

ENGAGING FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES AND LEARNERS

This Learning Digest identifies learning points for Uni Connect partnerships in relation to engaging Further Education Colleges and their learners. It is based on interviews and a workshop with partnership leads conducted as part of Uni Connect's formative evaluation (2019-2021), commissioned by the Office for Students. It is not intended to provide or represent a definitive approach, rather some useful learning points for consideration. This learning digest is produced by Ipsos Mori, from independent research commissioned by the OfS. It does not necessarily reflect the OfS's views or position.

Uni Connect partnerships must work in partnership with Further Education Colleges in order to achieve their aims and objectives.

is an increasing focus on ensuring effective engagement of Further Education College and learners in Uni Connect.

For most Uni Connect partnerships, engagement with schools has taken priority and Further Education Colleges have been less prominent. However, there

Further Education Colleges require a different engagement approach from schools; they are culturally and in composition different and their learners face different challenges as regards their progression into higher education

With special thanks to all Uni Connect partnerships and particularly to:

- Charlotte True and Mary Coles, Next Steps South West, nextstepssw@plymouth.ac.uk
- Sam Kalubowila, Greater Manchester Higher, gmhigher@mmu.ac.uk

Key considerations



Planning for effective engagement with Further Education Colleges and learners

- Initial engagement and consultation with senior Further Education College leaders can be helpful for understanding their strategic priorities and the profile and needs of their learners
- It can be helpful to recruit staff from a further education (FE) background to lead on engagement, bringing expertise and experience of the sector, as well as existing networks and contacts
- During initial engagement, it is important to be clear on how the partnership works, its key aims and objectives and to highlight the role of Uni Connect as an impartial broker



Establishing relationships with Further Education Colleges

- Inviting Further Education Colleges to join Uni Connect governing boards can be helpful in ensuring they can play an active role in shaping the strategy for the region
- Where appropriate, it can be helpful to have Uni Connect staff embedded within local colleges
- Present the role of Uni Connect staff as working on behalf of the programme rather than the lead university
- It is useful to establish relationships with staff at different levels (from principals to administrative staff) and in different teams (e.g. student support and careers teams) as well as learners at a personal level
- Building trusted relationships can take time and effort - it is worth remaining persistent
- Ensure that all communications to Further Education Colleges are consistent and based on their 'vocabulary'



Planning activities that matter to Further Education Colleges and activities their learners

- Planning activities in collaboration with Further Education Colleges, learners and other local stakeholders helps secure engagement and buy-in
- Designing activities that respond to regional need with content that is tailored to FE learners helps ensure relevance and impact
- Activities that are interactive and provide participants with a sense of agency work well with FE learners
- Where Uni Connect staff are embedded in Further Education Colleges, providing them with the tools and flexibility to develop, test and evaluate different engagement activities can work well given they are close to the learners and understand their needs
- Online methods, such as interactive chats and collaborative platforms, remote and blended learning, seem particularly engaging for Further Education learners



Creating sustainable relationships with Further Education Colleges and learners

- Establishing networks of FE practitioners and stakeholders across regions to come together and share experiences and best practice can help build relationships and establish a learning culture
- Aligning communications with other organisations that share similar objectives to Uni Connect (such as CECs or LEPs) can be effective in creating 'one voice' on outreach for Further Education Colleges
- Continuing to gather and analyse local intelligence on the needs of Further Education Colleges and learners and using this to inform ongoing development of the Uni Connect offer will ensure it remains relevant for the sector
- It is important to consciously and consistently maintain the role of impartial broker. In doing this, small details matter, such as using a Uni Connect branded lanyard rather than a lanyard from the institution staff are based in

Potential issues to be alert to



- Further Education Colleges can be both recipients and deliverers of Uni Connect activities and so careful consideration needs to be given as to how best to navigate this dynamic and ensure they have the opportunity to engage in both capacities
- Further Education Colleges are often larger than schools and can be geographically disparate with multiple campuses. This can create some logistical challenges
- in establishing relationships and targeting the right learners – a planned approach
- Uni Connect can be perceived to have a 'university bias' which can hinder progress in engaging Further Education Colleges – highlighting the impartial nature of the programme can be helpful in overcoming this

What does success look like?



- Uni Connect partnerships have effective strategies and approaches for engaging Further Education Colleges within their areas
- Further Education Colleges are represented in Uni Connect governance and decision-making processes at a regional level
- There is trust and understanding between Uni Connect partnerships and Further Education Colleges
- Uni Connect partnerships have a good understanding of the needs of Further Education Colleges and learners in their areas and adapt their provision accordingly
- Uni Connect partnerships work with Further Education Colleges to effectively identify, target and recruit learners who would benefit from Uni Connect activities and support

NORTH EAST RAISING ASPIRATION PARTNERSHIP (NERAP) – WORKING WITH FE PARTNERS

The context

- The North East Raising Aspiration Partnership (NERAP) is funded by the five universities in the North East (Newcastle, Durham, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside)
- NERAP aims to support students to explore higher education opportunities at partner institutions and delivers specific programmes of activities for underrepresented groups as outlined in the OfS APP guidance
- The partnership collectively reviews provision and the needs of underrepresented groups and approves the development of targeted activity

Trying to find opportunities for alignment

- FutureMe reviewed the APPs of each of the individual institutions that make up NERAP to identify shared priorities

FutureMe then facilitated a discussion with these institutions to ascertain whether the needs of any particular underrepresented groups could be addressed through collaboration

Alignment achieved

- In the north east, there has been a long-standing programme of support for pre-16 students who are care experienced, which is funded through partners' APPs
- Through collaboration with FutureMe, this provision was expanded to include post-16 students
- NERAP and FutureMe are working together to develop a Regional Care Leavers Covenant which will provide support to access, succeed and progress to higher education

Identifying good practice

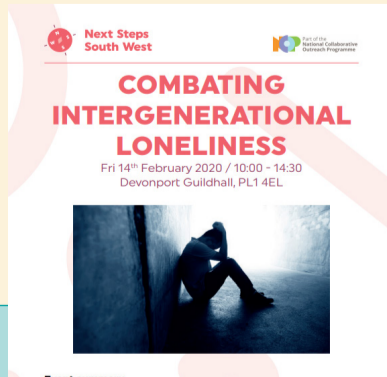
Using examples of good practice from the practitioner group and literature examined by the literature review group, two key pillars for developing activities for FE learners were identified:

- Pillar 1: activities work best when they are interactive, collaborative and provide learners with a sense of agency - learnings are often easier to remember if learners have played an active part in creating the activity outputs
- Pillar 2: where possible, an activity should consider the local context or 'fit the narrative of the area' - activities feel more relevant when tied directly to a local challenge, involve local organisations, industries, or legislative representatives

Identifying good practice

Adhering to the two pillars for developing engaging activities for FE learners, **Next Steps South West (NSSW)** developed a suite of activities including the event **Combating Intergenerational Loneliness**.

Combating Intergenerational Loneliness was an interactive academic challenge providing FE students the opportunity to work with current university students and local employers to problem solve. It focused on learners interested in public and third sector careers, giving them the opportunity to explore approaches to addressing a key public policy issue. The event was attended by the local MP.



Event summary
Join us as we bring through an academic challenge of how to support intergenerational loneliness. You will work in small groups with current university students and local employers to explore ways to address the issue. This is an opportunity to discover more about a wide range of local employment opportunities in the public and third sector.

To register for this event, please contact:
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“If you're in school, and doing A-levels, your progression route onto higher education is likely to be more straight forward than if you're in a Further Education College taking a less traditional route... this is a target group that we need to work with”.

Charlotte True, Manager, Next Steps South West