Formative Evaluation of Uni Connect Phase Three: Summary Report

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Executive Summary

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

Context and Background

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

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

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

Programme Aims and Objectives

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

- Contribute to **reducing the gap** in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups.

- Equip learners from underrepresented groups to make **informed choices** about their options in relation to the full range of routes into and through higher education and to **minimise the barriers** they may face when choosing the option that will unlock their potential.

- Support a **strategic local infrastructure** of universities, colleges and other partners that can cut through competitive barriers, offer an efficient and low-burden route for schools and colleges to engage, and address outreach 'cold spots' for underrepresented groups.

- Contribute to a **stronger evidence base** around 'what works' in higher education outreach and strengthen evaluation practice across the sector.[2]

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

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[1] As defined by the Office for Students in its Access and Participation Glossary: Access and Participation Glossary - Office for Students
[2] Office for Students (OfS) – Uni Connect Phase Three 2022-23: Operating Plan Guidance, May 2022.

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

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

Evaluation Approach

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

- A **desk review** of Uni Connect phase three programme documentation.

- **Scoping interviews** with key stakeholders from the OfS involved in programme design/delivery.

- Attendance and presentation at **three Uni Connect partnership events.**

- Development of a **Theory of Change** for phase three of the programme.

- **39 in-depth interviews** conducted between October and December 2022, of which 29 were with Uni Connect partnership leads and 10 with local stakeholders.

- A **workshop** with partnership leads in December 2022.

Key Findings: Targeted Outreach

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Key Findings: Strategic Outreach

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

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

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

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

Key Findings: Attainment Raising

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

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

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

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

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

Key Findings: Signposting

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

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

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

Recommendations

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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