

The background of the cover is a photograph of a modern university interior. In the foreground, a young man in a brown jacket and a young woman in a teal sweater are looking at each other. In the background, other students are walking through a bright, open-plan space with large windows and a red seating area.

April 2021

Formative Evaluation of Uni Connect Phase Two

Detailed findings report

Elpida Achtaridou, Susan Mackay and Emilio Torrini

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1 Introduction

This report presents findings from the ongoing **formative evaluation of Phase Two of Uni Connect**, focusing on the programme's **outreach hubs**¹. It presents findings which aim to:

- a) support the articulation of Theory of Change (ToC) for outreach hubs;
- b) understand partnerships' progress, processes and practices to-date; and
- c) support the Office for Students (OfS) and partnerships with further shaping the remit of the hubs and their future delivery.

At the time of the data collection for this formative evaluation, the outreach hubs continued to develop both conceptually and operationally; funding decisions on the programme were pending, as was new guidance on how the hubs were to be operationalised going forward, and the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing.² These internal and external factors had an impact on how the remit of outreach hubs was perceived and on their implementation, and, in turn, how the findings of this report need to be viewed. This **report outlines how the hubs seem to be forming and evolving** rather than providing definitive answers on their Theory of Change (ToC) and delivery. Further, different outputs outlined in this report were produced at different timeframes, i.e. the ToC presented in this report was produced in September 2020, and at this stage does not definitively articulate expectations of the hubs.

The Uni Connect programme

Uni Connect (formerly known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme – NCOP) was launched in January 2017 by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

Uni Connect offers events, impartial advice and information on the benefits and realities of higher education (HE) to young people from Year 9 to Year 13. Its main features are its **highly collaborative nature** and the **sustained and progressive approach** to supporting young people from Year 9 to Year 13 (i.e. including younger learners). The programme, led by the OfS, brings together 29 partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners across England to support access and participation in HE through multi-agency collaborative work.

There have been two phases to the programme:

- **Phase One: January 2017 to July 2019** – involved delivery of Targeted Outreach focused on 997 specific wards in England where HE participation was lower than might be expected given the GCSE results of the young people who lived there.
- **Phase Two: August 2019 to July 2021** – building on Phase One, Uni Connect continues to deliver Targeted Outreach in the wards but also includes an additional strand: outreach hubs which were introduced in August 2019. Each area in England is covered by one of the Uni Connect outreach hubs.

¹ A summary report on the can be found on the [OfS website](#).

² At the time of the report, the Targeted Outreach element of Uni Connect had been confirmed until 31 July 2021, whilst funding for the Outreach hubs has been agreed in principle until 2024-25 (until the current cycle of Access and Participation plans ceases in 2024-2025).

In summary, the key aims of Phase Two of Uni Connect are to:

- **Reduce the gap** in HE participation between the most and least represented groups.
- Support young people to make **well-informed decisions** about their future education.
- Support effective and impactful **local collaboration** by HE providers working together with schools, colleges, employers and other partners.
- Contribute to a **stronger evidence base** around 'what works' in HE outreach and strengthen evaluation practice in the sector.

Structure of this report

To present findings to date, the report is structured as follows:

- **Chapter 2** describes the evaluation approach and data collection methods.
- **Chapter 3** provides the context of this report and of the formative evaluation so far.
- **Chapter 4** explores findings relating to partnerships' governance and infrastructure.
- **Chapter 5** outlines findings on hubs' strategic engagement requirement.
- **Chapter 6** focuses on outreach hubs' proactive support.
- **Chapter 7** discusses outreach hubs' signposting.
- **Chapter 8** sets out the preliminary conclusions and recommendations.

2 Evaluation approach

Ipsos MORI was commissioned to conduct an evaluation of Uni Connect Phase Two in March 2020, which will be completed in July 2021. This is a formative evaluation, meaning the programme is ongoing, and the evaluation aims to provide learning to support and enhance ongoing delivery rather than assessing the overall programme impact. Delivery by the hubs has continued to evolve over the evaluation period, and so this evaluation supports a continuous process of programme learning and enhancement through summarising evidence of the programme's implementation, factors influencing implementation and what seems to support or hinder it, at a particular point in time.

This report outlines how the hubs are developing and learnings to support and enhance their ongoing delivery, rather than assessing the impacts of the programme. Data collection was ongoing from July 2020 to March 2021, and encompassed:

- A desk review of Uni Connect programme documentation
- Nine scoping consultations with Uni Connect staff and the Department for Education (DfE)
- 29 interviews with partnership leads conducted by the OfS in June 2020
- A light-touch review of programme monitoring and evaluation data provided by partnerships in their summer 2020 and winter 2020 returns to the OfS
- 40 in-depth interviews conducted between October and November 2020, of which 29 were with partnership leads and 11 with stakeholders who have been working closely with partnerships³
- A workshop with 28 partnership leads/representatives.

Desk review

A briefing pack containing background documentation on Uni Connect was shared with Ipsos MORI in July 2020 for review. This included programme and operational guidance, partnership operating plans, funding documentation and previous evaluation reports. The evaluation team's document review was used to hone programme knowledge and develop an accurate model that best reflects the programme and can be used to assess the programme's operations.

Scoping consultations

Nine in-depth interviews were conducted with key project staff from across the OfS in June and July 2020, including members of the senior team accountable for Uni Connect, current and previous partnership account managers and those responsible for monitoring programme activity and performance. Interviews were also conducted with the evaluators for Phase One and a policy representative from DfE. Interviews were semi-structured in nature and lasted up to an hour. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

³ The wider stakeholder interviews included a mixture of delivery organisations and strategic partners, such as career guidance services, local authorities, employers, LEPs, local careers hubs, careers leaders and opportunity areas.

Partnership lead interviews

In June 2020, the OfS carried out 29 interviews with partnership leads. Analysis of these interviews was brought together with the findings from the desk review and scoping consultations to inform the development of a first draft ToC for outreach hubs (see Appendix 1) and accompanying evaluation framework. The ToC was initially developed in September 2020 based on relatively limited information and was used to guide the development of our evaluation framework and our research instruments. We were aware that the ToC was incomplete and that it would evolve and change when all of the data for this evaluation was collected, as per the nature of formative evaluations.

Review of programme monitoring and evaluation data

A brief review of partnerships' winter and summer monitoring returns was carried out to inform an assessment of progress in delivery. This helped get an overview of partnerships' targeted outreach and hub activity and was used to support our understanding of findings relating to the evaluation in a light touch way.

Based on the monitoring data we also created geographical classifications (coastal, rural and urban) for partnerships, drawing on 2011 Office for National Statistics (ONS) census data.

Two flags were added to the Uni Connect Phase Two learner population estimates (which lists the CAS wards⁴ in each partnership area). The first flag indicated whether the CAS ward was rural or urban. Using the ONS National Statistics Postcode Lookup (NSPL), the postcodes in each CAS ward were defined as rural and urban; CAS wards were then defined as rural or urban based on the percentage of NSPL addresses that are in urban or rural postcodes. The second flag indicated whether the CAS ward was a coastal community. Using the NSPL, the predominant Built Up Area (BUA) or Built Up Area Subdivision (BUASD) for each CAS ward was defined. Using the '2011 ONS census Coastal Communities' Data file, the BUA/BUASD for each CAS ward was then defined as either a coastal community or not.

An additional column was created to indicate whether the CAS ward was coastal, rural or urban. To define this, CAS wards that were indicated to be coastal communities were defined as coastal. If the CAS ward was not a coastal community, we used the rural-urban classification.

On a partnership level, we could then calculate the percentage of CAS wards within each partnership area that were coastal, rural or urban. Based on this, partnerships were defined as either coastal, rural or urban depending on which percentage was the highest⁵. As such, this geographical classification indicates whether each partnership area is 'mostly' coastal, rural or urban (based on CAS wards). When it came to the hubs, we were unable to repeat this analysis as the data was not available at that time. We used our interviews with partnership leads to check whether classifications had changed/remained the same and used that information for our analysis.

Interviews with partnership leads and wider stakeholders

40 in-depth semi-structured virtual/telephone interviews were conducted, 29 with partnership leads and a further 11 with wider stakeholders. The interviews with partnership leads took place over a three-week

⁴ Census Area Statistic (CAS) wards were created for the 2001 Census Output based on postcodes and best fit electoral wards. There are 8,850 CAS wards in England and Wales, each with a minimum of 50 residents and 20 households.

⁵ Please note that Ipsos MORI's method for defining the geographical classification of each partnership area as 'mostly' coastal, rural or urban is independent of the OfS funding allocation methodology.

period commencing 5th October 2020. The interviews with wider stakeholders took place after the partnership lead interviews and were completed at the end of November 2020.

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

The process for selecting wider stakeholders to participate in the evaluation was iterative. The aim was to enable us to triangulate findings from interviews with partnership leads and collect a breadth of different perspectives. The criteria used to select stakeholders included:

- Their level of engagement with Uni Connect partnerships and outreach hubs
- Provision of match-funding to support outreach hub activity and the role of the stakeholder in this process
- Type/level of support provided to foster an understanding of the local landscape of educational disadvantage, e.g. local challenges to underrepresented groups' access and participation in HE
- Involvement in the co-design/development of innovative and collaborative approaches to addressing the challenges identified in the local area.

The interviews explored the following areas:

- Progress and/or anticipated progress towards the delivery of outreach hub activities and outputs and outcomes
- Partnership infrastructure and governance, communication of strategic aims and objectives, delivery approaches and monitoring and evaluation
- What worked well and less well in the implementation of the hubs, including key enablers/barriers, resultant lessons learned and unintended outcomes
- The effects of COVID-19 on outreach activity, measures that partnerships were putting in place to help mitigate the impact of the pandemic (including virtual/online support) and the lessons learnt.

The interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and the qualitative data was analysed using a code frame. The data was coded thematically to identify overarching themes and findings based on the key questions outlined in the evaluation framework. This provided a structured and systematic approach to analysis based on the evaluation objectives. The next stage involved analysis of the data to help us gain a deeper understanding of what works, for whom and in what contexts (context, mechanism, outcome). Variables explored included region, geographical classification of the schools served (e.g. rural, urban and coastal), length of experience and size (defined by partnerships funding levels). None of these

variables yield any significant differences for the majority of partnerships. Although no strong or consistent patterns were identified, there are indications that size, the number of schools/colleges served by a partnership and their progress stage might have influenced implementation.

Workshop with partnership leads

In March 2021 we invited all 29 partnership leads to take part in an online workshop lasting three hours. The workshop aimed to:

- 1) validate the data presented;
- 2) discuss findings with partnerships leads;
- 3) gather views on the conclusions and recommendations for this report.

3 Outreach hubs

This chapter discusses the evolving nature of the hubs and provides the context in which their Theory of Change (ToC) was drafted in September 2020, so as to provide a starting point and an initial guide for our evaluation framework and research instruments.

The evolution of outreach hubs

Following delivery of Uni Connect Phase One through the targeted outreach model, outreach hubs were introduced at the outset of Phase Two. Outreach hubs were **originally developed based on feedback from partnerships** and local stakeholders of a **need to support schools and colleges beyond the target wards**. They were developed in recognition of the need for a long-term local partnership infrastructure which would be sustainable beyond the agreed targeted outreach programme funding. Targeted outreach, although valued and considered impactful by partnerships, was also perceived to be restrictive; it focused on target wards and students who were not progressing into university despite achieving relevant grades, prohibiting other students and schools in their areas to access what was perceived as much needed outreach support. Thus, targeted outreach was viewed as a solution to meet the needs of particular groups of students, whilst outreach hubs were envisaged as able to address the local needs of the wider learner population who are underrepresented in HE.

Defining the outreach hubs in terms of their activities, outputs and outcomes **is an ongoing process**. **Overall, they are enabled by partnerships' work on targeted outreach**. When outreach hubs were introduced, the shaping and forming of the hubs was driven by partnerships. This was intentional; the aim was to allow partnerships flexibility in their approach to delivering the hubs and ensure that the diverse range of partnerships' contexts and needs were accommodated. As with all innovations, over time, outreach hub related guidance and implementation have iteratively been defined and refined by the OfS. Such refinements were influenced by:

- Direct feedback from partnerships to the OfS
- Ongoing learning from this formative evaluation, as communicated through ongoing update meetings; a scoping report; findings from our survey with schools/colleges; and a draft interim report and presentation to the OfS based on the qualitative interviews with partnerships leads
- Developments related to COVID-19 and its impact
- Pending decisions as regards the funding of both targeted outreach and of the hubs. At the time of this interim report, funding for targeted outreach had been confirmed until 31 July 2021. Funding for the outreach hubs was agreed in principle until 2024-25, when the current cycle of Access and Participation Plans (APPs) ceases.

Further, at the time of this interim report, discussions between the OfS and Uni Connect partnerships were taking place to set expectations more firmly for the outreach hubs and what constitutes successful delivery – internally known as the 'Outreach hubs success criteria'.

Overall, OfS and DfE policy stakeholders interviewed suggested that the hubs should provide the following opportunities:

- a) **Engaging a broader range of learners across different ages and stages:** which could mean delivering support to primary school children through to those aged 18+, 'upskilling/re-skilling' of

mature learners as part of the skills agenda, and increasing the number of young people from underrepresented groups in different areas going into HE.

- b) **Promoting alternative routes to HE:** such as further education (FE) delivered within HE, apprenticeships and other tertiary routes through education and into employment.
- c) **Further enhancing partnership collaboration with local/regional stakeholders:** to ensure that provision is appropriate and responsive to local needs, particularly in relation to the changing context due to COVID-19.
- d) **Expanding collaboration:** to ensure a co-ordinated and mutually supportive approach with opportunity areas (OAs) and other key local/regional stakeholders involved in 'levelling up' and the skills agenda, such as local authorities, LEPs and the Careers and Enterprise Company.
- e) **Further focusing on engaging FE colleges and employers:** to effectively deliver the hubs' wider objectives and remit.
- f) **A greater focus on online provision:** allowing for a more blended delivery model, the rise of which has been partly due to the impact of COVID-19.

Theory of Change for the outreach hubs

As part of the scoping phase of the evaluation, a first draft Theory of Change (ToC)⁶ was developed for outreach hubs (see Appendix 1). This was based on findings from the review of programme documentation, findings from the nine in-depth scoping consultations with key stakeholders and qualitative data from interviews with the 29 Uni Connect partnerships conducted in June 2019. We also attempted to address gaps through our knowledge and experience in education and of generating educational outcomes from other similar programmes.

The ToC was a starting point in understanding the hubs and it guided our evaluation framework and research instruments, including the 40 interviews with partnerships leads and their wider stakeholders in June 2020. It is important to recognise that the ToC was initially developed in September 2020 and that the remit and delivery of the hubs has subsequently evolved and continues to evolve. For this reason, this report both **utilises the ToC as a guide for investigating the hubs while also documenting how the hubs have been delivered in practice and changed over time**. Further, as noted above, the success criteria for the hubs are currently being discussed. As a result, the ToC at this stage does not definitively articulate expectations of the hubs. A refined and improved ToC will be produced at the end of our formative evaluation.

It is also important to note here that, when the evaluation team conducted further analyses using different variables, i.e. by classifying partnerships based on their geography as well as based on the geographical characteristics of the schools/colleges they were serving (urban/metropolitan or urban and coastal) or, more loosely, staffing structures, the results did not yield any patterns either. There are indications however, that partnership size may play a role – possibly due to commonalities in terms of staffing capacity and funds, the number of targeted outreach and hub schools they were serving and at

⁶ A Theory of Change (ToC) is an overall narrative that explains how a programme aims to achieve its intended objectives. It traces the programme inputs through to its intended impacts. The ToC helps capture how the programme will support changes to achieve its objectives and how it will evolve, assuming pre-conditions for changes (both inside and outside of the programme) are in place.

times the stage in a partnership's lifecycle/progress stage, i.e. whether they already have an established brand in the region or not, or they had already existing relationships with 'cold' spot schools or they were in the process of creating them. These patterns, however, were not strong or consistent. For example, we would find some patterns in a group of small partnerships but there would always be an outlier(s) exhibiting a similar approach to a different sized partnership. As a result, it was challenging to identify patterns of implementation across partnerships or within groups of partnerships. However, where these emerged, we have presented them.

4 Partnerships' governance and infrastructure

In this chapter we explore how partnerships adapted their governance and infrastructure for the hubs. We also discuss how partnerships' operating models and staffing structures are changing to support the delivery of the hubs and their sustainability.

Willingness to change/adapt infrastructures for the hubs

When the hubs were introduced, their shaping and formation was driven by partnerships based on the infrastructure which already existed, which is why most partnerships saw any changes to their structures as an extension or evolution of their existing ways of working. For example, the hubs legitimised what some partnerships were already doing, such as including students beyond those identified in the 'wards' as part of targeted outreach and collaborating with a wider group of stakeholders, such as the opportunity areas (OAs).

However, a small proportion of partnerships were yet to be convinced of the hubs' merit. They were especially resistant to the idea that the hubs could become the centre for their operations going forwards, because:

- they saw the partnership's role was more closely connected to targeted outreach and perceived the hubs to be less focused and less impactful in comparison, especially because they were covering wider audiences and geographical areas
- they were concerned that any potential disruption to their stable and well-formed infrastructures, which took time and effort to establish, could negatively impact their ongoing targeted outreach work
- they perceived some elements of the hubs as being more valuable than others; some partnerships viewed signposting of less value than pro-active support and strategic engagement.

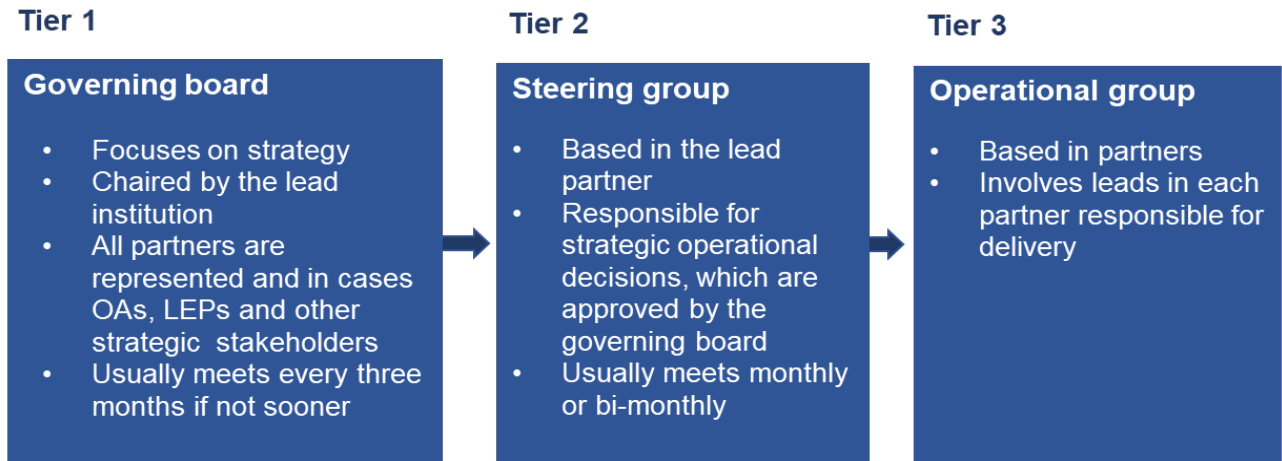
Governance structures

Strategic decision making was the responsibility of partnerships' governing boards, with the partnership lead role providing all relevant information and proposals, enabling swift decision making. The governing structures described by most partnerships are outlined below and further represented in the accompanying graphic (Figure 4.1). However, not all partnerships' structures and the nuances involved fall into this structure⁷:

- **Tier 1** – Governing board as the decision maker.
- **Tier 2** – Steering group, usually comprising the partnership lead and managers from the central team. Steering groups focused more on strategy and management of lower tiers.
- **Tier 3** – Operational group, usually involving senior staff in partner organisations responsible for delivery.

⁷ Not all partnerships necessarily 'name' Tiers 1 to 3 as they are entitled here.

Figure 4.1: An overview of most partnerships' governing structures and related responsibilities



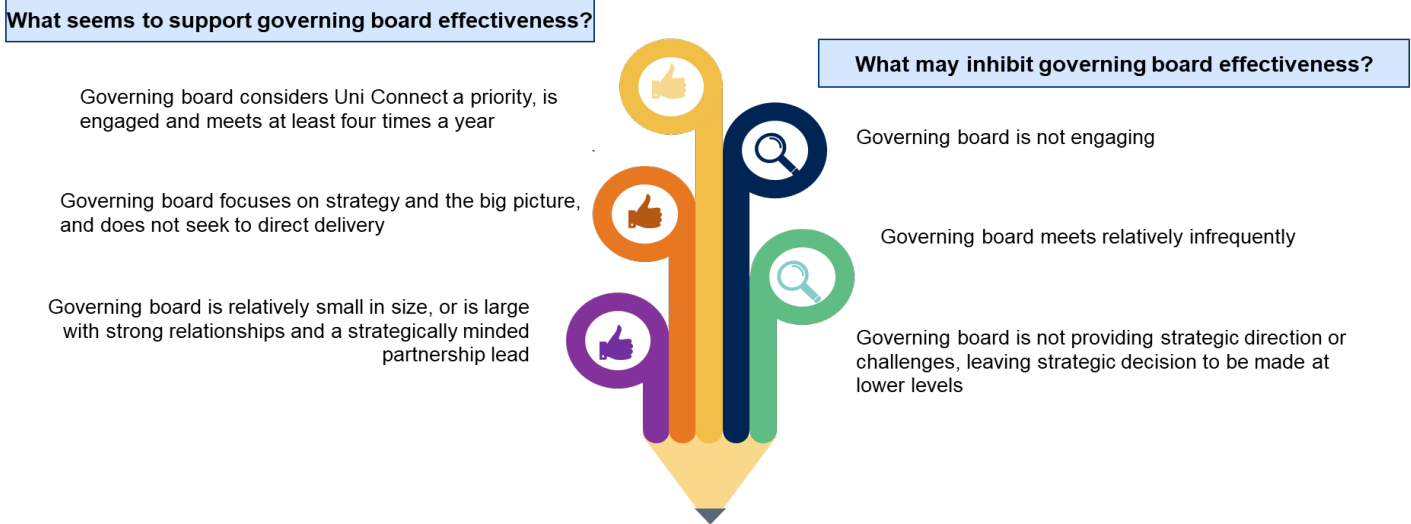
To embed the hubs, the most 'substantial' changes were noted at the governing board level. Nearly all partnerships had made changes to their governing boards by:

- **'retaining' existing governance boards established for targeted outreach** – as they already included wider stakeholders
- **'extending' existing governance boards for targeted outreach** – predominantly to ensure that FE colleges were represented
- **creating a separate governance board to that of the targeted outreach** – a practice observed by a handful of partnerships.

In most cases, interviewees valued governance boards which were engaged and considered them best placed to make decisions at a strategic level, thus using a more centralised approach to decision making. Valued boards usually comprised senior executives from lead institutions and their partners, considered Uni Connect a priority, and met every six to eight weeks, or every three months. In a few cases, however, it was reported that some governing boards were less engaged or that they met less frequently, predominately 'rubber stamping' rather than providing direction. There were also indications that swifter decision making was enabled when governing boards were smaller in size, although that does not appear to be necessarily the rule; one partnership suggested that despite its large governing board it was still able to make quick decisions.

The figure below outlines reported characteristics which seem to support governing boards' effectiveness and those that have the potential to inhibit it and may need exploring further.

Figure 4.2: Characteristics which support and inhibit a governing board’s effectiveness



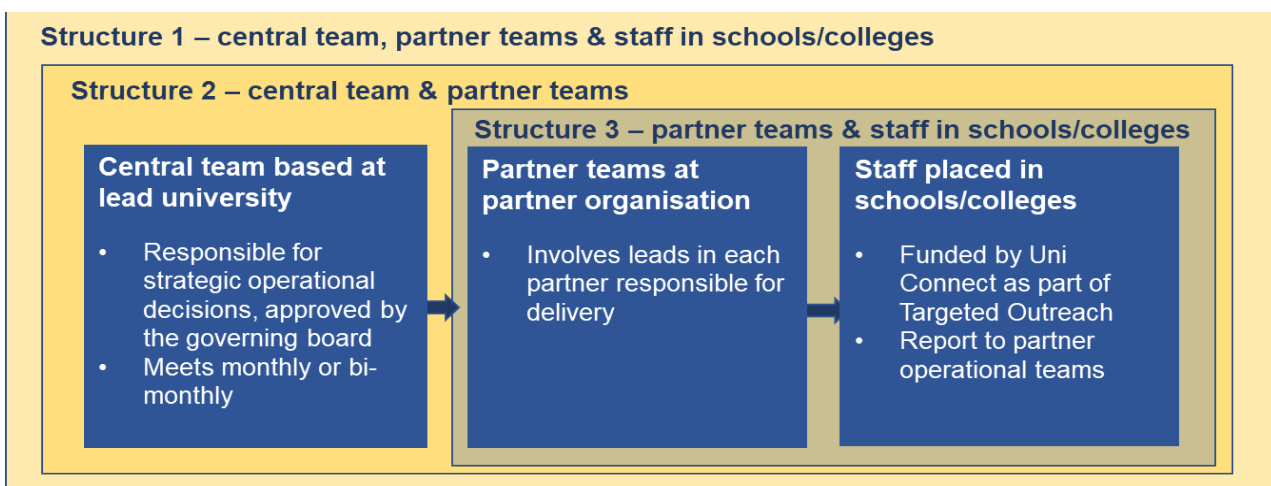
Organisational structures and operating models

Irrespective of the size or geographical location of the population they were serving, most partnerships seem to employ the **hub-and-spokes organisational model**. In this model the lead partner organisation assumes the role of the ‘hub’ and partners the role of the spokes. Some smaller partnerships however, comprised one central team that is organised by function.

Overall, organisational structures developed for the delivery of targeted outreach were utilised and built upon for the hubs also. As seen in the figure below, such structures seem to encompass:

- **Structure 1** – a central team at the lead university and staff in partner organisations
- **Structure 2** – a central team, staff in partner organisations and staff placed in schools/colleges
- **Structure 3** – partner teams and staff in schools/colleges (one partnership only)

Figure 4.3: Organisational structures



Although no substantial changes were reported in terms of partnerships’ overall organisational structures, there were a few cases where substantial changes had started to emerge. For example, there were partnerships that had already, or were considering, **merged teams and/or programmes which exist(ed) in parallel to Uni Connect** and were mutually supportive/duplicating work. These changes

were primarily driven by the need to focus on supporting regional or system-wide needs, to streamline efforts by avoiding duplication, and/or an opportunity to increase staffing.

Although overall structures might not have changed from those for targeted outreach, the hubs appear to have brought about the following **changes in many partnerships' operating models**:

- **More unified – *partnerships were focusing more on regional needs and challenges***. In practice this has meant that some partnerships were starting to operate a satellite or system changing approach to their thinking for the hubs offer compared to the more school/college specific needs approach that some had applied as part of targeted outreach. Some partnerships, especially smaller ones, felt that focusing more on regional needs could also support efficiency.
- **More outward looking – *partnerships were collaborating with more external stakeholders within their region and with each other more than before***. Such collaboration was enabled by technology and was driven by COVID-19, as well as partnerships' need to better understand the hubs' requirements. Some partnerships reported the creation of 'virtual' working groups, breaking barriers relating to distance and enabling more frequent contact between different stakeholders. These virtual working groups prompted more frequent discussions between some stakeholders than would have been the case with face-to-face meetings, and some took place for the first time. For partnerships working in dispersed geographical areas, technology was particularly helpful in supporting their efforts to connect with relevant stakeholders across their region.
- **More all-encompassing** – although the hubs were originally aimed at teachers and career advisors, it seems that platforms created for the hubs enabled partnerships **to increase engagement with students, parents and carers** for example, by signposting relevant content to them through the website or hosting online events.

Staffing structures

All partnerships had central teams which were already in place as part of targeted outreach and these typically remained the same. In all cases bar one, central teams were responsible for supporting the hubs' strategy and governance boards. They were also responsible for coordinating the hubs' delivery and most usually for 'back end functions' relating to the hubs (and targeted outreach) such as finances, monitoring and evaluation, and communications and marketing. The make-up of the central teams was fairly similar across partnerships. They were generally comprised of the partnership lead, lead project manager(s), communications specialists, evaluation analysts and finance and administrative roles. In a few cases, administrative support and finance posts were funded by the lead university rather than the Uni Connect programme. Overall, staffing numbers and the types of roles varied. Larger partnerships seemed to share a more similar approach. Smaller partnerships usually did not have staff placed in schools and colleges except in one case, possibly because it served more dispersed populations.

Partnership leads brought a wealth of knowledge to the table and were key to delivery. They were also keen to improve hub (and targeted outreach) practices and be challenged by their governing boards and steering groups. However, challenge was not forthcoming in the case of hub practice, with leads suggesting this was possibly due to staff not understanding the remit and aim of the hubs in the same way they understood targeted outreach, which was seen more 'tangible' and/or due to the short-term funding of the programme.

Staff placed in schools and colleges as part of targeted outreach supported hub activities too, in terms of signposting and pro-active support. They also played a key role in their delivery, especially for targeted outreach schools which were also hub 'cold spots'.

Overall, **staffing changes** driven by the hubs **were limited to additional staff being employed and/or hub responsibilities being subsumed within existing targeted outreach teams**. In more detail:

- Most partnerships, irrespective of size or context, seem to have allocated one dedicated member of staff to oversee the hubs, at either management or assistant-management level.
- A few large partnerships have allocated two or three members of staff for the hubs as part of the wider central team. One partnership appears to have created a separate hub team including a manager and hub officers. Another partnership is considering increasing its hub capacity by merging a team currently employed by the lead university with relatively similar remit with the Uni Connect central team.
- A few smaller partnerships have incorporated hub-related responsibilities within their existing teams.

Sustainability

Interviewees pointed to **external funding being a key aspect to the sustainability of the hubs**.

Although they were confident that some current partnerships and structures would be retained to support learners' HE progression, they believed that without external funding core programme benefits were at risk, which, due to COVID-19 and its impact, were possibly needed more than ever. Benefits quoted include:

- Reaching more under-represented groups and those students that need the most support, with the risk of some groups and students missing outreach activities altogether
- The impartiality of advice
- Supporting wider regional and sector needs.

Interviewees suggested that removing external funding would discourage collaboration and encourage competition, as providers will be "fighting for the same students". They also suggested that many HE provider access and participation plans are more focused on post-entry rather than pre-entry support, reducing the opportunities for under-represented learners to participate in outreach activities. Even more concerning was the suggestion that some providers might not wish to engage with the hubs (and targeted outreach), as significantly reduced funds could become a disincentive.

Significantly reduced funding becoming a disincentive to engagement was a concern for partnerships irrespective of size, although the impact might be felt in different ways:

- *Large partnerships* – a few interviewees gave feedback on this and pointed out that even with reduced funding they could retain a relatively good proportion of their staff and continue their own outreach activities.
- *Small partnerships* – suggested that they would find it hard to retain staff without external funding or if external funding was significantly reduced, which could lead to changes in their operating model and offer.

Unsurprisingly, then, **retaining staff was the most cited factor towards the hubs' sustainability**, with a few partnerships experiencing staff losses or a slower pace in operations due to the uncertainty of funding for the Uni Connect programme at the time of the interviews. Losing staff compromised their infrastructures and could lead to expertise and relationships developed within schools/colleges and other stakeholders being lost too, all of which took a lot of time and effort to establish, they suggested. Partnerships saw any disruption to staffing structures counter-productive and costly. Fewer staff would also mean reduced delivery for the hubs.

To support the sustainability of the hubs (and of targeted outreach) partnerships suggested the following potential solutions:

- **Hybrid funding models** – in which external funding is in place, with universities contributing to costs/staffing and match funding secured.
- **Reduction in the number of hub activities/requirements** – by a) focusing on the most impactful activities and b) having an offer that seeks impact at a regional/system level. This way, efficiencies could be made without losing impact. It was suggested that COVID-19 seems to have resulted in schools/colleges having more similar needs across regions than before, which, in turn, could enable further collaboration outside one's region, alignment of goals and the sharing of efficiencies across partnerships.
- **Re-thinking staffing structures or staff roles and placing emphasis on CPD programmes** – interviewees suggested that operating models could be re-shaped and roles rethought, including some staff redeployed. Continuing professional development (CPD) programmes could also support the development of a cadre of people within schools/colleges with the right knowledge and skills, reducing the burden of partnerships' hub teams. To do so, however, the right pedagogy for such programmes needed to be developed so they are impactful, as outreach delivery is not the same as careers advice or teaching, it was suggested.
- **Enhancement of technology infrastructures and more focus on virtual delivery** – COVID-19 has accelerated online delivery, which in turn has enabled partnerships to maintain engagement with schools/colleges and continue delivery despite the pandemic. Partnerships suggested that, moving forward, virtual delivery can provide ample opportunities for long-term sustainability. They did point out however, that, in order to reap the benefits, it is critical that disadvantaged students have access to the necessary technology, otherwise gaps will be further exacerbated.

5 Strategic engagement

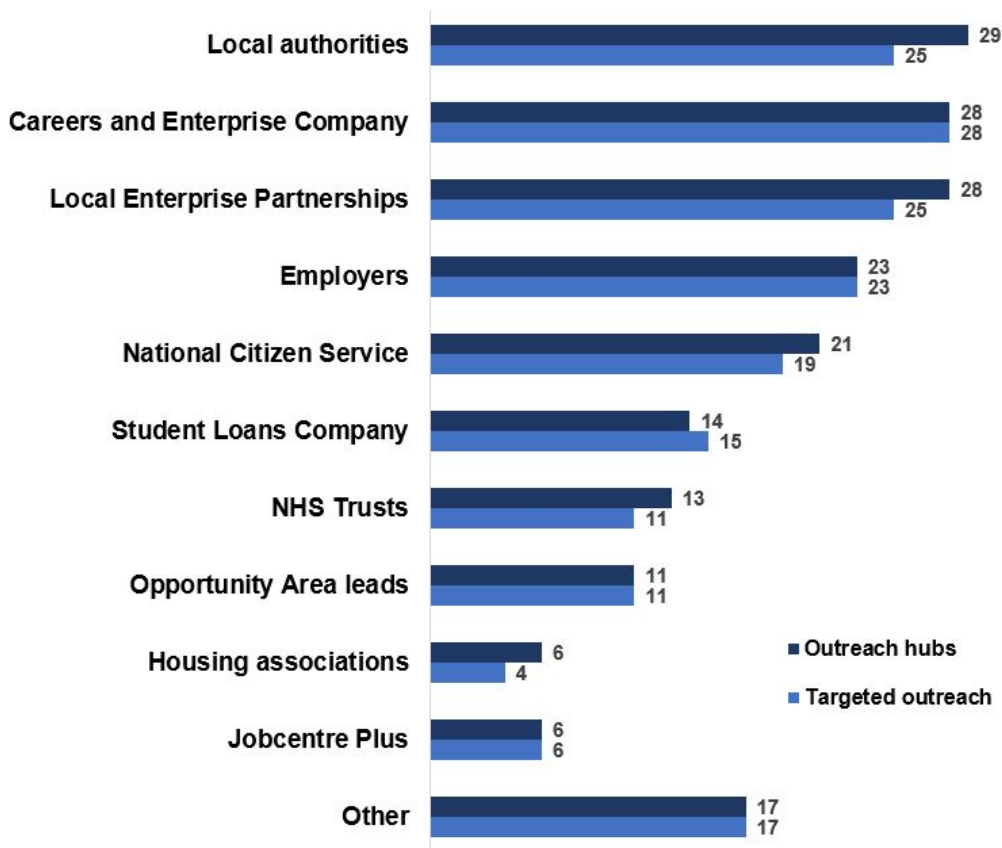
In Chapter 5 we present findings on strategic engagement, including who partnerships engaged with, what this engagement involved and suggested enablers and challenges to engaging strategic stakeholders. We also present findings on the progress made in securing match funding.

Strategic engagement with local partners

Who have partnerships engaged with as part of the hubs?

The key strategic partners for Uni Connect are local authorities, the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) and Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) (Figure 5.1). These have been prioritised by partnerships in terms of their strategic engagement, with almost all reporting that they are working with them on outreach hub activities. Most partnerships are also working with employers and the National Citizen Service and around half are working with the Student Loans Company and NHS Trusts. Beyond that, partnerships cite a broad range of partners, including OAs, housing associations and community and third sector organisations.

Figure 5.1: Number of Uni Connect partnerships citing as a partner



Source: Office for Students, Uni Connect: Summer Monitoring 2020

Whilst the profile of partners engaged through outreach hubs is broadly similar to that for targeted outreach, there has been a notable shift in the nature of this engagement:

- **Hubs have been a catalyst for deepening relationships with existing partners** – for example, most partnerships were already working with the CEC and LEPs during Phase One of Uni Connect. However, they are now able to work with them in a more holistic way as they are no longer restricted to only working with those schools and colleges eligible for targeted outreach.

- **Hubs have been a catalyst for broadening relationships with existing partners** – some partnerships are now working with economic development and business support departments within local authorities, where previously their engagement was limited to education. Similarly, most are engaging with a broader range of people from within LEPs, such as those responsible for generating economic and labour market information as well as those involved in commissioning outreach provision.
- **Hubs are resulting in more strategic engagement with existing partners** – the nature of engagement with local partners through the hubs is typically less focused on delivery and more focused on identifying strategic priorities, sharing intelligence and coordinating provision.

In addition to refocusing relationships with existing partners, some Uni Connect partnerships have broadened their strategic engagement to incorporate a wider range of organisations including the following:

- **Community organisations** – several partnerships reported having expanded their engagement beyond statutory organisations to incorporate voluntary and community sector organisations working with young people. These organisations were perceived as offering insight into the challenges and barriers faced by young people from a different perspective to educational practitioners, including young people from priority groups such as care leavers or those from a black or minority ethnic (BAME) background.
- **Employers and employer representative bodies** – several partnerships mentioned an increased focus on working with local employers through outreach hubs. This was perceived as important to developing their understanding of both local skills needs and skills gaps, and identifying progression pathways to local opportunities, including through higher level apprenticeships.

What has this engagement involved?

The **depth, nature and effectiveness** of engagement of local partners in outreach hubs was found to be highly variable across partnership areas. It fell into four broad levels: 1) connecting, 2) sharing information, 3) assessment of need and 4) collaboration. These are each discussed in turn below.

Connecting

At a basic level, most outreach hubs were found to be **meeting with local partners on a regular basis**. In some cases, these meetings were convened by outreach hubs and in others they were convened and led by partners with representatives from outreach hubs in attendance.

There was acknowledgment amongst partnerships that meetings alone were of limited overall impact. However, the coming together of local partners around a shared agenda was viewed as the first step towards meaningful partnership working and collaboration. There was also recognition that some areas were already 'saturated' with outreach provision and so there was a need for **better coordination of existing provision** to identify potential areas of duplication and gaps, in advance of planning any new provision or collaborations. This was perceived as being important to avoid overburdening schools and colleges with multiple approaches, particularly during the pandemic.

A couple of partnerships convened **working groups** within each local authority area that they covered. This appeared to be an effective first step in engaging local partners involved in outreach activity within each area.

A small number of partnerships were found to have not progressed far beyond connecting with local partners via meetings. This was typically those partnerships who:

- **were engaging with local partners through existing external structures** rather than developing and leading their own platforms for engagement, which limited their influence on the agenda and scope to ensure their interests were represented.
- **did not have a dedicated strategic lead in place** and therefore had teams who were more focused on delivery. In at least one example, this post was vacant, and they were hoping to have someone in place who could lead this work in future.

Sharing information

The next level of strategic engagement with local partners involved sharing data and information in the following areas:

- **Local need** – there were several examples of outreach hubs having facilitated the sharing of data on the profile of young people and schools/colleges across the area, generating rich insights into challenges and barriers they were facing to inform identification of effective support.
- **Existing provision** – some partnerships had worked with local partners to map the range of existing outreach provision in place across the area with a view to identifying areas of potential duplication and also where there were gaps.
- **Skills needs** – most LEPs have a skills strategy, which identifies key and priority growth sectors for their area and associated skills required to drive future growth. Partnerships were found to be increasingly engaging with this type of labour market information and insight to inform their provision.

Assessment of need

In addition to sharing existing data, there were a couple of examples of partnerships working with local partners to **develop an evidence base** on the needs of young people in their area, including through regional surveys of young people. This was found to be an effective approach to engagement, ensuring that all partners were working to a shared understanding of that need. There were also some examples of partnerships going beyond sharing data to working jointly on its analysis and interpretation in order to identify priority areas of focus.

“We work really closely with the LEP within the area, and also the careers hub. We’re really trying to align what we’re doing closely with what they’re doing, and so we have regular meetings with them. If they are carrying out a survey or a questionnaire with schools, we get the opportunity to input into the questioning, and obviously can then work together in looking at the results and what’s relevant to each side.”

To understand local outreach needs and potential gaps, most partnerships undertook a **local mapping exercise** to:

- **Identify schools and groups of learners who were not eligible for targeted outreach but needed support** – this included identifying schools/colleges that had not engaged in either

outreach hubs' work or other activities delivered by HE partners (also called 'cold spot schools'). High-level action planning was required with those schools identified as cold spot schools. This step also included identifying those groups of learners who had not been engaged and offered help because they did not fall under specific targeting characteristics. For this purpose, data from partners such as local authorities have been used to target and engage with underrepresented groups (e.g. BAME students, care leavers and military service children) more specifically. Partnerships used different approaches to identify cold spot schools/colleges for both signposting and proactive support, with some using multiple methods and others fewer. Such methods included:

- a. Analysis of POLAR4, Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index (IDACI), Free School Meals (FSM) and schools planning datasets
 - b. Mapping areas known to be experiencing high deprivation and identifying schools/colleges for signposting (and proactive support)
 - c. Discussions with strategic stakeholders to identify under-represented groups in HE in their region for signposting to relevant activities and audiences
 - d. One partnership carried out a school/college needs questionnaire to establish what outreach provision schools and colleges had been in receipt of.
- **Assess the local landscape of educational activities and its alignment with regional and national priorities** – most partnerships reported to have developed a good understanding of the HE outreach offer within their region by using the benchmark framework to map local needs against their own progression framework. In addition, there were a couple of examples of where partnerships were working with local partners to **develop the evidence base** on the needs of young people in their area, including through regional surveys. This was found to be an effective approach to engagement, ensuring that all partners were working to a shared understanding of that need. There were also some examples of where partnerships were working jointly on the analysis and interpretation of the data to identify priority areas of focus.

Interviewees found the mapping of local needs valuable in planning appropriate activities to **address some of the gaps in outreach provision**, but also to **reduce duplication of outreach activity**. Interviewees also recounted examples of needs being significantly different within the same region/area due to diverse geographical landscapes (e.g. urban/rural/coastal) and sociodemographic profiles. Similar to targeted outreach, learners within the same county or local authority area were experiencing very different issues. This may be due to their family background, access to transport, rural, coastal or urban location, or other factors. In some cases, when learners needed or wanted to stay local, partnerships have worked flexibly with schools and colleges to provide support and identify local and accessible outreach offers rather than trying to offer a one-size-fits-all outreach offer.

By using the above processes, partnerships conducted outreach to schools/colleges for signposting (and as part of their efforts related to proactive support). The number of schools reached per hub varied; this appears to be dependent on the types of data analysed and the eligibility or threshold criteria used by partnerships to derive hub schools/colleges. In some partnerships, there was overlap between targeted outreach and hub schools; some partnerships spoke interchangeably about the two and thus saw that their signposting approach was the same or similar for both types of schools. This was also because some partnerships were already engaging hub schools as part of targeted outreach. In cases where

additional hub schools were identified, these were mainly located in coastal areas and, in a few cases, in rural areas.

“The schools give us all of their data and we are able then to help them identify the key target groups.”

“We literally took all of the schools across the region that had POLAR 4 quintile 1 and 2 students identified as being part of the cohort, and we found which of those schools had the biggest number of the quintile 1 and 2 students. We then approached those schools to work with them proactively directly, in the same way that when the partnership was first set up we approached 18 schools who had students attending their institutions from the postcodes that we were tasked to work with.”

Collaboration

There are a number of examples of outreach hubs working collaboratively with partners to deliver locally tailored interventions aimed at addressing key challenges and gaps in existing provision. These mainly relate to the following activities:

- **Co-delivery of campus visits** – there were a couple of examples of where outreach hubs have worked with OAs to co-design and deliver campus visits. By combining resources, they were able to enhance the offer to include guest speakers, professional careers guidance, support with the development of personal statements and to cover the costs of travel and subsistence for learners to attend (which was identified as a barrier to participation).
- **Co-delivery of skills and careers events** – there were several examples of outreach hubs working with local partners on delivery of regional events. The use of resources to support larger events was reported to be a more efficient and effective use of funding than hubs trying to host smaller events themselves. It provided attendees with access to information on the full range of career pathways and progression routes. In this type of model, outreach hubs were not the main funders, but brought added value through staffing and funding.
- **Targeting specific cohorts** – there were a number of examples of outreach hubs working with local partners to identify, engage and deliver support to priority groups of young people. These were typically identified through engagement with LEPs, local authorities and community organisations. Examples include delivery of CPD to foster carers and staff within children’s care homes, as well as support targeted directly at looked-after young people and students with a disability.
- **Developing shared resources** – including labour market information/booklets and guidance documents for teachers and others working with young people.

What has enabled local partner engagement?

Partnership leads identified a range of factors that have helped facilitate strategic engagement with local partners, which are set out below.

Firstly, the broader scope of outreach hubs (relative to targeted outreach) was reported to have enabled partnerships to engage with local partners on a more strategic level. Several partnerships referenced the flexible nature of outreach hubs as being a key enabler of effective collaboration. It has

given them scope to tailor provision to local needs and align with strategic objectives of local partners in a way that they were unable to do with targeted outreach due to the relatively narrow criteria of learners.

Working with partners to identify common ground and building on that was considered key to collaboration. This often involved an element of compromise, for example identifying where objectives were broadly aligned and working together to develop approaches that could meet differing priorities. It also sometimes involved recognition that partners were better placed to take the lead on design and delivery, with outreach hubs in more of a supporting role. One challenge faced by partnerships in these discussions was a lack of clarity on the strategic aims and objectives of hubs, which led to them often being guided by partners' priorities.

Building on existing partnership structures was also viewed as helpful. One partnership described how they had planned to set up a regional strategy group for outreach hubs. However, the key partners they were looking to engage were already actively engaged in another group led by the CEC, which had similar objectives and was well established and working effectively. Rather than create a new structure, they decided to work within this existing framework.

The independence and impartiality of Uni Connect was cited by several partnerships as a key enabler to effective partnership working. There was recognition that local HE and FE providers were often in competition and having an external organisation acting as a trusted broker helped facilitate a collaborative approach.

There were examples of where collaborative work had enhanced due to the pandemic. Partners were keen to come together to develop solutions to address the challenges facing young people. This was more common amongst local authorities and LEPs than employers and other third sector organisations. The shift to online working was also found by some partners to have made it easier for them to connect with others as it removed geographical barriers to attendance at meetings and events. Partnerships that were able to pivot to digital delivery and engagement have typically been more able to continue and enhance their collaborative work.

Involving partners in the co-design of initiatives and giving them a clearly defined role and contribution enabled effective collaboration. Involving partners in the design, development and implementation of outreach initiatives (rather than just as co-funders or delivery partners) was found to be an effective way to develop genuinely collaborative relationships. It helped to secure ownership, buy-in and longer-term commitment. There was an example of a multi-strand project where each partner was given one element to take the lead on. This enabled them to focus on aspects that most closely aligned to their aims, objectives and specialisms rather than feeling that they had to be involved in all elements. This was an efficient and effective approach to collating inputs from partners whilst also ensuring close alignment to their objectives.

"[Partnership working] has been more challenging in the past because different priorities and objectives haven't necessarily aligned. The hubs now offer a chance to do that."

"I would say that it is different because the nature of targeting is a lot more relaxed for the outreach hubs. That's allowed easier relationships with potential match funders and co-creators in programmes. At the top of the list is the charity and third-sector, because we've seen a lot of work with them."

“Developing those relationships with the Careers and Enterprise Company has taken a couple of years to get to where we are. And I think one of the key things is we’ve not been precious about who has the relationship with the school. We’re happy for them to have the main relationship, and we come and deliver stuff as a provider. As long as we can deliver what we want to deliver, evaluate what we want to evaluate and track the students, then we don’t have to be the gatekeeper to it all.”

“We’ve got that impartiality, and we’re a trusted broker between member institutions. They do work well together, but they’re also massively in competition with each other. We are the ones enabling them to have that trusted engagement with each other.”

“I think chunking it up worked quite well for us because it meant that each of the partners could lead on the area that met their aims and objectives, and their specialisms, rather than trying to have everyone involved in everything. Once we broke it down, it was a lot easier for people to take a lead on their thing.”

What challenges have been faced in local partner engagement?

Whilst good progress had been made in most areas around strategic engagement with partners, discussions also revealed a number of challenges faced which are set out below. These challenges were common across most partnerships regardless of size, location or target beneficiaries.

The **landscape of outreach provision is complex and fragmented**. Almost all partnerships referenced the high volume and wide range of outreach provision being delivered by different partners across their areas. This was resulting in schools and colleges feeling overwhelmed and finding it difficult to navigate the complex landscape of provision to access the support they needed. A further challenge was that each outreach provider is working with different target groups of learners, has different objectives, key performance indicators etc. The strategic objectives of a LEP for example are very different to those for higher education institutions, which can create challenges for effective collaboration.

Several partnerships mentioned that, whilst there was a willingness to work collaboratively at a local level, there was also an **element of competition between providers** who were often looking to draw from the same pool of learners. This was referenced in relation to universities and colleges (as noted in the previous section), but also in relation to other types of outreach providers. They each have their own targets that they are working towards, which will take priority over the aims and objectives of collaborative activities (if not completely aligned).

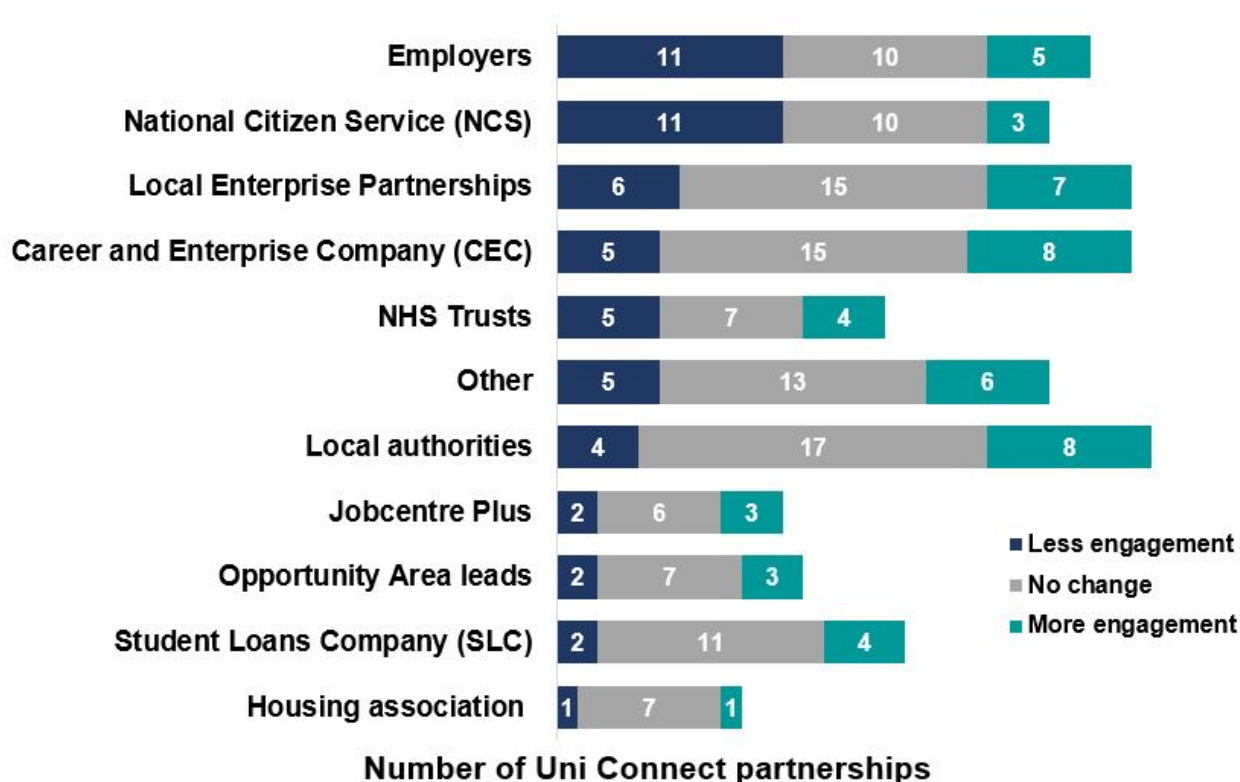
The **short-term nature of the funding** for outreach hubs was identified as a key barrier to strategic engagement of local partners. There is a level of investment required to establish systems and processes for joint working. It takes time to set up the infrastructure, to develop progression frameworks, to recruit schools and colleges and to align delivery partners. The short-term nature of the funding was a **barrier to engaging some local partners on collaborative initiatives**. It was also a barrier for Uni Connect partnerships themselves, some of whom were reluctant to commit to long-term projects given the uncertainty around their future funding. As the current funding period comes towards an end, some partnerships have **lost key staff**, who they are unable to replace, which also limited their capacity to develop new collaborations.

A lot of planned collaborative projects were **cancelled due to the pandemic** and there were associated restrictions on face-to-face delivery, as well as wider issues such as key staff within partner organisations being furloughed or having to adapt to new ways of working. A lot of organisations were

said to have ‘turned inward’ to deal with the implications of the pandemic which has made it **difficult to engage them in strategic conversations**. There was also a general shift towards meeting the immediate needs of young people (such as ensuring they had access to appropriate IT equipment for home schooling) rather than longer-term strategic priorities.

Over a third of Uni Connect partnerships reported **less engagement from employers and the National Citizen Service (NCS)** as a result of the pandemic (Figure 5.2). This was confirmed in interviews with partnership leads, who talked about the challenges they faced engaging employers and the impact this was having on planned collaborative activity, including work experience placements. A lot of joint work with the NCS involves residentials and these have been unable to go ahead due to lockdown restrictions.

Figure 5.2: Impact of COVID-19 on outreach hub partnership engagement



Source: Office for Students, Uni Connect: Summer Monitoring 2020

Match funding

How far have partnerships progressed in securing match funding?

Uni Connect partnerships have **made some progress in securing match funding** during Phase Two of the programme. They had secured a combined total of **£1.8m** in match funding by July 2020, accounting for **3%** of their overall funding. Around a third of partnerships had secured no match funding at all and only three had secured match funding of 10% or more of their overall funding. The majority of match funding secured was **in-kind rather than cash**, which has included digital support and the provision of venues or other facilities to support delivery of events and staff time.

As noted earlier in this chapter, **CEC and LEPs** are two of the key strategic partners for outreach hubs. They are also the source of the majority of match funding secured by partnerships. There are several examples of jointly funded initiatives between the three partner organisations, including delivery of

regional skills and careers events and co-funding of labour market information and resources. Several outreach hubs are match funding **Enterprise Coordinator (EC)** posts along with the CEC/LEPs. This was reported to be an effective route to ensuring that the ECs are fully aware of the Uni Connect offer and can raise awareness of this within the schools they are working in, thereby helping to ensure a joined-up approach to careers support across the region.

Some partnerships have secured match funding to **target specific cohorts of young people**, such as the children of military personnel. There was one example where six partners had all contributed financially to a project that was being delivered by an organisation offering targeted support to this group of young people. There were also several examples of where partners had secured small amounts of match funding from **community groups** to deliver bespoke activities to priority groups of young people, such as those who are looked after or have a disability.

The **more well-established partnerships** that have a long history of co-investment or co-funding with local partners were more likely to have secured match funding than newer partnerships who had no previous experience of this. One partnership generated a quarter of their income from match funding, which was much higher than any of the others. In this example, they had a long history of partners contributing financially towards their services (prior to Uni Connect) and they secured agreement for this to be continued. Other partnerships who did not have existing match funding arrangements in place found it much harder to establish these, particularly given COVID-19 and the resultant financial pressure on resources within partner organisations.

“This is where other partnerships that existed before this programme have the upper hand because they’ve always had partners giving cash and they will continue to do that. But for us, that’s really, really difficult.”

“With the Careers and Enterprise Company, we are running careers events. We’ve been able to look at some virtual universal activities for all our schools and colleges with regards to skills gaps, employer liaison and engagement, careers and information, advice and guidance (IAG) pathways. That’s been match funded. That’s the one success, because they’ve given us some money. We’ve got some really high-profile events happening at all our schools – no matter whether they’re targeted or hub they’ll be able to benefit.”

“The other place we’d been successful was with the Ministry of Defence, so we have the military connection. There was £20,000 for this thing called Festival of Friends. We also got some money from the Armed Forces Covenant. The armed forces and the military, there are pots of money there that we’ve been able to access.”

“We got a tiny bit of money, and it was only a few hundred, from the Big Local for a community project. Community projects, I feel like we’ve done some really good work in that area, but COVID-19 has crushed that for now because all those youth groups stopped, but we had got a little bit from the Big Local.”

What challenges have partnerships faced in securing match funding?

The financial constraints faced by partner organisations were identified as the main challenge to securing match funding. Whilst partners were perceived to be committed to working collaboratively and strategically with outreach hubs, many were not able to contribute financially towards this. The financial constraints faced by many partner organisations, particularly employers, universities and third

sector organisations, were reported to have been heightened due to the pandemic as many were facing increasing pressures on budgets to deliver core services.

The pandemic was also found to have resulted in a shift in priorities for some partners. A lot of partner organisations were reported to be making changes in order to respond to challenges related to COVID-19, such as supporting staff to work remotely or changing delivery models, which resulted in longer-term strategic planning and collaboration becoming less of a priority for investment. In some cases, partnerships were not actively pursuing match funding as they did not think it would be a possibility in this context.

A further challenge faced related to a **lack of clarity and understanding** amongst some partnerships on what constituted match funding. This was raised by several partnerships who said they would welcome **greater clarity and direction** from OfS on expectations of this. For example, some were under the impression that providing funding to partners to support delivery of their activities constituted match funding, whilst others were clear that it involved leveraging resources from partners to support delivery of Uni Connect activities. A third category involved partnerships co-designing, delivering and resourcing new activities in collaboration with partners. The latter category included some proactive support initiatives, which are discussed in Chapter 4.

“It’s just really difficult to get strategic buy-in on a funding level. I’ve got buy-in from all partners that they want to make the hub successful, that they think it’s great, they would like to continue working together as a partnership. I’ve had that confirmed at a recent governance board meeting that everyone is still on the same page about making it a success, but nobody around the table can commit funding, and that is the bit that for us is a real challenge.”

“I think we probably had a fair chance to get match funding without COVID-19 striking. The region is a poor one, and there is not a huge amount of funding going around. We’ve already had a number of partners and local areas who have had fairly significant budget cuts, so I suppose that’s probably one of the reasons, as far as I’m aware, we haven’t actively pursued the match funding, just because we know there isn’t a huge amount of funding available there.”

“I don’t necessarily see even a major, major employer being able to contribute monies to it. I think they’ll offer something that we’re not able to put together because it may be niche, it may be specialist. For example, [a company] offering environmental careers or engineering careers, they can offer us something by way of a resource, a training day, something like that.”

Sustainability

The strategic relationships established between Uni Connect and local partners were considered to be sustainable. In most areas, relationships had been established over the four years since the Uni Connect programme was launched. A sense of trust and shared endeavour had been developed over this time and partnerships felt an obligation to local partners to deliver on commitments made. Some had modelled how their partnership infrastructure could be scaled up or down depending on available resources, suggesting that the model could still work with lower levels of available funding. However, if funding was reduced, there would be a greater emphasis on partners to provide resources, which would diminish the role and influence of the partnerships.

The impartial nature of outreach hubs was considered key to their sustainability. As noted earlier in this chapter, the landscape of outreach provision is complex and fragmented at the local level. In this

context, there is a clear role for an impartial, trusted broker to help facilitate better coordination and alignment of provision. In some areas, Uni Connect has taken the lead in bringing partners together around a shared agenda and is considered the 'glue that holds it together'. In others, partnerships have worked through existing local structures rather than developing and leading their own working groups. The implications on sustainability for both models were slightly different, with those working through existing groups requiring less resource in order to maintain those relationships whilst those who have been leading the coordination and bringing together partners likely to require more.

"I think having that independent person in the middle like we are, and like all the other 28 are, is important. They trust us now. It's not been easy – it has taken four years."

6 Proactive support

This chapter presents evidence about partnerships' approach to proactive support, and how activities delivered have enabled schools and colleges to access existing and new outreach activities and support.

Partnerships' conceptualisation of proactive support

Some of the partnership leads interviewed agreed that, in moving beyond the set-up phase, there was a **lack of clarity around the terminology used between 'proactive support' and 'targeted outreach'**. The main uncertainties were around what was expected and how it differed from targeted outreach activities. This led to cases where these two overlapped and terms were used interchangeably and confused partnerships.

In addition, evidence from smaller partnerships indicates that due to low number of schools/colleges in their area, hubs' **proactive support activity had inevitably overlapped with targeted outreach provision**. As a result, partnerships increased the number of students engaged within a school as opposed to targeting new schools. This enabled them to **target groups that have specific barriers and issues beyond standard socioeconomic indicators** (e.g. looking to work with care-experienced students in Year 13 across a city/region) and to tailor their offer on an individual school basis depending on what type of support had been already accessed.

Most partnership leads from larger cities and urban areas reported difficulties in consolidating their outreach offer in a concise and clear format due to saturation of interventions being delivered in schools/colleges. Evidence suggests that this was particularly notable for projects seeking to work with younger age groups (Year 9) in schools. While this saturation had led to a competitive market, **some gaps in provision endured** – such as parent engagement, which was identified as one of the key areas for development. Another engagement-related challenge faced by regions with small BAME populations was to ensure inclusion and avoid singling-out individual learners.

A barrier identified is around supporting schools/colleges to consider the importance of HE progression. Partnerships felt that schools/colleges tend to prioritise attainment-raising activities rather than motivational careers support activities because HE progression does not always align with the school priorities.

“Yes, I think it is important to stress, as I say, the degree of overlap that exists. If you take the original targeted outreach and the engagement with hub schools, there is a huge degree of overlap in terms of, for example, the programme of activities that has been around for a number of years before the outreach hubs were thought of.”

“I think there was a lack of clarity of guidance on it initially from the OfS in that we did not really know what we were supposed to do. With any guidance that comes out, we have to unpick what it does really mean, what we are really being asked. I think that is challenging.”

Provision of support through existing or new/expanded provision

As a result of the local mapping exercises, undertaken to understand local outreach needs, all 29 partnerships were reported to be delivering proactive support activities to facilitate access to both existing and additional HE outreach⁸.

Once gaps in provision of activities had been identified, **most partnerships developed a strategic plan** ensuring the type of outreach activity and the learner groups they focused on were fit-for-purpose. The strategic plan was also designed to enable learners' progression to education and employment to fill local and national skills gaps. Examples of provisions contained in the strategic plan are skills-led events, employer visits, parent events and CPD sessions tied into Gatsby Benchmarks⁹. In order to facilitate attendance to these events, travel and coach expenses were provided, as well as equipment, ticket fees and staff/supply cover. Learners from deprived areas and critical learner groups were prioritised and supported to access activities offered. Both in rural and urban areas, a **tiered approach to delivering outreach provision** was cited as having helped to focus time and resources where they were most needed and reach out to schools with lower numbers of learners taking part in activities.

Most partnerships reported having delivered relevant activities by **building on their existing provision (i.e. to a wider group of learners)**, adapting their current offer as they deemed it fit-for-purpose, rather than creating new provisions. For instance, because of the hubs' remit, **urban partnerships found themselves needing to provide proactive support to more rural schools than before**. They needed to adapt and utilise local partners who had lived experience of the barriers faced by students in the area. This knowledge enabled partnerships to engage with those students who had not had the support or encouragement to access outreach provision previously. Some partnerships worked strategically with partners to match fund and deliver new programmes to underrepresented groups.

Some partnerships delivered **new activities**. New proactive support provisions were broadly similar to the targeted outreach ones, but often had been made bespoke to underrepresented groups, such as care leavers and young carers.

Use of new and existing relationships

Partnership leads highlighted that in order to appropriately support intra-regional variations, **new relationships** had to be built. Particularly in the case of partnerships created after 2017, some partnerships required more time to embed the hub offer and extend provisions to schools/colleges who previously were not able to access support.

Outreach hubs were cited as having provided capacity to match-fund programmes that had previously been beyond the remit of the very targeted nature of the Uni Connect funding envelope for targeted outreach. As mentioned in Chapter 5, **match funding through outreach hubs was cited as having produced new opportunities for partnerships**. This has been in the form of capital or in-kind contribution, such as staff time, academic time and use of facilities and settings (theatres, community venues).

In order to foster a joined-up approach across the regions and bring multiple stakeholder organisations into project delivery, partnerships promoted the creation of a broader infrastructure for delivery and engaged with a variety of agencies in delivering interventions including local authorities, CEC, careers

⁸ Uni Connect: Summer Monitoring 2020, OfS.

⁹ More information about the Gatsby Benchmarks can be found at: <https://www.goodcareerguidance.org.uk/the-benchmarks>

hubs and local enterprise partnerships. This created a solid infrastructure for supporting and delivering to schools/colleges, enabling them to more easily access proactive support provision.

These relationships also led to more effective partnerships being created among wider stakeholders such as LEPs, with a greater understanding of how the work of each provider can complement that of others. By working with the charity Citizens UK (a community-organising charity aiming to build alliances of civic-society organisations to create change) and maximising links with employers and other voluntary sector organisations (VSOs), most partnerships brought to life the career opportunities available in their local areas, linking learning to a tangible outcome for a young person, parent or community member.

The following activities have also been delivered as part of proactive support, which, unsurprisingly, were ones already offered as part of targeted outreach:

- Creation of specific **interventions removed from a school/college setting and delivered within the community or other locations**. For example, some partnerships took learners to other areas of the country to visit art galleries, theatres or museums to widen knowledge and experience of these environments and increase social and cultural capital. This knowledge was then explored in relation to local opportunities and educational progression paths.
- **Securing support from teachers** who are most engaged to work behind the scenes and ensure that learners are supported to complete tasks given as homework.
- Activities designed to **develop leadership skills among Uni Connect learners** working with university students who often felt more confident and capable to step up and take responsibility for acting as positive role models for their peers.

Most partnerships worked closely with schools to support learners' education, progression opportunities and long-term prospects. In order to do so, a programme of activities **delivered by experienced staff who designed the sessions** was developed and found to have received a better response from schools. In particular, sessions and resources tied into Gatsby Benchmarks which engaged a whole year group/class were highly valued, as well as opportunities to experience HE first-hand via campus visits.

Furthermore, partnership leads considered the adaptability of staff a key enabler for proactive support activities to continue at no additional cost, while enjoying the benefits of working remotely. Those partnerships who have invested in **fast up-skilling of internal staff** through webinars and online events also added that they benefitted from introducing staff to evidence-based practice from the outset by making them familiar with evaluation tools, methodologies and progression frameworks.

The benefit of having **staff located within schools and colleges** was two-fold:

- It enabled the creation of strong relationships
- It brought delivery into the fabric of the school/college community.

Having staff embedded in schools and colleges also increased the opportunities for parental engagement. For schools, achieving parental engagement was deemed problematic, especially for those hardest to reach. Many partnerships have created new environments to meet with parents, which were often less intimidating than the school environment, and more flexible in meeting parents' needs.

In an environment of frequently changing staff, some partnerships leveraged **existing relationships** to progress their work on proactive support and continue to deliver targeted outreach activities as part of the outreach hubs. By leveraging previous connections and working with schools/colleges to sustain current outreach provision, pre-existing partnerships were also able to tweak their offer to fill relevant gaps. It seems that established existing partnerships with close relationships with schools/colleges and other partners in the local area were successful in facilitating learners' access to both existing and new services.

"We have got experts in the field to help us create the evaluation tools, and they come out and conduct on-site research. So, they will be doing pupil interviews, teacher interviews, they come and visit to watch the days. We do a range of those case studies. It is also about upskilling our team as well. So, then we are able to be better as practitioners and understand the evaluation elements."

"OfS funding for Uni Connect has meant we have been protected from the local politics and resource-saving schemes that have affected our colleagues at individual providers. We have had a level of freedom in trialling innovative methods of outreach work."

"Our focus was actually to put our staff into those school environments to ensure that they were able to work effectively with what we call high-intensity cohorts, so students that have filled a criteria that we have set, and our outline nationally, to actually ensure that they have a consistent and positive engagement with people from the partnership on a regular basis."

"By placing staff within those colleges, it enables them to work with colleagues across really big institutions to actually target students and I think that is why our targeting and engagement has been done in terms of students progressing on the programme."

Delivery of proactive support activities

Interviews indicate that most partnerships created their own delivery programme drawing on the broader aims and objectives of the Uni Connect programme. Whilst being delivered to suit the local needs, interviewees highlighted a **mix of both core and bespoke activities**, which have been created to meet regional, local and specific learner groups' needs, as essential to developing programmes, progression frameworks and strategic plans.

Partnerships provided various examples of the type of proactive support they provided. For instance, some partnerships looked at indicators such as percentage of learners speaking English as an additional language and signposted schools/colleges to local partners best suited to meet their needs. Other partnerships set up working groups to share best practice and research, as well as communicate how collaborative approaches could enhance their work.

As already mentioned, part of the activities offered through the outreach hubs were those already created through targeted outreach and which were tailored to reach new audiences. Examples included:

- **Campus visit:** a visit to a university campus where learners are taken on a tour and meet university students and staff and find out about university. Includes activities related to HE in FE on a FE campus.
- **Subject masterclass/subject insight:** activity designed to provide an insight to a subject or to increase awareness of a subject at HE. Can be a structured subject-specific event.

- **Mentoring:** activity with repeat interactions and sustained engagement designed with a range of outcomes. Involves a dedicated relationship between a mentor and student mentees. Can be face-to-face or online activities.
- **Skills and attainment (incl. tutoring):** activity designed to increase knowledge, skills and understanding. It has a clear aim and can be used to help, for instance, students with their Key Stage curriculum, contribute to increasing attainment or personal development e.g. **developing learners' confidence, sense of identity, resilience**, growth mindset and study skills through Progression Frameworks or projects to **raise 'aspiration, self-awareness and relationships**. There were mixed views amongst partnerships however, on whether proactive support should offer, activities related to raising attainment. Arguments in favour suggested that attainment programmes help with engaging schools/colleges, as attainment is their 'core business'. Some also argued that learners need the right grades to progress to HE and so a combination of outreach activities and attainment programmes would be appropriate.
- **Summer school:** two or more days of intensive activity aimed at providing a real insight into university life and all that it entails. May also be an Easter school and may be residential and non-residential.
- **Study skills series** on time management, CV building, interview skills, preparing for the workplace or managing personal finance.
- Careers fairs, motivational talks, university visits, skills development workshops.
- **Mock lectures** in certain subjects so that learners can experience what university would be like.
- Interactive sessions around how **fees and funding work**, how to fill in an UCAS form, how to choose Level 3 options.
- **Universal taster days to help promote HE to students from POLAR 4 quintiles 1 and 2**, followed up by bespoke work with small groups identified as at-risk of not achieving and those from target wards.

Examples of bespoke activities developed through proactive support include:

- **Care experience programmes** (e.g. University GO!, which relies on the strategic partnerships developed through Uni Connect between local authorities and HE providers).
- **Enhanced access to Virtual School**, enabling the majority of Looked After Children (LAC) learners to remain engaged with virtual content and with partnership teams.

When engaging with schools/colleges, some partnerships placed emphasis on the importance of providing further support to teachers as part of the outreach hub offer. Three main approaches were described:

1. Employ an outreach officer to carry out targeted work with classes and support around UCAS applications.
2. Deliver training for careers advisors.
3. Provide qualification support for teachers/careers advisors.

“We are working with an organisation to help adapt resources to be particular to the situations of refugees and asylum seekers. It is the niche under-represented groups, the very small groups where individually it would not make sense for each of the 13 HE providers to try to work with these groups, but as a partnership, we can do that.”

“There is so much duplication at the moment from different organisations. And that is something we are trying to work with strategic partners to minimise as much as possible, but it is not always practical to do so.”

“This year, they are, again, recruiting two members of staff, HE engagement staff, funded by us, but they are going to really be embedded within the careers service at their college.”

“We have developed a comprehensive support offer looking at three strands, or three subject areas, choices and pathways, that schools can choose. So, making it a much more coherent, simple, accessible offer, just branding it up a bit better, revising the materials each year, making sure that they are as interactive as possible. Getting that feedback back from schools to make sure that, when that lighter-touch offer is presented, actually it is still as impactful as possible. It is about trying to continue to make sure that any vulnerable students are present in those sessions, so making sure that they access that sort of support as well.”

“The core offer is free on our website, we have a prospectus with the activity we can do. Whether it is online or in school or (in previous times) on campus, there is a title for it, a summary of what it is, how it is mapped against our evaluation framework and how it is mapped against Gatsby Benchmarks because [schools] are interested in that. That is our core offer. The bespoke element is the bit with the target schools, where we would say, ‘Who are we to say everything you need? You are in that school, what is particular for you?’ Depending on how many learners they have, we would allow them to bid in for pots of money to do things specifically for them.”

“I think the biggest new activity was the CPD for foster carers. There’s also been a resource for those who are working with young carers, so to understand the experience of young carers.”

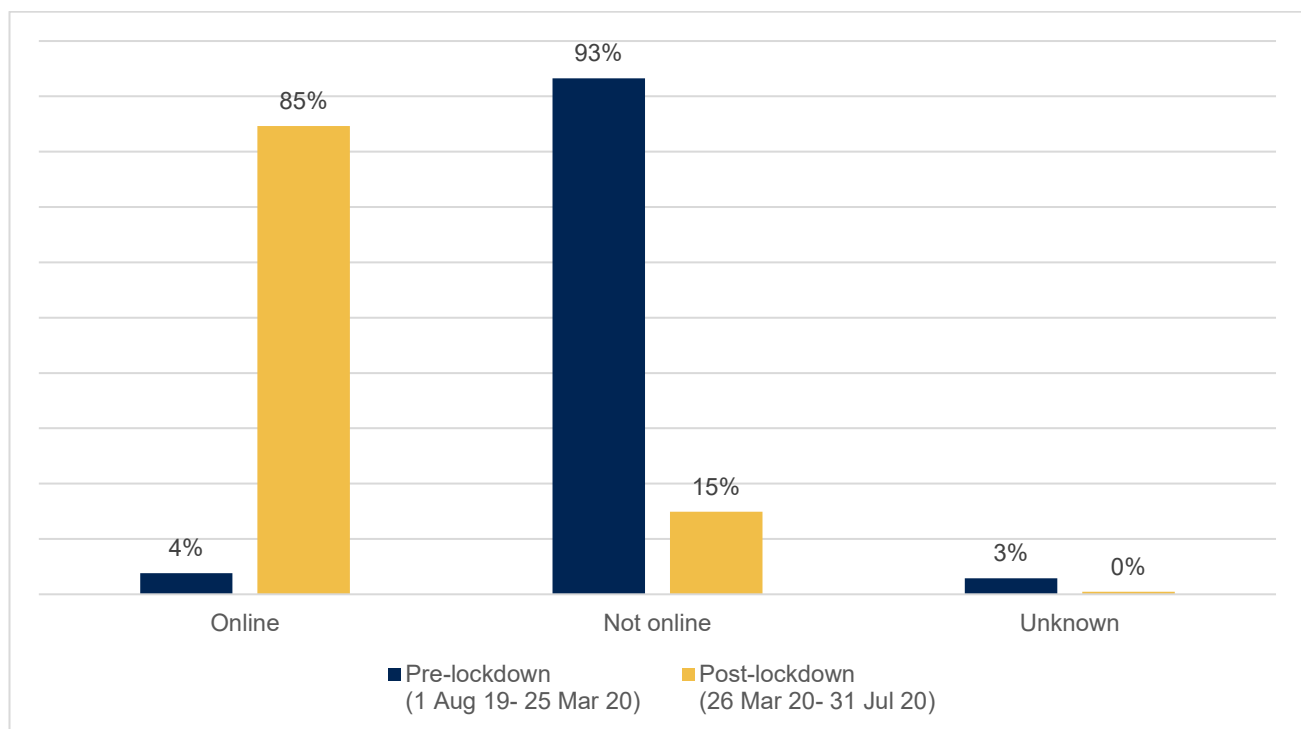
“In terms of the different demographics, we do have activities that are targeted towards specific demographics, be they black and ethnic minority young people, specifically South Asian girls, or boys from a white working-class background. That does happen across different layers of our projects. Sometimes that is been driven by local need in the school. Sometimes it is been driven by an evidence need in the literature or something we are aware of.”

The impact of COVID-19 on proactive support initiatives

The impact of COVID-19 was felt across the board but was more disrupting for some partnerships than others. While some suggested that although their delivery, both under hubs and targeted outreach, was scaled down, it did not vary greatly compared to the level pre-COVID-19, but others experienced higher levels of disruption.

Overall, **Covid-19 created significant barriers to in-person delivery, as such** the main response from partnerships to COVID-19 was to **accelerate innovative solutions and virtual delivery which, in the long run, might become more permanent than temporary**, especially delivery through blended learning.

Figure 6.1: Share of activities held online



Source: *Uni Connect: Summer Monitoring 2020, OfS.*

Despite the benefits of virtual alternatives, some interviewees suggested that the essence of the proactive outreach activities and its impact may have been reduced.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have been particularly detrimental for the most disadvantaged groups, exacerbating existing attainment gaps. Partnerships considered Uni Connect an important player in supporting students to catch up on lost learning by delivering evidence-based interventions.

Most partnership leads and also external stakeholders interviewed highlighted **digital poverty** and the importance of **parental engagement with technology at home**, which, for students that need it the most, in many cases was lacking. To support with the above, partnerships currently are:

- Utilising funding to provide technology bursaries to combat digital poverty (prior to the DfE provision of support for digital equipment). The aim was to enable learners to access online materials during the lockdown period, which according to some interviewees has made a real difference in some localities. To do so, one partnership re-allocated funds that would have otherwise been spent on residential trips to an IT support bursary scheme for schools.

- Working with external partners (e.g. MADE Training) to provide schools with access to IAG around examinations and best practice for home-schooling during the COVID-19 period.
- Providing schools (targeted outreach or hubs) with funding to address needs e.g. licences for learners to access online platforms providing guidance for students to explore the different university courses and apprenticeships they may be interested in, such as Unifrog.

For those teachers and learners able to access virtual delivery, partnerships deliver activities such as:

- Teacher CPD online events. It was noted that virtual activity had overall better attendance rates than before. In fact, around 50% of teachers normally attended an in-person evening event. Now, 90-95% engagement was reported by most partnerships, which also added that recent teacher and headteacher event forums were incredibly well attended.
- Rapid digital up-skilling of partnership internal staff, which has resulted in the creation of new online resources, activities and opportunities for learners and their parents/carers during the lockdown.
- Virtual campus tours and other online resources (e.g. Brightside¹⁰), which have seen increased take-up.

Lastly, interviews also revealed that **other barriers both physical (e.g. geographical) and attitudinal need to be addressed further**, if proactive support activities are to be more effective in the future. Transport was identified as one of the greatest barriers for outreach proactive support in rural areas and geographically isolated regions (e.g. Sussex, Cornwall and Herefordshire). Either travel was no't available or was too expensive (e.g. an Isle of Wight ferry might be £20 a day). As a result, learners who found it difficult to access outreach opportunities in these areas started to develop a negative view of HE as a whole and of their ability to access it. This, paired with lack of knowledge of HE pathways, fees and funding, resulted in learners in coastal, rural and insular regions feeling discouraged and less likely to progress to HE.

“What we had a lot of is schools saying to us as a partnership, ‘We just feel really overwhelmed with all these third-sector organisations saying, ‘We will offer this virtual, or we will offer this virtual or we will do this virtual for you.’” Schools were literally bombarded, to be honest, and so that was the biggest barrier to start with, to try and help them in any way we can to try and navigate all this noise going on.”

Sustainability

Uni Connect activities as part of outreach hubs continue to be delivered to beneficiaries despite the COVID-19 crisis. This has shown the resilience in collaborative partnerships and their ability to respond in challenging times. However, there were concerns amongst partnership leads about the **likely financial impact of the pandemic on universities** and the need for them to recruit new staff in order to mitigate its impact on staff turnover.

¹⁰ Brightside is an online platform connecting trained mentors with young people who are exploring options for their future.

According to most partnership leads, **outreach hub funding enabled them to develop and implement proactive support initiatives to engage with schools/colleges that they probably would have not otherwise**. Due to structural changes to how schools/colleges are supported, they considered that it would be difficult and counter-productive to revert to previous ways of working without causing considerable disruption to the activities currently being delivered. Other partnerships mentioned they have already reduced the amount of funding put towards proactive support in this academic year, in preparation for whether there will be less funding in the future. Online and blended learning delivery are seen as likely to remain in place in the post-Covid-19 climate. The resources developed during the pandemic have the potential to be used in the long-term and could represent value for money and return on investment from Uni Connect funding.

7 Signposting

In Chapter 7 we discuss the outreach hubs' signposting activity. We explore how signposting is conceptualised by partnerships, approaches to its delivery and the audiences engaged. We also examine the outreach hubs' websites and in particular the progress made in delivering them, the types of information they hold, and how partnerships try to include relevant, up-to-date and comprehensive information. Lastly, we look at how signposting is monitored and evaluated, and examine partnerships' thoughts on its sustainability.

Signposting

How have partnerships conceptualised signposting and why?

Overall, partnerships used **signposting to raise awareness of the outreach activities available locally, regionally and nationally**. Partnerships conceptualised and, in turn, operationalised signposting differently. Their different understandings and interpretations of 'signposting' and of its requirements, stemmed from:

- A perceived **lack of clarity of expectations** as regards signposting – with some interviewees requiring further clarity on its purpose and of its requirements
- The **overlap between targeted outreach signposting and signposting for the hubs** – making it hard to articulate what about the hubs was distinct and separate in terms of signposting
- The **level of buy-in achieved** as regards signposting and, in turn, its **role in partnerships' overall hub strategy**, with different partnerships treating signposting as:
 - **important to the overall hub's strategy**; these partnerships expressed their commitment to signposting and considered it key to their overall hub's strategy because it was seen as: a) mutually supportive of proactive support and strategic engagement; and b) an opportunity to expand their reach, and support, to more schools/colleges. These partnerships positioned signposting relatively 'equally' to the other hub activities.
 - **not important to the overall hub's strategy**; these viewed it in a similar way to targeted outreach signposting and deemed it to be less important or impactful compared to proactive support and strategic engagement. These partnerships deprioritised signposting as a result.
- **External and internal environmental factors, including:**
 - **Local/contextual needs as identified by partnerships**. For example, one partnership acknowledged that guidance suggested that signposting should be aimed at teachers and careers advisors. In its context however, it suggested that it is learners, parents and carers who were more in need of signposting, especially during COVID-19.
 - **Capacity to deliver as a result of the pandemic**. Some universities implemented recruitment freezes which impacted capacity. Some staff had to be redeployed to fill in gaps and, thus, their responsibilities increased. Such challenges meant that hub activities had to be carefully prioritised, especially by small and medium size partnerships for whom even small changes in staffing were problematic.

Due to the variation in the way that signposting was conceptualised, its operationalisation was notably different.

Who have partnerships engaged through their signposting and why?

Based on how partnerships conceptualised the hubs, they **signposted and/or focused their efforts on one or more audiences**, including the following:

- **Targeted outreach schools/colleges** – as part of targeted outreach activities. At times, some targeted outreach schools were also hub schools, as already discussed in the strategic engagement and proactive support chapters. In these cases, it was difficult to distinguish between targeted outreach and the hubs' approach.
- **Hub 'cold spot' schools/colleges** – at times signposted separately to targeted outreach schools/colleges. Other times 'cold spot' schools were referred to and signposted as part of targeted outreach too, i.e. because they might have been engaged before the introduction of the hubs.
- **All schools/colleges in the region** – as part of targeted outreach and/or hubs' signposting. In some cases, signposting to all schools/colleges in the region was a standalone activity, especially for partnerships whose buy-in to signposting was relatively low.

Within schools/colleges, partnership signposting focused on different sub-audiences. Some partnerships focused on teachers and careers advisors, on learners and/or on parents and carers. Other partnerships tried to cover all audiences.

What methods have partnerships used to signpost, how and why?

Different methods were used to signpost based on audience and there was variation in the number and combination of methods used. At a minimum, partnerships used their website, newsletters and direct one-to-one communication with schools/colleges via their staff. A summary of methods is outlined in the table below.

Table 7.1: Summary of signposting methods

Audience	Methods reported to be effective
Targeted outreach and/or hub schools	<p><i>One-to-one signposting (and support)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through hub officers and staff placed in school/colleges as part of targeted outreach also supporting the hubs • Telephone calls (at times weekly) and direct emails to ‘cold spot’ hub schools initiated by partnerships <p><i>Direct to schools</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newsletters (i.e. weekly) • Bulletins (i.e. monthly) • Social media (identified based on audience) • Word of mouth (school/college to school/college) <p><i>Independent use</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hub website information that is relevant, up-to-date and comprehensive • School/colleges approaching with queries; queries are followed up
All schools in the region	<p><i>Independent use</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enabled through the hubs’ websites and the information they hold • Enabled through functionality on the hubs’ websites, allowing schools/colleges to search for outreach activities in their area by typing in their postcode or posting a query • Links to websites of strategic stakeholders <p><i>Direct to schools</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newsletters • Social media • Word of mouth • Liaising with strategic stakeholders to signpost their own contacts to partnerships’ hubs and websites

Partnerships favoured some methods over others. Overall, there was relative consensus that more **proactive methods that allowed partnerships to reach out to schools directly were more effective**; it was suggested that schools/colleges were less prone to engage with partnerships on their own accord. Word-of-mouth and school-to-school recommendation as well as the work of hubs’ staff with new schools/colleges were perceived to be most fruitful.

However, choosing methods was based on what partnerships viewed to be effective for the audience they were reaching, the aim of the signposting activity, the size of the partnership and staffing capacity, and the stage of a partnership’s lifecycle. In more detail, **approaches that worked in different contexts and circumstances** included the following:

- **One-to-one frequent (weekly) signposting** (and support), via phone calls and also as part of proactive support, was ***favoured more by partnerships who were continuing their efforts to establish themselves and their brand in the region and/or were in the process of developing relationships with ‘cold spot’ hub schools***, which was particularly challenging during COVID-19. Some smaller partnerships also favoured one-to-one methods and encouraged schools/colleges to speak directly with their allocated representative.
- **Social media** was actively leveraged by ***partnerships which saw signposting as an opportunity to engage with more schools/colleges in the region and promote their hubs***. **Newsletters** were sent to all schools in the region by some partnerships whilst others focused on targeted outreach and hub schools only.

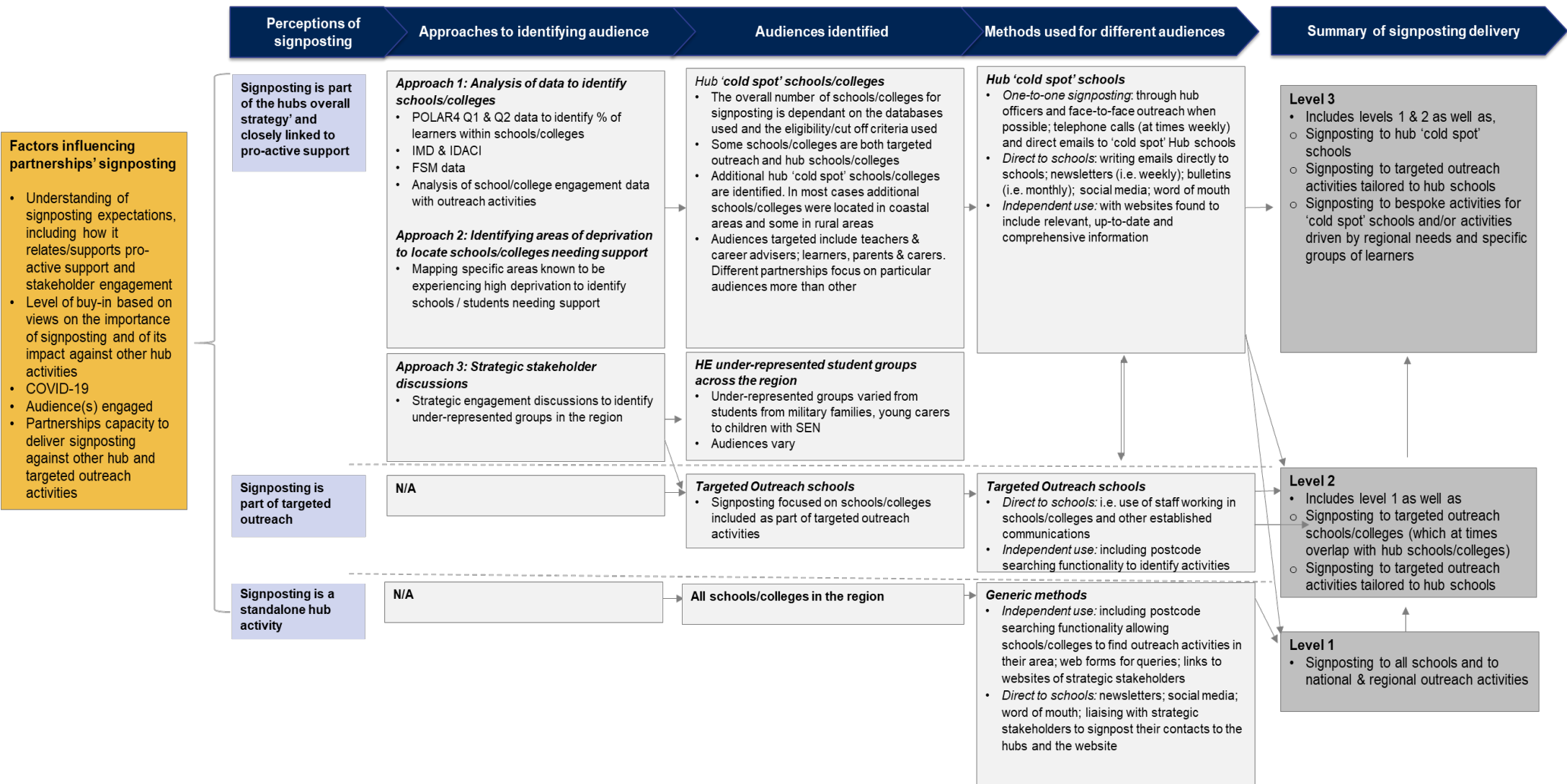
- Some partnerships only ***signposted to information they wished schools/colleges to engage with and promoted those across all their signposting activities***. These partnerships usually ***focused their efforts on one audience***. Others were signposting to different information through different methods to accommodate wider audiences.

In the **diagram below**, we attempt to **summarise partnerships' approaches to signposting**. The diagram only outlines some of the complexity and variation observed. It is more of an attempt to outline the processes for signposting and the different elements at play for simplicity, rather than precisely portray all partnerships' approaches and thus all their individual nuances.

Some partnerships **operated at all three levels and exhibited a more holistic approach to signposting, using different methods relatively methodically**. These partnerships exhibited characteristics already mentioned as supportive of signposting, including:

- a) capacity and less staffing issues due to COVID-19;
- b) an established brand;
- c) positioned signposting as an important part of their overall hub's strategy.

Figure 7.2: Approaches to signposting



“We’ve had all sorts of conversations where there’s been a lot of confusion about what we mean by ‘signposting’. It can just be copying something that is already on lots of other pages, pulling it together in one place and presenting it as, “This is the offer locally.””

“For the hub, we have split the schools into three groups... It’s all about where the students live... Our tier 1 schools have a high proportion of learners that live in the target Uni Connect wards. Tier 2 schools are our primary hub target schools, so they have a large proportion of learners who live in POLAR 4 quintile 1 and 2 areas. Tier 3 are ones that have some learners that live in POLAR 4 quintile 1 and 2 areas but not as many as the tier 2 schools, and then tier 4 schools are schools that have already had quite a high level of progression to HE and are probably already in contact with a lot of our partners so don’t need that much support from us.”

“With the signposting, although the guidance, I think it mentions it’s for teachers and advisors, that’s the main audience, we do recognise that for us it would be learners, and parents and carers. I think we would have those three main audiences really through our signposting.”

“...the approach that was taken with the website was... initially to host... resources and to highlight the opportunities available in respect of outreach for students, but that would be targeted at teachers and at those working within the schools and careers advisors. The site continues to do that. We have developed it now to include more content aimed directly at students.”

“...so rather than just relying upon people contacting us, we actually try to proactively get people to contact us. That might be a social media post that links to a partner activity, and then encouraging someone to obviously contact us in relation to that post, or actively talking about an open day and a mentoring session....”

How have partnerships promoted signposting?

Some partnerships seem to have embraced the idea of becoming a central point of contact for outreach in their area. They suggested that, due the plethora of information available, many schools/colleges missed out on outreach opportunities and they could not easily find what they needed. These partnerships referred to **the hubs’ websites in particular as an opportunity to create a ‘one-stop-shop’ for outreach** to support schools/colleges and pointed to the need to make information easily accessible. **Others were more sceptical, suggesting that schools/colleges already had established relationships and preferences on who to reach to for outreach activities.** There were also concerns from some partnerships about potential tensions as they were entering a space in which strong and established relationships already existed between other providers and schools/colleges.

Many partnerships spoke about their communications strategy and the different campaigns and activities they had planned to promote the hubs and signpost. Some of the methods used as part of these campaigns have already been outlined in the previous section, many of which were already taking place as part of targeted outreach but now had changed focus or also signposted the hubs. Other such activities included school fairs and ad hoc virtual events inviting schools/colleges where partnerships showcased their work.

However, there were some **hub-specific activities created which were perceived to have a positive outcome**, including:

- Hub launch events that were relatively big and conference-style, with all schools/colleges in the region invited
- An animation explaining hubs was produced and posted in different platforms
- Fortnightly virtual coffee mornings with schools/colleges were introduced
- Different social media was used to ensure the right audiences were engaged, i.e. LinkedIn and Twitter for teachers and parents and Facebook for students
- Liaisons with strategic stakeholders, especially those who they had strong relationships to start with, to support the hubs promotion by adding links to their websites, and/or signposting to the hubs in meetings and other forums they attended
- A communications campaign encouraging users to contact a member of Uni Connect through the website, i.e. using Unibuddy, a functionality that enables live chat.

As regards the **hubs' websites, some partnerships appear to more systematically promote them than others**, especially those which had embedded functionality that allowed for online live delivery of outreach activities. Those partnerships:

- mentioned and circle back to the hubs' websites via all their signposting activities
- invested more effort in promoting the hubs and the website, i.e. through the launch events already mentioned.

Some partnerships however were less willing to promote their website, for reasons highlighted above, such as the potential for tension in instances where established relationships already existed between other providers of outreach activities and schools/colleges.

Further to that, an additional reason was the concern among some partnerships about the impact on their processes and staffing structures, which had taken a long time to establish and which in their view were now working. They were concerned that creating 'an all-encompassing website' which could become the focal point of most communications would be relatively disruptive to their operations.

“So, we created a video, an animation, to describe what the outreach hub is, and that was posted in different platforms. We also, because we have quite strong contacts in the LEP, for example, they posted it out to their networks. People have shared it on LinkedIn. We have sent it out to all of our schools. ...a little box that got posted to schools. So, it’s got, like, a teabag, and biscuits, and stuff, and then information about the outreach hub, which was just quite a nice little low-cost thing, with a little incentive in, but actually information. And that has actually driven quite a lot of engagement to our hub. And so, all of the information, we’ve worked quite hard on making sure that our website has everything on it, so we’ve worked quite hard to get that up and running.”

“So, someone like the [name of strategic stakeholder group], they’ve got 150 schools who they’re meeting with on a monthly basis, and they have incredibly well attended forums for careers advisors, teachers, headteachers... their head, is going to be one of the key members of our board. She feels, actually having this website and being the hub, that one-stop-shop for all of these access and guidance requirements is a vital need in the area. So, she’s in that position that forming what we do, but also then is the mechanism to share it further and wider, we’re having to utilise people who have already got strong networks rather than trying to build it all ourselves.”

“Direct communications... with schools and colleges. We had different things like weekly newsletters that were sent through to teachers and careers advisers. Monthly email bulletins. We also hold borough level meetings through school improvement teams where hub staff have attended to try and identify local need and signpost accordingly. Social media is used quite effectively as a platform for connecting by Twitter and LinkedIn. I know Linking London set up a LinkedIn connectivity group, which was a good way of collaborating, sharing resources and signposting to virtual open days, and things like that.”

Outreach hubs’ websites

What progress has been made to deliver the hubs’ websites?

All 29 partnership outreach hub websites are now up and running,¹¹ and most partnerships reported that their websites were more or less completed. For a small minority, their website was work in progress, this was mainly due to disruption caused by COVID-19 and staffing issues which prevented swift delivery. In these cases, partnerships outsourced the development of their websites. However, outsourcing in the longer run was not straightforward all of the time or less burdensome. One partnership was looking to bringing the work back in-house as soon as staffing issues were resolved. To further enable quick delivery, some partnerships were dividing responsibilities, especially as regards the websites’ content, across members of their Uni Connect team, an approach especially useful to medium and smaller partnerships.

Overall, there were **mixed views on the relative importance and impact of the hubs’ websites against proactive support and strategic engagement, as well as against other signposting methods**. Such views influenced partnerships’ approach to prioritising and developing their hub’s website, with some investing and utilising it more than others.

¹¹ Two partnerships had suggested that their website launch was imminent. By the time this report was written these websites have been launched.

What type of information has been included in partnerships' hub websites?

To deliver the websites' content, the majority of partnerships integrated relevant information within their existing Uni Connect websites. A few created a separate website or invested in revamping similar websites and their content, which until the introduction of the hubs existed in parallel to but separate from Uni Connect. The following table summarises the types of information partnership leads suggested is included in the hubs' websites.

Table 7.2: Information included in hub's websites

	Outreach – regionally/locally – a few examples	Outreach – nationally
For all schools in the area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web links to CEC • Web links to LEPs 	Links to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UCAS • The Pay Index • Uni4Me
For new hub schools (and targeted outreach schools)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targeted outreach activities, tailored for the hubs audience where needed • Hub activities created based on hub schools' feedback • Activities for under-represented groups identified in the region through strategic engagement 	

Larger partnerships, although not exclusively, were more likely to create their own content as well as tap into other platforms and support. For example, larger partnerships mentioned using the Uni4Me platform as well as using The Pay Index platform as part of a collaboration between a few larger Uni Connect partnerships.

“...we are looking at other ways of signposting to our resources and others through strategic partners like the LEP, and [regional] hub, and the [name of network] Network. We're trying to make sure all our websites and resources link to each other, and there's not too much duplication going on in terms of resourcing, time and cost, hopefully.”

“We have been producing our own resources, we've been looking at sourcing our partners' resources to go on there, in terms of vlogs, videos, PDFs, worksheets, lesson plans, etc., and we've also partnered up with Uni4Me. So, we're working with NEON... and we're also collaborating with some other... [Uni Connect] partnerships as well... on The Pay Index, again, which is a really, really exciting project....”

How have partnerships identified relevant, up-to-date and comprehensive information for their hubs' websites?

Partnerships identified relevant information for the hubs' websites in different ways, with some partnerships using a wider variety of methods than others. As expected, information to be included related to the audiences each partnership aimed to engage. In most cases, **partner information was the main source of content as it was the most directly relevant.** Relevant content for the websites was also collected by:

- drawing from team members' knowledge of relevant national and regional/local websites for inclusion
- adapting or building upon existing similar websites parallel to Uni Connect websites
- reviewing relevant national and regional/local websites and information
- using regional meetings related to outreach to gather relevant information
- running focus groups with schools and students to elicit the type of information that would be most useful
- analysing data/mapping conducted as part of proactive support to influence decisions on what content to include.

To ensure the relevance of information, one partnership also went through a **relatively rigorous process of evaluating information collectively as a team, rating the suitability of the signposting information identified before adding it in to its website.**

Although **identifying relevant information was easier to achieve, collating up-to-date and comprehensive information was more challenging.** Receiving information in a timely manner was an issue for many partnerships; they were dependent on partners and schools who did not have the time to support or did not have the relevant information. As regards **the comprehensiveness of the websites,** that **varied.** The table below provides a summary of factors influencing the comprehensiveness of information.

Table 7.3: Factors influencing comprehensiveness of information

Factors influencing comprehensiveness	More likely to include comprehensive content	Less likely to include comprehensive content
The value placed on the hub's website/position in the overall Uni Connect and hubs offer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hub's website is viewed a key part of the overall hub's strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hub's website is viewed less impactful and useful as part of the overall purpose of the hub
Delivery expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hub's website, even if seen burdensome in some of its aspects, i.e. its monitoring and evaluation requirements, other of its aspects are seen inter-related and supportive of the hub's overall purpose, especially proactive support Aspects seen burdensome, i.e. monitoring and evaluation of telephone queries, were deprioritised/abandoned 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hub's website is viewed burdensome in terms of expectations for its delivery
Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Dedicated team member/capacity in place – more a feature of larger partnerships Responsibilities for content development are shared across team members where capacity is challenging – more a feature of small partnerships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Small team with the need to prioritise across all Uni Connect activities
Website functionality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Functionality that allows partners to upload their information directly (such as the Uni Taster Day platform) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Functionality is relatively basic and/or needs investment which is not perceived to be a priority
Other outreach resources available	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outreach resources are seen useful to include/signpost to, especially by making them easily accessible on the hub's website 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Including/signposting to others' outreach activities is perceived to be duplicating efforts

To support the inclusion of up-to-date and comprehensive content three partnerships used the Uni Taster Day platform. Uni Taster Day is funded by the lead institutions and allows partners to directly upload their content onto the hub's website. Although one partnership suggested that, despite investing in the platform, partners were not as forthcoming to upload their information, two partnerships pointed to its benefits:

- It alleviated administrative burden from central teams; they did not have to spend time chasing partners to gather the relevant information or uploading it.
- It found partners to engage with the process when they realised the opportunity to further market and promote themselves through the website, with no cost.

“[When we found relevant information] then went through with a fine-tooth comb, we had a panel of staff going through and rating the suitability and the value in terms of the information, which once that process had been undertaken and the information had passed those particular tests, we then put the information onto the website, so it’s a completely different animal to what it was before.”

“We fund their [partner] licence to a platform called Uni Taster Days, which I think a lot of institutions are probably using. It allows our partners to advertise their outreach and widening participation offer to schools nationally. So, we fund that to our partners and then it’s hosted on our website as well as the individual university partner’s website as well. So, there’s an incentive for them to do it because it means that they don’t need to pay for their subscription, it makes their website look really nice because schools can search it and then for us, it helps us because it means that we don’t constantly need to be going out to HE institution partners every week saying what’s your offer, they’re doing it automatically and it gets pulled into our website straight away.”

“And so, all of the information, we’ve worked quite hard on making sure that our website has everything on it, so we’ve worked quite hard to get that up and running. So, we really do, kind of, direct people to that website....”

“So, I think we signpost to things, but the things that we signpost to are perhaps not as voluminous as the OfS had thought when they were setting this strand of the programme out.”

“...we invested in Uni Taster Days... so all of the activities from our partners are directly advertised onto our website for all of our schools, colleges, students etc. [who] can all go on there and view those... so we don’t get involved in the admin side of that, when they advertise a taster day or an open day, they can list it onto Uni Taster Days themselves which then shows on their website as well as ours. It’s one of the main reasons we invested in it, to get rid of that admin side of that because I didn’t want to just be chasing people all the time saying, ‘Have you got something else for us,’ or them constantly saying, ‘Can you make a new event?’”

How have partnerships collected signposting monitoring and evaluation data?

Data collected from signposting was seen as being key to continuous improvement, serving two purposes:

- 1) To fulfil the requirements for collecting monitoring and evaluation data by the OfS
- 2) To support monitoring and evaluation activities identified by partnerships, i.e. tracking resources most downloaded to gauge usefulness and promote them further on their website.

The large majority of partnerships do not record much of the monitoring and evaluation data required by the OfS and expressed a lack of appetite to do so in the near future. Their reasoning is that:

- The requirements are relatively unclear at times, i.e. what constitutes a ‘query’
- The requirements are burdensome, with the burden outweighing the benefits
- The required data are not always fit for purpose, with data such as hits on the website or downloads are not evaluative, i.e. giving a sense of whether a user understood the information and found it useful

- Ability to track unique visitors to their websites
- The platforms of most partnerships lack the capacity to gather all the data required as regards the tracking of different types of queries such as telephone, in-person and online. Consequently, the breakdown of these queries by type and audience as well as their outcome is disabled too.

From the monitoring winter returns, only one partnership seems to be tracking most queries whilst some track queries through the website, and others track through telephone, and/or in person, and/or by direct email. There also appears to be a relationship between data recorded by partnerships and the approach they take to signposting, i.e. those partnerships which record website related data are more prone to use and promote the hub website, whilst those with more in-person and direct email related data are more prone to promote signposting via their team.

There was recognition that meaningful monitoring and particularly meaningful evaluation for signposting were difficult to achieve. There was also recognition that, overall, any evaluation of signposting activities (and of the hubs as a whole) would be relatively premature. Examples of the ways in which partnerships attempted to monitor and evaluate signposting activities include:

- Manually inputting queries required, i.e. inputting queries into excels sheets and chasing partners on the outcome of queries
- Only recording queries required by the monitoring returns through routes they perceived less burdensome, i.e. their website, or through methods which constitute their approach to signposting, i.e. in-person signposting
- Using analytics and usage data, such as resources most downloaded, to gauge usefulness and promote them further on their websites, i.e. through Google Analytics built on their website
- Using the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT)¹², an online database which allows longitudinal student tracking and, thus, monitoring and evaluation of their signposting activities.

Examples of approaches to data collected for monitoring and evaluation purposes for signposting are provided in the table below.

¹² The Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) Service provides collaborative and innovative solutions for widening participation (WP) outreach teams throughout the HE sector. More information can be found at <https://heat.ac.uk/>.

Table 7.4: Approaches to data collection for signposting monitoring and evaluation purposes

	Monitoring		Evaluation	
	Signposting approach	Potential impact	Signposting approach	Potential impact
Website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Website requires users to register, enabling unique users to be identified 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> More reliable traffic data More reliable user data, i.e. downloads, visited pages/activities, etc. Co-ordinated, cost and time-effective approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding of partners to use the Uni Taster Days platform. In exchange require quarterly updates on what the outcome from the website queries has been 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reliable data to support evaluation More comprehensive and up-to-date provision of information to schools/colleges Less burdensome for lead institutions
Telephone and in-person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Responses to queries through phone, email or any other route mention or direct teachers, students, parents and career advisors to use the website to send queries (push to web) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Less burdensome for lead institutions and partners Cost and time effective approach 	N/A	N/A
Use of other website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) platform 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engagement data for continuous improvement Cost and time effective approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of the HEAT longitudinal data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evaluating activities over time becomes possible Cost and time effective approach

“It’s just I don’t think any of us are really clear on what OfS actually want to be getting from... this data, I know other leads have sent back zeros...”

“It’s difficult, because the team, even though criteria [is set up] for it [signposting] they’re still maybe not 100% what they should be recording, because, what classes as a query and what doesn’t? They end up writing down all sorts of things, which is fine, but I suppose that could become a bit clearer.”

“As a criterion for funding the signposting service for our partners, we require them to report back to us on a quarterly basis on the outcomes of the signposting that we have funded. So, for example, we might get an inquiry come through from Uni Taster Days for X university to do X intervention. We will then forward that on, record all these signpostings and then on a quarterly basis we will ask the institution or FE college to tell us what the outcome of that inquiry was.”

“We’ve just developed, not quite a rating, but trying to get into that idea of, if that becomes the popular one that is valued and used, then let’s try and get that on the front page. We’re getting to that point now of now only being able to just do the analytics around visitor numbers, but starting to cleanse it.”

“...in terms of an activity tracker that we have to send with the monitoring return, that’s taken from HEAT. We have always had a mantra right from day one that if it is not on HEAT it has not happened. In this way, our staff know that that if you have got an activity taking place it has got to be recorded on HEAT.”

Sustainability

Staffing was seen as key to the hubs’ websites continuing to be relevant and up-to-date. Some partnerships suggested that if certain requirements, especially those relating to the monitoring and evaluation of signposting, were reduced, the websites would be easier to maintain. Others suggested that if proactive support activities were to be further streamlined going forward, that could possibly also support partnerships to maintain their websites more easily.

8 Conclusions and recommendations

In this final chapter we outline the conclusions and recommendations based on the data collected and analysed for the formative evaluation to-date. The aim of the evaluation was to understand how practices were forming for the hubs and to support improvements to practice. It is important to note once more here that the OfS created the hubs based on feedback from partnerships and allowed for flexibility so that partnerships could lead in delivery as both experts in their field and of their contexts. This formative evaluation was timely in understanding practices and the challenges faced so that the hubs' work is further defined.

Understanding the remit and delivery of outreach hubs

There was a high degree of variation amongst partnerships in the way that outreach hubs had been conceptualised and operationalised. This was mainly due to differing interpretations of what constitutes hub activities. The relatively broad definition of what hubs were expected to achieve was intentional; the aim was to allow partnerships flexibility in their approach to delivery, enable room for innovation and enable alignment of hub activities to regional needs. However, it also created challenges for partnerships in developing a clear narrative on the purpose, aims and objectives of the hubs and this affected their buy-in, as well as the buy-in of some of their governing boards and wider stakeholders.

The different interpretations of the hubs and resulting variation in implementation by partnerships was also evident in analysis of variables relating to context and partnership characteristics. This analysis found no clear or strong pattern in terms of implementation, although there were some indications that the size of partnerships, numbers of schools served and stage in lifecycle were associated with approaches to implementation.

To further improve their understanding and implementation of hubs, partnerships have themselves initiated monthly meetings during which they discuss common issues and challenges and exchange practice. These meetings are highly valued, and feedback suggests that more peer-to-peer practical support would be appreciated. Such support also has the potential to encourage further consistency and effectiveness in terms of implementation. Monitoring and evaluation data collected by the OfS was also seen as a key part of continuous improvement processes, but partnerships were overall unclear on how the data being collected was used or what lessons were being learned from it.

Recommendations

For the Office for Students

1. To further support the development of a **clear ‘narrative’** for future signposting and strategic outreach activity, the OfS could consider:
 - Providing further **guidance on expected practices or a minimum level of practices expected**
 - Liaising with partnerships to **derive** some **measurable outputs** for signposting and strategic outreach
 - **Defining expected outcomes**, as well as who would be evaluating progress towards these.
2. Despite the lack of clear patterns in terms of implementation between partnerships, there are indications that some partnership characteristics influence implementation – **partnership size, number of schools/colleges/learners served and stage of progress**. To support further consistency and continuous improvement, the OfS could consider:
 - Encouraging partnerships to **assess** their **signposting and strategic outreach** practices **using the above characteristics and further test** their **usefulness**
 - **Providing** partnerships with **analysis of the monitoring and evaluation data based on such characteristics**. Such analysis would enable partnerships to benchmark themselves against other partnerships with similar characteristics, identify potential areas for improvement and seek targeted peer support as and when needed.

For the OfS and partnerships

1. Partnerships could work with the OfS to **define measurable outputs and expectations of progress** based on their contexts so that expectations are in line with their characteristics and local needs. Measurable outputs could account for partnerships’ size, the numbers of schools/colleges/learners engaged and stage of progress. This means that some expectations might differ between different groups of partnerships, but that their progress will be reflected more accurately.

For partnerships

1. **Partnerships could explore further structures and approaches to facilitate more peer to peer support** for partnership leads and other roles. Peer-to-peer support needs to be **structured around indicative factors influencing implementation**, such as partnerships size and other identified in this report. Partnerships should also seek the support of the OfS, e.g. in terms of organisation, administration and/or facilitation of these meetings to reduce their workload.

Partnerships' operating models and outreach hub infrastructure

There have been visible changes in partnerships' operating models for the effective support of hubs. Operating models were:

- a) placing more emphasis on regional needs;
- b) becoming more outward looking, engaging with more stakeholders and more frequently through the use of technology;
- c) more encompassing, engaging learners, parents and carers as well as teachers.

There was also good progress in the development of governance and staffing infrastructure for the hubs, enabled by the existing targeted outreach structures. Governing boards expanded to include mainly FE colleges, which, overall, were found to be more challenging to engage. Interviewees valued governing boards which set the strategic direction of their partnership, although some governing boards, it was reported, were disengaged. Staffing structures had not changed significantly and did not seem to need to either. Overall, staffing numbers, roles and responsibilities varied considerably even amongst same-sized partnerships. Importantly, there were a few partnerships who had merged teams and/or programmes which existed in parallel to Uni Connect, enhancing the programme's capacity and increasing opportunities for a more strategic and streamlined approach to outreach in the region.

Retaining staffing structures was seen key to effective delivery, and staffing was the main cost and the main concern for partnerships. There was consensus that staffing structures were key to the sustainability of the hubs (and targeted outreach) and that losing staff would equate to losing valuable infrastructure, expertise and, potentially, some relationships with schools/colleges. Staff in schools and colleges were particularly helpful in engaging and continuing communications with schools/colleges during the pandemic.

Recommendations

For the Office for Students

1. Governing boards and the engagement of key stakeholders, including that of senior Access and Participation Plan (APP) leaders, are crucial to the strategic direction and sustainability of the hubs. The OfS could engage/support **national and regional communications to further champion the work of the hubs.**
2. Staffing structures are both a key cost for partnerships and critical to the sustainability of the hubs. To support sustainability of infrastructures, the OfS could consider:
 - **Hybrid funding models**, including the OfS, partnership/partner and match funding
 - Incorporating targeted outreach into the hubs
 - Providing **information** to enable **partnerships to benchmark** themselves **against other similar sized partnerships**, especially as **regards staffing costs.**

For partnerships

1. **Aligning hub targets with APPs** could facilitate further engagement of governing boards and wider regional stakeholders, which could in turn enable a more strategic approach to delivery, as well as, potentially, increase the likelihood of match funding. Partnerships could consider:
 - Intensifying efforts to **engage Pro Vice Chancellors, school headteachers and college principals** to their governing boards
 - **Applying processes** relating to **effective governing board engagement**, e.g. those identified in this evaluation and share examples of good practice.
2. Given that staffing structures are key to sustainability and that decisions on Uni Connect's funding are imminent, partnerships could re-think staff structures and operating models for further effectiveness and efficiency by:
 - **Assessing governance structures**, operating models and staffing structures **against similar sized partnerships** and those sharing similar regional goals for improvement and efficiencies/streamlining, particularly differences identified in staffing numbers and roles in some similar sized partnerships
 - **Sharing** practices on effective **succession planning processes**
 - **Sharing** practice on **how best to engage FECs** given that they are harder to engage.

Strategic engagement

While the profile of partners engaged through outreach hubs is broadly similar to that for targeted outreach, there has been a notable shift in the nature of this engagement with the hubs facilitating more strategic collaboration with local partners. The depth, nature and effectiveness of engagement with partners is variable across outreach hubs, ranging from attending meetings to the co-design, delivery and funding of outreach activities.

In some areas, partnerships have undertaken mapping exercises to identify schools and groups of learners who were not eligible for targeted outreach but who needed support. Partnerships used a range of different approaches to identify schools/colleges for both signposting and proactive support, with some drawing on sophisticated analysis of multiple datasets and others using one or two indicators. There was no consistency identified in the approach and measures being used across areas.

Uni Connect partnerships have made some limited progress in securing match funding. The majority of this has been in-kind rather than cash, which has included digital support, venues or other facilities to support delivery, and staff time. The main challenge to securing match funding is the financial constraints faced by partner organisations, which was referenced by all partnerships. A further challenge related to a lack of clarity and understanding amongst some partnerships on what constituted match funding.

The strategic relationships established between Uni Connect and local partners were considered to be sustainable. A sense of trust and shared endeavour had been developed and partnerships felt an obligation to local partners to deliver on commitments made. The complex and fragmented landscape of outreach provision at the local level points to a clear role for an impartial, trusted broker to help facilitate better coordination and alignment of provision.

Recommendations

For the Office for Students

1. Consider **developing guidance for partnerships on which databases and eligibility/threshold criteria to use in order to identify learners/schools/colleges for outreach hub activities**. This should not be as specific as for targeted outreach, which was very focused on one cohort of learners, but would help bring some alignment and consistency to the approaches being taken to this and would further contribute to a more 'coherent' narrative about the purpose, aims and objectives of the hubs.
2. **Provide greater clarity and direction on what constitutes match funding and how best to monitor and report on this**, particularly for in-kind investments.
3. The key role of **outreach hubs as an impartial trusted broker of outreach activities should be highlighted in communications at a national and regional level** to help raise awareness of the added value they bring, **and** support schools/colleges navigate the existing landscape of provision.

Proactive support

Partnerships' approach to proactive support varied due to a perceived lack of clarity on expectations and confusion over how it differed from 'targeted outreach'. Proactive support was seen as most effective when it was closely linked to strategic engagement, with activities on offer that were, by and large, the same as those created for targeted outreach but tailored. Few new activities were created, and those that were focused on the needs of underrepresented groups. In line with targeted outreach, proactive activities closely linked with school/college interest and the curriculum were highly valued. There were mixed views however on whether attainment support/programmes should be part of proactive support.

Overall, partnerships responded well to the challenges of COVID-19, accelerating virtual delivery of support. They also suggested that they would possibly continue to deliver activities using online and blended learning. Having staff located within schools/colleges was also seen as instrumental in continuing communications during the pandemic. To support sustainability, partnerships suggested focusing on the most impactful activities and underrepresented groups, collaborating further with each other to exchange practical tips and resources, and offering CPD programmes that enabled career advisors and teachers to deliver outreach activities themselves.

Recommendations

For the Office for Students

3. Provide **further clarity on the differences between targeted outreach and proactive support**.
4. Further consider the **sustainability** of proactive support activities, balancing the quantity of support offered to schools/colleges versus quality and ensuring activities meet beneficiary needs. To support this, the OfS could consider:
 - Focusing activities on **schools/colleges and underrepresented groups in the region**, instead of having a wider regional focus

- Focusing proactive support on the **most impactful activities** and ensure that **more sustained/longer-term support** is provided to students through such activities
- Encouraging partnerships to continue developing activities which **align with key priorities of school/colleges, including attainment**. Although funding is available for learning recovery due to the pandemic, consideration could be given to proactive support also playing a role given that: a) attainment is the prime concern for schools, thus could support engagement; and b) attainment gaps have widened due to the pandemic and seem to be widening. This means that access of underrepresented groups to HE could be more challenging in future as it requires students to gain relevant grades. Thus, the OfS could consider whether attainment initiatives might be beneficial as part of proactive support, in what format and in which circumstances, as well as how such programmes could be best evaluated.

For partnerships

1. Partnerships could further enhance their delivery by:

- Exchanging examples of effective practice on how to **avoid duplicating outreach activities** in their areas, as well as how to best **engage schools/colleges** where **saturation of relevant interventions is noted**
- Exploring similar school/college challenges and groups of underrepresented learners in HE across regions so that they **exchange practical solutions and resources**
- Further enhancing their technology infrastructures to enable **high quality virtual delivery**
- Continuing to offer **online and blended learning programmes** and assess their impact relative to face-to-face support
- **Developing CPD programmes to create a cadre of career advisors and teachers** able to deliver outreach activities in order to increase capacity and potentially reach.

Signposting

Signposting was the hub activity that showed most variation in how it was interpreted and operationalised. Signposting targeted one or more in targeted outreach schools/colleges; Hub 'cold spot' schools/colleges; and/or all schools/colleges in partnerships' region. It was also operationalised at three different levels, with some partnerships operating at all levels, some on two and some just on one (see Figure 7.2). These levels were: a) national signposting; b) signposting to targeted outreach schools served; c) signposting to 'cold spot' schools. This variation was due to the perceived lack of clarity on expectations for delivery by hubs, variation in buy-in, and the monitoring and evaluation requirements, which were seen to be taxing – many partnerships did not collect most of the data required although they recognised that it was difficult to develop meaningful monitoring and evaluation metrics for signposting.

Some partnerships embraced the idea of becoming a central point of contact for outreach in their region and put signposting central to their hub's strategy, with the hub's website playing a key role. Others were more sceptical about this approach. As regards the hubs' websites, they were all in operation but there were mixed views on their relative importance and impact, compared to proactive support and strategic

engagement, alongside other signposting methods. The comprehensiveness and timeliness of the information included in partnerships' websites varied considerably.

Recommendations

For the Office for Students

1. Provide **further clarity** on signposting expectations, including identifying **minimum expected levels** for signposting delivery and hub websites.
2. Further **communicate and exemplify**, i.e. through cases studies, the **benefits of creating a 'one-stop-shop'** for outreach activities in regions and the role of the hubs' websites in achieving this.
3. Reduce the level of monitoring and evaluation data required for signposting, especially the items that most partnerships find burdensome, e.g. tracking queries made via phone or in person.
4. Further explore how to best **evaluate the impact of signposting activities**.

Appendix 1 – Theory of Change (ToC) for outreach hubs: A starting point

Inputs

Inputs for the outreach hubs include:

- **Funding from the Office for Students** – a total of £10 million per year (for 2019-20 and 2020-21) has been allocated to establish the hubs across the 29 partnerships for Phase Two.
- **Partnerships' time and resources** – includes human resources, such as staff time and operational resources to support governance, set up and delivery arrangements, and monitoring and evaluation activities.
- **Management and oversight** – which relates to human resources and particularly the time school and college staff and learners spend when involved in hub activities, as well as time and resources spent by other stakeholders (i.e. senior leaders' attendance to meetings, match-funding provisions, etc.).

Activities and outputs

Outreach hubs involve three key activities:

- a) Signposting;
- b) Proactive support; and
- c) Strategic engagement.

Signposting

Signposting aims to connect schools, colleges and advisors to existing local and national outreach. To achieve this aim, partnerships are required to provide a **central point of contact** and online resource for outreach activity for the areas they cover by:

- Creating a '**one stop shop**' **website/webpage(s)** with relevant information related to outreach activity both in the local area and nationally and promoting this website as the main point of contact for outreach in the areas.
- **Collating information** on local/national outreach relevant to each user group.

To deliver effective signposting, partnerships need to collect information on existing local and national outreach provision that is relevant, comprehensive, accessible and accurate. This information needs to be kept up-to-date to ensure that it is current and reliable. Partnerships also need to develop effective communication strategies and approaches, particularly for reaching schools and colleges who are not already involved in targeted outreach or targeted through 'proactive support'.

Proactive support

Proactive support should enable schools and colleges to access the local, regional and national outreach activities and support they need. To deliver this effectively, partnerships are to:

- **Map the existing outreach activity** in their area and nationally.
- **Examine relevant datasets** (i.e. POLAR4, FSM, IMD, IDACI) to identify under-represented groups.
- **Engage partners and beneficiaries** to understand local/national strategic priorities and gaps in existing outreach provision.

Strategic engagement

Strategic engagement is key to the sustainability of all outreach hub activities and of the Uni Connect programme as a whole. It requires partnerships to become a platform for collaborative activity regionally to ensure a joined-up approach to careers guidance, outreach activities and other higher education opportunities.

To effectively deliver strategic engagement, partnerships need to create a sustainable infrastructure that enables them to:

- **Understand the local and national landscape** of educational disadvantage, higher-level skills need, joined up career advice and specific local challenges.
- ‘Dip’ into the knowledge and resources, including financial, of different stakeholders so that they **respond to a changing environment** (i.e. changing government priorities, local needs or situations such as COVID-19).

Outcomes and impacts

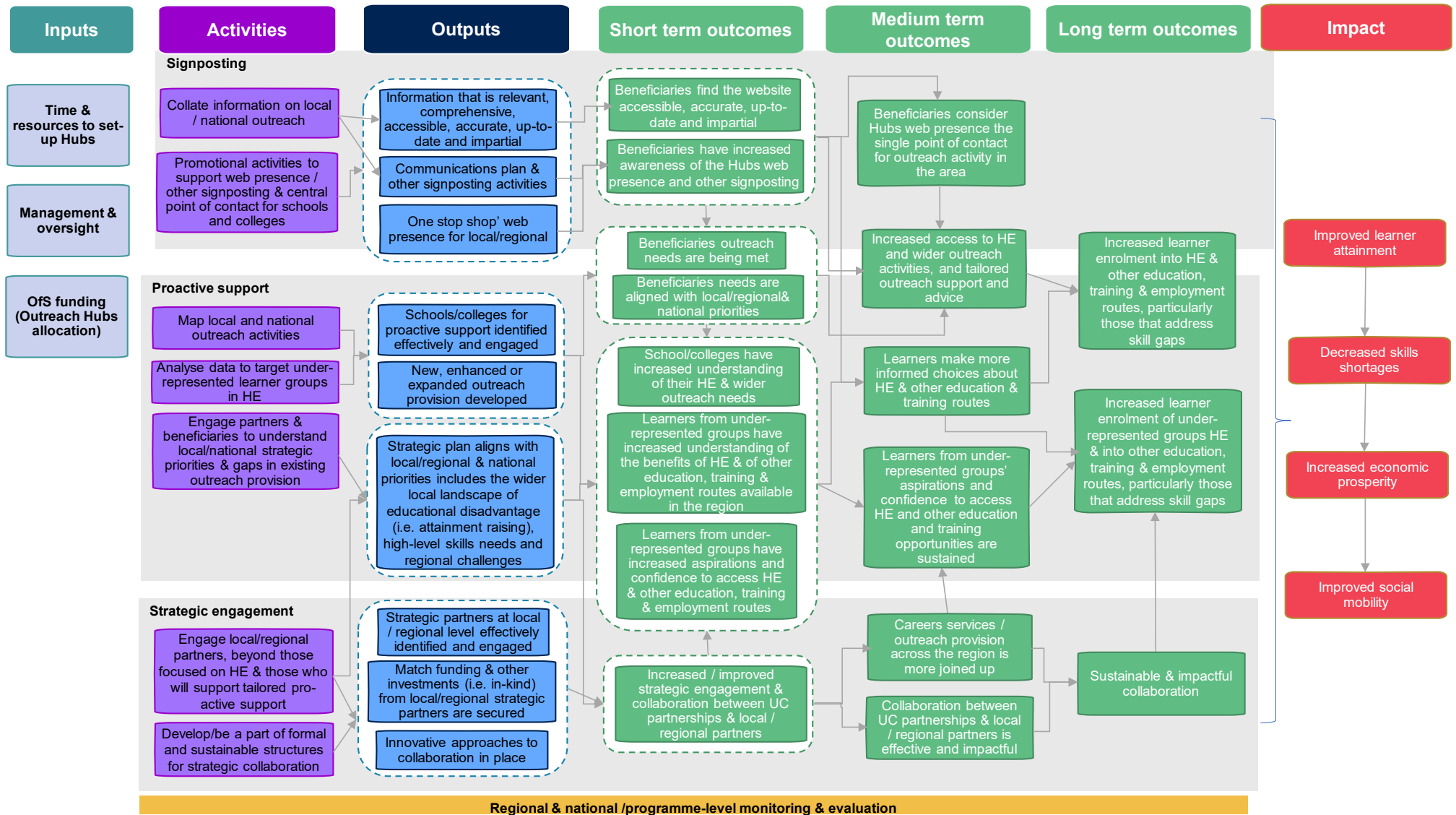
The success criteria¹³ for outreach hubs provide some direction on anticipated outcomes from hub activities. However, it has been particularly challenging to identify a full and definitive set of outcomes and impacts from the documentation reviewed and the interviews conducted. Outcomes and impacts suggested during the scoping consultations include:

- Access to and awareness of the outreach hub website and other relevant signposting
- Ensured sustainability of the outreach hub
- Increased understanding among schools/colleges of their HE and wider outreach needs
- Increased understanding among under-represented groups of the benefits of HE and of other education, training and employment routes available in the region
- Support for learners to make more informed choices about HE and other education and training routes

¹³ The success criteria for outreach hubs have been developed as a matrix which provides some tangible examples to help assess partnerships’ approaches and progress toward developing their outreach hub models.

- Increased access to HE and wider outreach activities, and tailored outreach support and advice
- Increased learner attainment
- Improved social mobility
- Decreased skills shortages.

Figure 8.2: Theory of Change



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For information please contact

Elpida Achtaridou, Director, Education, Children & Families & Policy and Evaluation Unit

Email: Elpida.achtaridou@ipsos.com

Susan Mackay, Associate Director, Policy and Evaluation Unit

Email: Susan.mackay@ipsos.com

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