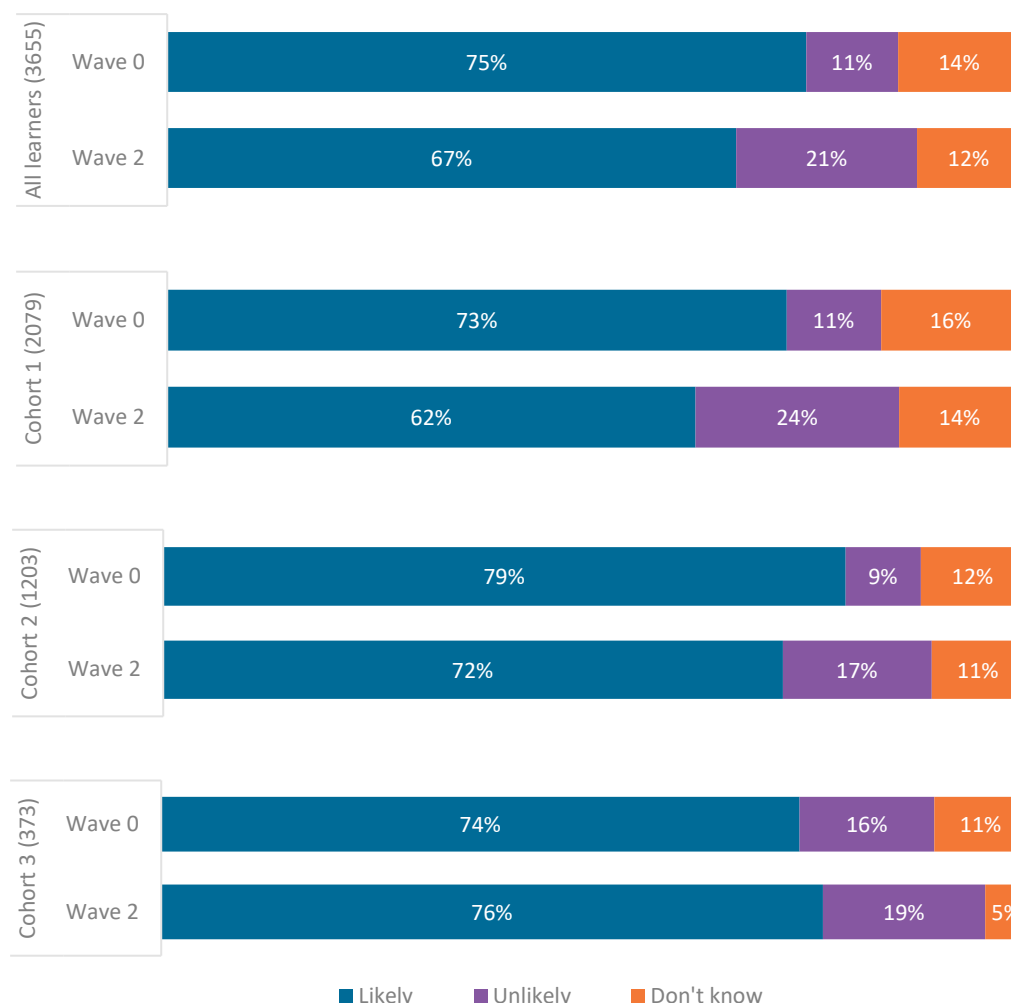
- 11 reported that they were 'unlikely' to apply to HE at baseline but subsequently applied
- 24 reported that they did not know whether they would apply to HE at baseline but subsequently applied.

<sup>29</sup> Excluding learners who have already applied.

<sup>30</sup> See Anders, J (2017) [The influence of socioeconomic status on changes in young people's expectations of applying to university](#) for further evidence that younger learners from lower socio-economic groups have strong intentions towards HE which change over time.



**Figure 17: How likely learners are to apply to higher education at age 18 or 19 at baseline (Wo) and follow-up (W2)? (all learners who have not already applied)**



Given the high proportion of target learners who expressed an intention to apply at baseline, there is limited scope for the programme to have an impact on this particular outcome. However, the comparative analysis demonstrates that amongst learners who have not yet applied, the likelihood of them applying to HE increases more for learners who have participated in Uni Connect than for those who have not. The difference between ‘treated’ and ‘untreated’ groups is particularly significant for learners in the second year of a Level 3 qualification at college (Cohort 3).

The regression analysis provides insights into the elements of Uni Connect that contribute to the change in learners’ intentions. Total hours of outreach activity and masterclasses are positively associated with changes in intentions to apply to HE, although the number of activities is not significant. Findings from the regression analysis demonstrate that a number of learner characteristics are also associated with likelihood of applying to HE:

- The likelihood of applying increases more for females and non-White learners than for males and White learners between baseline and W2

- Learners who would be first in their family to go to HE are less likely to say they intend to apply to HE at W2

## LEARNING AND INSIGHTS

Recent research has highlighted the complex interplay between aspirations, expectations, intentions and academic ability, and progression to HE, challenging the notion that low rates of progression among under-represented groups are primarily the result of low aspiration.<sup>31</sup> This evaluation confirms that there is no lack of aspiration among Uni Connect target learners and that a significant proportion intend to apply.

**Role of key influencers on learners' future intentions:** Previous research<sup>32</sup> has demonstrated that a range of people (as well as personal, situational and external factors) influence young people's decisions about education, training and employment and this is reflected in the current evaluation. By Year 13, most target learners have spoken to a member of their family, a friend, a teacher and/or a careers adviser about HE, but it is a learner's family that is perceived to have most influence. Parental views therefore have an important and potentially overriding influence on learners' decision-making. This highlights the importance of engaging parents/carers, as well as continuing professional development for teachers, to ensure they are equipped to provide advice to young people on HE and other options.

**Impact of the programme on learners' likelihood to progress to HE:** Uni Connect is having a positive impact on older learners' intentions to progress to HE, including by positively influencing many of those who are unsure or unlikely to apply at the outset. However, there appears to be a small group of learners who are resolutely unlikely to apply as well as a group of learners for whom the likelihood of applying has diminished over time. There are likely to be a number of reasons for this which are not necessarily negative. Progressing to HE will not be the right option for all target learners. If learners are able to make a well-informed decision not to apply as a result of the IAG they receive through Uni Connect, this is a positive outcome. It is also worth noting the increase in the proportion of learners intending to apply to HE in Cohort 3; this suggests that there is the potential for younger learners to change their minds several times over the course of their journey in response to the IAG they receive. This reinforces the importance of sustained and progressive engagement with learners up until the point of transition aged 18.

**Role of masterclasses:** Masterclasses are the only activity that are positively associated with positive changes in learners' intentions to progress to HE. This

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<sup>31</sup> Harrison, N. and Waller, R. (2018) Challenging discourses of aspiration: The role of expectations and attainment in access to higher education. *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol 44 Issue 5 pp 914-938

<sup>32</sup> For example, CFE Research with Hughes, D.M. (2017) [User insight research into post-16 choices](#). Sheffield: Department for Education; CFE Research (2015) [Understanding Progression into higher education for disadvantaged and under-represented groups](#). BIS Research Paper No. 229;

complements the findings from the meta-review of local Uni Connect evaluation evidence which suggest that masterclasses are an effective way to increase learners' skills and confidence to achieve in their current studies; learner confidence in their ability to achieve the grades necessary for higher-level study is an important factor that can influence their intentions towards HE. The meta-review also highlights that masterclasses are particularly effective if they are delivered as a series. This chimes with the results of the regression analysis which suggests that it is the total number of hours rather than the number of different types of activity a learner engages in that leads to an increase in the likelihood that a learner will apply to HE.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Continue to develop ways to engage parents/carers** (as well as teachers) as key influencers, to ensure they are equipped with accurate information and are better able to advise young people.
- **Explore the reasons why some target learners, particularly those who would be the first in their family to go to HE, males and White learners, are unsure or unlikely to apply** to identify potential barriers and design tailored interventions.
- **Consider how masterclasses could be utilised** over the course of a target learner's engagement in Uni Connect to increase the likelihood that they will apply to HE.

## 7. Conclusions and next steps

The OfS and the 29 partnerships have invested heavily in Uni Connect, which has successfully supported a large number of young people over three years. While we cannot attribute many of the outcomes achieved to date to Uni Connect *at the programme level*, it is possible that limitations in the data and features of the design and delivery of the programme are masking its true impact. There is evidence from this analysis of longitudinal learner surveys as well as partnerships' local evaluation evidence that elements of the programme are having a positive effect. It is also possible to identify from the evidence where change has occurred, for which students and the factors that may have contributed. In doing so, it is possible to identify the groups where tailored interventions may be needed to further enhance outcomes and ensure progression to HE is increased for all and not just some of the sub-groups who are currently under-represented in the sector. Drawing on these insights in Phase Three will help to ensure the impact of the programme is also maximised.

The findings and recommendations given throughout this report are designed to highlight the areas that could provide a focus for Uni Connect partnerships to enhance the impact of their work. Taking the findings as a whole, some cross-cutting issues and consistent themes emerge. These are brought together in this concluding chapter to provide insights into what's working (and what's not) at the programme level, to help inform the development of future phases of the programme.

### KEY INSIGHTS

According to tracking data, although learners across the programme are engaging in a range of activities, it is most common for individuals to participate in multiple sessions of one type of activity rather than multi-intervention programmes. Although there is local evaluation evidence to indicate that multi-intervention programmes have a positive impact, the evidence presented here suggests that it is the total number of hours spent engaging in Uni Connect, rather than the number or type of activities engaged in, that leads to positive change. This indicates that the fundamental principle of Uni Connect – to provide sustained and progressive support throughout Key Stages 4 and 5 – is well-founded and should continue.

Knowledge, attitudes and intentions towards HE differ according to learner characteristics. Although outcomes have improved for all groups, the extent of change is consistently lower among certain sub-groups, particularly females, learners with a disability, some White learners, and learners without prior knowledge or experience of HE in their family. This suggests that more needs to be done with and for these learners if the OfS's ambition for equality of outcomes between different under-represented groups is to be achieved.

Current evidence on the impact of individual interventions is limited and it was not possible to isolate the effects of some activities in the survey analysis because of the

small number of learners in the sample who had taken part in them (e.g., summer schools). It is therefore too early to say whether many activities are effective and make recommendations about whether partnerships should continue to implement them (or not). However, there is evidence from the separate meta-review of local evaluation evidence that mentoring and masterclasses have a positive impact on a range of outcomes by helping to enhance learners' knowledge of and attitudes towards HE. Incorporating these activities in their own right or as a part of a multi-intervention programme is likely to enhance outcomes, particularly for those groups where change is not so pronounced relative to target learners overall. The meta-review highlights the importance of delivering masterclasses and wider forms of IAG as a series and the value of involving role models, such as student ambassadors, to enhance the impact of both these interventions.

Financial concerns were identified as a barrier for target learners at the end of Phase One of Uni Connect. Perceptions of cost, and a lack of awareness of the financial support available and the financial benefits of HE, still appear to be acting as barriers for some learners. Prevailing views about the types of people who go and 'fit in' at HE, along with a lack of understanding of the non-financial benefits of HE, also continue to act as deterrents.

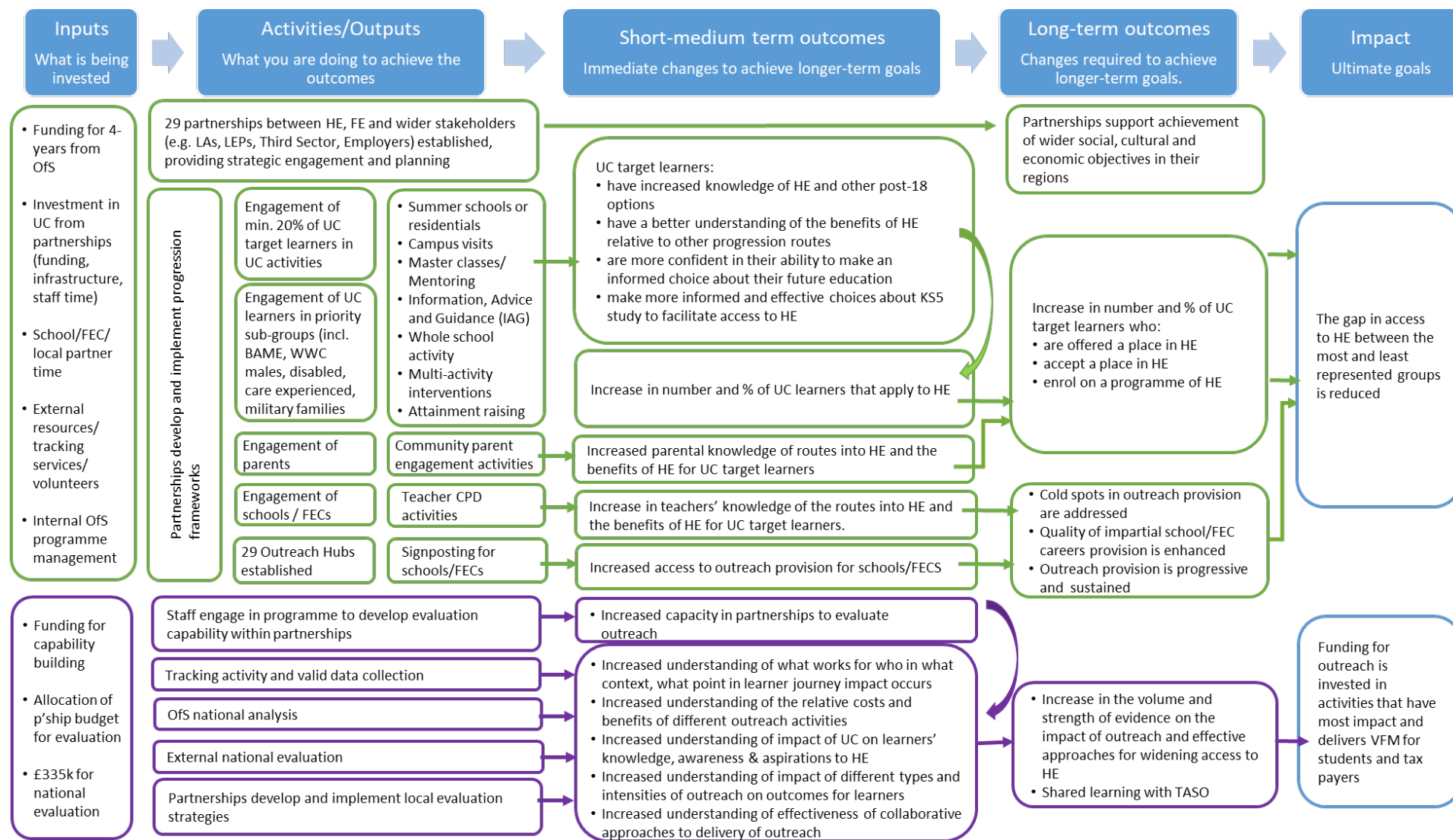
Family in particular influence a range of outcomes for learners and can serve to both encourage and deter them from considering HE. Parents/carers and other family members often draw on their own views and experiences when advising young people and, as such, can offer a partial view. The evaluation findings highlight the important role that Uni Connect fulfils in terms of delivering accurate and impartial IAG for young people to help inform their decision-making.

It is clear that the pandemic has had a significant impact on the delivery of Uni Connect in the 2019/20 and 2020/21 academic years. It would therefore be valuable for research at the national and local level to explore the characteristics of those who do and do not progress to further and higher education and their reasons, to ascertain whether these are related to the impact of the pandemic or another change, such as a shift in intentions or a lack of attainment. It will also be important to identify whether learners who did not progress to HE in 2020 deferred a place or intend to (re-)apply at a later date to understand if any dip in the progression rate (or likelihood of applying amongst younger cohorts) is temporary and likely to recover once COVID-19 restrictions are lifted.

## **NEXT STEPS FOR THE PHASE TWO NATIONAL IMPACT EVALUATION**

The final wave of the longitudinal survey will close at the end of March 2021. This data will be analysed alongside the findings from the most recent (January 2021) and planned (summer 2021) meta-reviews of local evaluation evidence to understand the impact of Uni Connect after four years of delivery. The findings will be summarised in the end of Phase Two report which will be submitted to OfS in the autumn of 2021.

## APPENDIX 1: LOGIC MODEL FOR THE NATIONAL EVALUATION OF UNI CONNECT



### **Assumptions**

- Partnerships provide strategic leadership, management and governance arrangements to maintain delivery of a collaborative approach
- Partnerships implement strategic plans to deliver a sustained and progressive programme of targeted outreach for young people in Years 9 and upwards in target wards
- Partnerships effectively engage with schools/FECs/SFCs and other stakeholders to target and deliver their activities
- Partnerships adapt their approach/activities to reflect changes in the local and/or national context
- Young people are on track to achieve the necessary levels of attainment at KS4 and KS5 to progress to HE
- Partnerships use data and emerging findings from evaluations to adapt and change their approach
- UC activity is aligned with broader outreach activity and outreach hubs



## APPENDIX 2: WAVE 2 SURVEY – PART 1 (CORE) QUESTIONS

### 1. Which year of study are you in?

- ☐ School - year 9
- ☐ School - year 10
- ☐ School - year 11
- ☐ College - level 2
- ☐ Sixth form - year 12 (lower sixth)
- ☐ Sixth form - year 13 (upper sixth)
- ☐ College - level 3 - year 1
- ☐ College - level 3 - year 2

### 2. When you finish your current studies, what would you most like to do next?

[response options routed according to Key Stage]

- ☐ Study at school or a sixth-form college
- ☐ Study at a further education college
- ☐ Get a full-time job
- ☐ Get a part-time job
- ☐ Study higher education at a further education college or other further education provider
- ☐ Study at a local university or another higher education institution
- ☐ Study away from home at university or another higher education institution
- ☐ Get a job and study at the same time
- ☐ Begin an apprenticeship
- ☐ Begin a higher/degree apprenticeship
- ☐ Take a gap year
- ☐ Other (*please specify*) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Don't know

### 3. Who have you spoken to about higher education?

- ☐ Family
- ☐ Friend(s)
- ☐ Teacher(s)
- ☐ Careers adviser(s)
- ☐ Other (*please specify*) \_\_\_\_\_
- ☐ Nobody

### 4. Apart from yourself, who has had the greatest influence on your decision about what to do next?

- ☐ Family
- ☐ Friend(s)
- ☐ Teacher(s)
- ☐ Careers adviser(s)
- ☐ Other (*please specify*) \_\_\_\_\_



## 5. How much do you agree with the following statements?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know
I am motivated to do well in my studies	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I can get the grades I need for further study	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I believe I could go to university if I wanted to	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## 6. How much do you know about the following things about higher education?

	Nothing	A little	A lot
The subjects that you could study	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Different types of course, such as: degree, foundation degree, or higher/degree apprenticeships	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How to apply to study higher education	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Where to find information about applying	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The qualifications and grades needed to get into higher education	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## 7. How much do you know about the following aspects of higher education?

	Nothing	A little	A lot
What student life would be like	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How it leads to careers that you may be interested in	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The costs of study	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The financial support available	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The options about where to live whilst studying	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**8. Have you applied to study at higher education? [Sixth form year 13 (upper sixth) or College level 3 (year 2) only],**

Yes ☐ *Please go to question 11*

No ☐ *Please go to question 9*

**9. How likely are you to apply to higher education at age 18 or 19?**

Definitely won't apply ☐ *Please go to question 10*

Very unlikely ☐ *Please go to question 10*

Fairly unlikely ☐ *Please go to question 10*

Fairly likely ☐ *Please go to question 11*

Very likely ☐ *Please go to question 11*

Definitely will apply ☐ *Please go to question 11*

Don't know ☐ *Please go to question 10*

**10. What is the main reason you might NOT go on to study higher education?**

- ☐ My current qualifications are enough
- ☐ I have decided on a specific career (that does not require further study)
- ☐ I want to work and earn money
- ☐ The cost is too much
- ☐ It depends on the grades I get
- ☐ I don't have the necessary study skills
- ☐ It does not appeal to me
- ☐ I want to travel
- ☐ I am still undecided
- ☐ There is nowhere close enough to home
- ☐ Other reason (*please specify*) \_\_\_\_\_

### 11. What is the main reason you want to go to higher education?

- ☐ I enjoy learning
- ☐ To enable me to get a well-paid job
- ☐ It's what my parents expect me to do
- ☐ It's what all my friends are planning to do
- ☐ My teachers have encouraged me to go
- ☐ I don't know what else to do
- ☐ I don't feel ready to start working yet
- ☐ Other reason (*please specify*) \_\_\_\_\_

### 12. How much do you agree with the following statements about higher education?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know
It is for people like me	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would fit in well with others	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have the academic ability to succeed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I could cope with the level of study required	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

### 13. How much do you agree with the following statements about higher education?

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Don't know
It will broaden my horizons	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It will challenge me intellectually	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It will give me valuable life skills	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It will improve my social life	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It will enable me to earn more	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
It will enable me to get a better job	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

**14. If you go on to higher education, would you be the first person in your immediate family to go?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No - my grandparent(s) went first
- ☐ No - my parent(s) or guardian(s) went first
- ☐ No - my brother(s) or sister(s) went first
- ☐ Don't know

**15. Do you know somebody else who has gone on to higher education?**

*Please select all that apply*

- ☐ No
- ☐ Yes - another family member
- ☐ Yes - a friend
- ☐ Don't know
- ☐ Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**16. Do you have a disability, learning difficulty or long-term physical or mental health condition?**

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Prefer not to say

**17. What is your gender?**

- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Prefer not to say

**18. Which of the following ethnic groups do you belong to?**

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="radio"/> White - British                    | <input type="radio"/> Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi |
| <input type="radio"/> White - Irish                      | <input type="radio"/> Other Asian background               |
| <input type="radio"/> White - Scottish                   | <input type="radio"/> Mixed White and Asian                |
| <input type="radio"/> Other White background             | <input type="radio"/> Chinese                              |
| <input type="radio"/> Black or Black British - Caribbean | <input type="radio"/> Arab                                 |
| <input type="radio"/> Black or Black British - African   | <input type="radio"/> Irish Traveller                      |
| <input type="radio"/> Other Black background             | <input type="radio"/> Gypsy or Traveller                   |
| <input type="radio"/> Mixed White and Black Caribbean    | <input type="radio"/> Other ethnic background              |
| <input type="radio"/> Mixed White and Black African      | <input type="radio"/> Any other mixed background           |
| <input type="radio"/> Asian or Asian British - Indian    | <input type="radio"/> Prefer not to say                    |
| <input type="radio"/> Asian or Asian British - Pakistani |  |

## APPENDIX 3: ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR WAVE 3 SURVEY

**Has COVID-19 influenced your decision about what to do next?**

- ☐ No, not at all
- ☐ Yes, to some extent
- ☐ Yes, a great deal
- ☐ I'm not sure

**Where did you study between March and July 2020 during the COVID-19 lockdown?**

- ☐ I stayed in school / college (1)
- ☐ I went to school/college and studied from home (2)
- ☐ I studied from home (3)

**[Respondents who studies from home all or some of the time] Did any of the following make it more difficult for you to continue learning at home? Please tick all that apply**

- ☐ Lack of a computer that you could use for your school/college work
- ☐ Lack of other equipment or resources that you would normally have in school/college to help you learn
- ☐ Poor or no Wi-Fi connection at home
- ☐ Limited contact with tutor and/or subject teachers at school/college
- ☐ Lack of a quiet space to study
- ☐ Being asked to help out with other family members, such as younger brothers and sisters
- ☐ Parents/carers unable to help with school/college work
- ☐ Nothing, I had everything I needed to continue learning at home [exclusive]

**Has COVID-19 affected your decision about whether or not to apply to higher education at age 18 or 19?**

- ☐ Yes, I'm now more likely to apply
- ☐ Yes, I'm now less likely to apply
- ☐ No, I'm just as likely to apply to now as I was before COVID-19
- ☐ I'm not sure

**What is the main reason you want to go to higher education? [Option added to core question 11]**

- ☐ It will be too hard to get a job because of COVID-19

**What is the main reason you might not go on to higher education? [Option added to core question 10]**

- ☐ COVID-19 has put me off going to higher education

## APPENDIX 4: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

### INCREASED KNOWLEDGE OF HE

	HE offer (subjects on offer, routes and types of courses on offer at HE)	How to apply (qualifications and grades needed, where to locate information about how to apply, application process)	Knowledge of student life (what student life would be like, accommodation options)	Knowledge of costs and financial support available
Change in outcomes	Increase in UC learners' knowledge across all aspects of HE offer over time	Increase in UC learners' knowledge across all aspects of application process over time Minority still 'know nothing' about application process	Increase in UC learners' knowledge about what student life would be like across all aspects over time	Increase in UC learners' knowledge about costs and financial support available, but substantial minority still 'know nothing' at W2
Impact of activity type, duration and frequency	<b>Total hours</b> spent engaging in UC outreach activities and <b>mentoring</b> associated with positive changes in knowledge about the HE offer	<b>No significant association</b> between knowledge about how to apply and UC activity type, duration of participation in UC activity and frequency of participation	<b>Total number</b> of activities and <b>mentoring</b> associated with positive change about HE accommodation options	<b>Total number</b> of activities associated with positive change in knowledge about financial support available  <b>No individual activities</b> associated with positive change in knowledge about costs and financial support available
Characteristics associated with the outcomes	<b>Higher</b> levels of knowledge about the HE offer amongst: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>learners from more advantaged backgrounds</li><li>learners without a disability knowing someone who has been to HE</li></ul>	<b>Higher</b> levels of knowledge about how to apply amongst: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>learners who would not be first in family to go to HE Cohort 1 (Y9, W0) and Cohort 3 (Y11, W0) learners</li></ul>	Learner demographics <b>not</b> associated with higher levels of knowledge about student life	<b>Higher</b> levels of knowledge about costs and financial support available amongst: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>learners from more advantaged backgrounds White learners</li></ul>
Comparison with learners outside Uni Connect	Changes in knowledge about the HE offer <b>cannot</b> be attributed to UC	Changes in knowledge about how to apply <b>cannot</b> be attributed to UC	Changes in knowledge about student life <b>cannot</b> be attributed to UC	Changes in knowledge about the costs of HE <b>can</b> be attributed to UC

## INCREASED UNDERSTANDING ABOUT THE BENEFITS OF HE RELATIVE TO OTHER PROGRESSION ROUTES

	Financial benefits of HE (careers that may be interested in, ability to earn more, ability to get better job)	Non-financial benefits of HE (broaden horizons, intellectual challenge, development of life skills, enhance social life)
Change in outcomes	Increase in UC learners' knowledge across all aspects of financial benefits over time	Increase in UC learners' knowledge on all aspects of non-financial benefits of HE over time
Impact of activity type, duration and frequency	<b>Total number of hours</b> spent engaging in UC activity associated with positive change in knowledge about the financial benefits of HE	<b>Total number of hours</b> spent engaging in UC activity associated with positive change about the non-financial benefits of HE
Characteristics associated with the outcomes	<b>Higher</b> levels of knowledge about financial benefits amongst: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cohort 1 (Y9, W0) learners</li> <li>• Learners who know someone in HE</li> <li>• Learners who have spoken to family, friends, teachers and careers advisors about HE</li> </ul>	<b>Higher</b> levels of knowledge about non-financial benefits of HE amongst: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Female learners</li> <li>• Learners who know someone in HE</li> <li>• Learners who have spoken to family, friends, teachers</li> </ul> <b>Lower</b> levels of knowledge about non-financial benefits of HE amongst: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learners with a disability</li> <li>• Learners who do not know anyone in HE</li> </ul>
Comparison with learners outside Uni Connect	Changes in knowledge about the HE offer <b>cannot</b> be attributed to UC	Changes in knowledge about non-financial benefits of HE <b>cannot</b> be attributed to UC

## INCREASED ABILITY TO MAKE INFORMED AND EFFECTIVE CHOICES ABOUT KS5 STUDY TO FACILITATE ACCESS TO HE

	Transitions at the end of Key Stage 4
Change in outcomes	Increase in proportion of Cohort 1 (Y9, W0) UC learners' who intend to continue with their studies rather than pursue full-time employment over time
Impact of activity type, duration and frequency	Not applicable
Characteristics associated with the outcomes	Not applicable
Comparison with learners outside Uni Connect	Not applicable



## INCREASED ABILITY TO MAKE INFORMED AND EFFECTIVE CHOICES ABOUT HE

	Reasons learners intend to go to HE/do not intend to go to HE
Change in outcomes	Not applicable
Impact of activity type, duration and frequency	Not applicable
Characteristics associated with the outcomes	<p>Overwhelming reason why students want to go to HE is to get a well-paid job:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Higher proportion of cohort 1 (Yr 11 W2) provide this reason than cohort 3 (Yr 13 W2)</li> <li>• Higher proportion of cohort 3 (Yr 13 W2) state their main reason for going to HE is the enjoyment of learning than cohort 1 (Yr 11 W2)</li> </ul> <p>Wider range of reason why students do not want to go to HE:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cohort 1 (Yr 11 W2) most commonly state it will depend on the grades they get</li> <li>• Cohort 3 (Yr 13 W2) most commonly state that they would rather work and earn money</li> </ul>
Comparison with learners outside Uni Connect	Not applicable

## INCREASED LIKELIHOOD LEARNERS WILL APPLY TO HE AGED 18 OR 19

	<b>Self-efficacy</b> (motivated to do well in studies, belief that can get grades needed for further study, belief in ability to go to HE)	<b>Confidence in academic abilities</b> (academic ability to succeed, ability to cope with level of study required)	<b>Social identity</b> (HE is for people like me, belief that would fit in with other students in HE)	<b>Likelihood of applying to HE</b>
<b>Change in outcomes</b>	Increase in UC learners' knowledge for all aspects self-efficacy over time	Increase in UC learners' confidence in academic abilities over time.  Less pronounced change in confidence about perceptions of academic ability to succeed	Less pronounced increases in UC learners' social identity over time	Increase in UC learners' likelihood to apply to HE over time, but relatively stable over time
<b>Impact of activity type, duration and frequency</b>	<b>No significant association</b> between perceptions of self-efficacy and UC activity type, duration of participation in UC activity and frequency of participation	<b>No significant association</b> between confidence in academic abilities and UC activity type, duration of participation in UC activity and frequency of participation	<b>No significant association</b> between perceptions of social identity and UC activity type, duration of participation in UC activity and frequency of participation	<b>Total number of hours</b> spent engaging in UC activity associated with positive increase in likelihood to apply to HE  <b>Total number</b> of activities and individual interventions <b>not</b> associated with positive change in likelihood to apply to HE
<b>Characteristics associated with the outcomes</b>	<b>Higher</b> levels of self-efficacy amongst: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Learners who have spoken to family, friends, teachers and careers advisors about HE</li><li>• Non-White learners</li><li>• Female learners (more motivated)</li></ul>	<b>Higher</b> levels of confidence amongst: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cohort 3 (Y11, W0) learners</li></ul> <b>Lower</b> levels of confidence amongst: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Female learners</li><li>• Learners with a disability</li><li>• White learners</li></ul>	<b>Higher</b> levels of social identity amongst: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cohort 1 (Y9, W0) learners</li></ul> <b>Lower</b> levels of social identity amongst: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Learners with a disability that HE is 'for people like them' and that they would 'fit in well with others'</li></ul>	<b>Higher</b> likelihood to apply to HE amongst: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Female learners</li><li>• Non-White learners</li><li>• Learners who have spoken to family, friends, teachers and careers advisors</li></ul> <b>Lower</b> likelihood to apply to HE amongst:

	<b>Self-efficacy</b> (motivated to do well in studies, belief that can get grades needed for further study, belief in ability to go to HE)	<b>Confidence in academic abilities</b> (academic ability to succeed, ability to cope with level of study required)	<b>Social identity</b> (HE is for people like me, belief that would fit in with other students in HE)	<b>Likelihood of applying to HE</b>
	<p><b>Lower</b> levels of self-efficacy amongst:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Female learners that they 'can achieve grades needed for further study'</li> <li>• Learners with a disability that they can 'achieve grades needed for further study' and 'go to university if they wanted to'</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• White learners that they would 'fit in well with others'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learners who would be the first in the family to go to HE</li> </ul>
<b>Comparison with learners outside Uni Connect</b>	<p><b>Positive</b> change in learners' perceptions of self-efficacy in relation to being 'motivated to do well in studies' can be attributed to UC overall and in particular for Cohort 1 (Y9, W0)</p> <p><b>Negative</b> change in learners' perceptions of self-efficacy can be attributed to UC for College Level 2</p>	<p><b>Positive</b> change for confidence in academic abilities can be attributed to UC, in particular for Cohort 1 (Y9, W0) learners</p>	<p>Changes in social identity towards HE <b>cannot</b> be attributed to UC</p>	<p>Increase in likelihood to apply to HE <b>can</b> be attributed to UC, particularly for College Level 3, Year 2 learners.</p>