

# Emerging insight report

## COVID-19 and Uni Connect

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This short report provides insights from 11 Uni Connect partnerships into the challenges of adapting and delivering outreach activities in the context of COVID-19 and offers emerging understanding of how learners have been affected.

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### Key findings

- The disrupted secondary education context significantly challenged partnerships that traditionally delivered outreach face-to-face via schools and colleges and caused many activities to be cancelled or postponed.
- Partnerships rapidly upskilled to adapt existing activities and materials for online delivery, in some cases supporting learners with more flexibility and choice. However, some activities, such as IAG and mentoring, were easier to adapt than others, like campus visits and summer schools. Few new activities have been designed specifically in response to the restrictions imposed.
- New barriers to engaging learners during the pandemic, including access to technology, meant that online outreach has not always been able to successfully reach Uni Connect target learners and other underrepresented groups who need the most support to make informed choices about higher education (HE).
- Very limited evidence suggests that some online mentoring and multi-activity engagement has been as effective as face-to-face delivery, but that less immersive, online approaches to activities such as summer schools may be less effective in helping learners understand what student life is like.
- Further evaluation is needed to understand the impact of mode of delivery on both levels of engagement and learner outcomes to ensure new blended approaches capitalise on the strengths of online delivery and are at least as effective as the predominantly face-to-face offer.

## Uni Connect context

Uni Connect is a national outreach programme funded by the Office for Students (OfS). Since its launch in January 2017, 29 partnerships have been delivering activities to young people living in areas where HE participation is lower than might be expected given their GCSE results. The aim is to increase the number of young people from this target group that go into HE through delivering outreach activities which support learners to make informed decisions.

In December 2019, the first news of COVID-19 emerged and from March 2020 the UK Government began introducing measures to limit the spread of what evolved into a global pandemic. To date, these measures have included the closure of schools and colleges to the majority of pupils for large parts of the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years. The closures have caused considerable disruption to the education system and programmes, such as Uni Connect, which were designed to be delivered primarily face-to-face and largely through schools and colleges.

The OfS recognised the pressures and uncertainties that COVID-19 presented to partnerships, as well as to the schools, colleges and young people they were working with. Partnerships were expected to adapt their approach in order to continue delivery, although expectations were reduced for the programme's learner engagement target. While partnerships are normally expected to engage at least 20 per cent of Uni Connect target learners, they were not held to account for this target from March 2020 for the remainder of the academic year. Partnerships have since been required to take 'all reasonable steps' to maintain 20 per cent engagement. Additionally, they have been encouraged to consider supporting a broader range of learners who are under-represented in HE, including those living outside Uni Connect target wards. Given the disruption to examinations in 2019-20 (and now also in 2020-21) and the uncertainty this caused for many learners, partnerships were asked to pay particular attention to the information, advice, and guidance (IAG) needs of those making a transition, including those hoping to progress into HE. <sup>i</sup>

## Developing this report

Since the outset of the programme, work has been underway to understand the effectiveness and impact of Uni Connect at a local and national level. Evidence of the impact of partnerships' activities is regularly collated and independently reviewed by CFE and forms a key part of the national evaluation. Given the disruption to delivery caused by COVID-19 and its potential impact on outcomes for learners, during the latest call for evidence<sup>ii</sup> partnerships were invited to share any information, research or evaluation on:

- The effects of COVID-19 on approaches to Uni Connect delivery, including how activities have been adapted
- The effectiveness of new interventions or modes of delivery developed in response to the pandemic
- The impact of COVID-19 on learners' lives, education, engagement in Uni Connect, and their attitudes and intentions towards HE.

Eleven partnerships shared sixteen sources of information that describe how they adapted their approaches in response to COVID-19 and guidance from the OfS, some of the challenges they encountered, and the perceived effects on learners. Two of the sources explored the impact of the changes to the delivery of activities on learners based on survey data collected prior to and during the national lockdown. Although the evaluation evidence is limited, it provides some insights into the effectiveness of digital delivery by comparing learner outcomes with those achieved through face-to-face approaches. Details of the information provided by partnerships are in Appendix 1. The remainder of this report summarises the insights from this information.

## **Adapting outreach delivery during COVID-19**

All Uni Connect activity was impacted to some extent by the sudden and unexpected introduction of COVID-19 restrictions, which forced partnerships to pause delivery and consider how they could adapt their offer for the new context. The substantial scale and speed of the changes required to adapt activities for remote delivery presented several initial challenges, including a lack of experience of designing digital interventions, and had time and resource implications. The information provided by partnerships demonstrates that they were able to overcome many of these challenges to continue delivery of some activities, but others had to be cancelled.

Eight partnerships that provided information on the effects of COVID-19 on outreach delivery, report that it was relatively quick and straight forward to adapt information, advice and guidance (IAG) materials, that would have usually been delivered to learners during workshops, so they could be accessed by learners via websites. Practitioners also recorded information sessions for learners to access online in their own time, in addition to delivering virtual sessions on aspects of HE, such as student finance and the application process. In contrast, partnerships that had planned to deliver campus visits cancelled them once the restrictions were imposed because staff did not feel they could offer learners an authentic experience of university life virtually. A previous formative evaluation of Uni Connect<sup>iii</sup> reports that some partnerships developed the technology to deliver virtual campus tours prior to the pandemic. However, no further evidence on the wider roll-out or impact of this activity was provided.

Summer schools and residential also proved more challenging to adapt. All of the partnerships that provided information cancelled these activities, except one which adapted its summer school and delivered it remotely. The virtual summer school mirrored the design of the planned four-day, face-to-face programme and provided a range of live and pre-recorded activities. These included subject tasters, IAG on study options and student finance, and sessions on mental health and wellbeing. It was not feasible to deliver some of the planned activities online, such as sports and an animal handling session, but the partnership was able to replicate some of the planned social activities by hosting virtual movies and quiz nights.

The review suggests that few partnerships developed new interventions specifically in response to the pandemic. Those that did achieved this with support from their partners in local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and careers and training providers. One partnership developed an information and careers guidance strategy in collaboration with their local authority at the specific request of the schools in its region. This was designed to ensure learners had access to personalised guidance in the context of the changes to examinations and HE recruitment. Another worked with school staff to develop and deliver bespoke support sessions.

## Delivering outreach during COVID-19

The schools and colleges that partnerships work with have themselves been severely impacted by COVID-19. After they closed, the first priority for teachers was to adapt their own practice and learning resources to enable their young people to continue learning, in the most part, from home. Maintaining the buy-in of teachers to Uni Connect while they were navigating the changes presented a significant challenge for partnerships at first. However, once schools and colleges had adjusted to the new context, partnerships were able to secure their agreement to recommence delivery of Uni Connect activities.

Partnerships' next step was to alter the way they targeted and worked with learners in order to deliver their adapted offer. In response to the OfS's guidance, partnerships sought to broaden the reach of Uni Connect by engaging a wider range of underrepresented groups. The shift to online delivery helped to facilitate this by offering:

- **Accessibility.** Platforms such as Google Classroom, Teams and Zoom enabled partnerships to increase the number of young people who were able to access interventions at any one time and engage learners who may have found it difficult to attend face-to-face. One partnership developed a new virtual learning environment, which enabled outreach staff and teachers to interact with learners, upload content, check learners' work and provide feedback.

- **Flexibility.** Online delivery offers learners the opportunity to engage in materials and pre-recorded sessions at a time that is convenient for them and to select material that is of interest and addresses their particular needs. According to one of the sources, some learners from a target ward found it preferable to engage online because it enabled them to work at their own pace in a less pressured environment.
- **Volume and choice.** The use of online platforms enabled partnerships to increase the volume and range of activities available to learners, when compared with equivalent face-to-face interventions, such as a summer school. This is made possible because online delivery is less time-constrained and allows learners to move between sessions, as well as dip in and out of activities, easily.

As a consequence, three partnerships reported that the number of learners who registered their interest in attending virtual activities was considerably higher than equivalent face-to-face interventions. Although a proportion of learners subsequently dropped out (over a quarter in one instance), overall, attendance was high.

## Barriers to engagement

The information provided by partnerships contained limited data on the learners who engaged in Uni Connect during the pandemic. However, it suggests that a significant number of non-target learners have engaged in some Uni Connect activities over the past 12 months. One partnership reported that just a fifth of learners who attended one of its online sessions met one or more of its widening participation indicators and only 3 per cent were Uni Connect target learners. While the necessary shift to online delivery is perceived to have successfully increased access to outreach activities overall, partnerships' concerns about the level of engagement among target learners are evident from the information provided. According to eight partnerships that gathered interview data from teachers and Uni Connect co-ordinators, disadvantaged learners were less likely to have access to technology (such as laptop, tablet and/or a stable internet connection) to enable them to engage in learning and outreach while home schooling, and this acted as a barrier to access. Prior to funding being made available by the Department for Education for IT equipment, one partnership purchased tablets, laptops and dongles for learners to help overcome this issue.

According to perceptions and observations of teaching and partnership staff, further drawbacks of the online approach that have acted as barriers to engagement for all learners include:

- **Voluntary attendance.** Two partnerships speculate that learners were less likely to engage in outreach because, unlike lessons with their teachers, it was not compulsory for them to attend.

- **Digital fatigue.** Learners have been required to spend significant amounts of time on-screen, both attending lessons and completing assignments. Two partnerships perceive that some learners were reluctant to spend further time on-screen in order to engage with Uni Connect.
- **Data protection.** Three partnerships report that staff experienced difficulties gaining access to learners' email addresses and telephone numbers. Consequently, they were unable to contact them to encourage them to engage in online outreach activities.
- **Impersonal approach:** Online delivery is perceived to be more impersonal and less engaging than face-to-face approaches. Often learners are unwilling or unable to switch on their cameras during sessions and facilitators are unable to see the majority of participants while sharing their screen. This makes it more difficult for facilitators to read body language and respond to social cues in order maintain engagement. It is also more challenging to direct individual attention to those who may be struggling to understand or failing to pay attention.

Maintaining the engagement of schools and colleges in Uni Connect now they have re-opened is still presenting challenges. Although face-to-face teaching has re-commenced, there is evidence from the review that schools and colleges are de-prioritising outreach activities in order to focus on the core curriculum that learners may have missed or not fully understood while learning from home. Research by one partnership with Uni Connect staff based in schools and colleges suggests that this is especially the case in schools with a high proportion of disadvantaged learners as, given the difficulties they experienced with home learning, they typically have more to catch up on.

Although partnerships are now operating in schools and colleges, according to information submitted by two partnerships, they are often being asked to provide bespoke, one-off activities to meet a specific need (e.g., personalised careers guidance) rather than more sustained and progressive activities that Uni Connect was set up to deliver. Limited time for outreach, coupled with higher rates of pupil absence due to illness and/or the requirement to self-isolate, have led to concerns that some target learners may be missing out. This could have implications for the programme's longer-term outcomes.

# Potential impact of COVID-19 on outcomes for learners

Prior to the pandemic, evidence<sup>iv</sup> was emerging of the positive impact that outreach activities, such as multi-intervention approaches, mentoring, workshops and masterclasses, and summer schools can have on intermediate outcomes for learners, in particular:

- Increased knowledge of HE and other post-18 options
- Increased confidence to make informed choices about future education
- Increased likelihood of applying to HE.

However, as highlighted above, the delivery of some of these interventions that are shown to be having a positive impact on learner outcomes, particularly summer schools, has been paused in the context of COVID-19, and target learners' engagement in online alternatives that have been delivered has been negatively affected by barriers to access. Concerns have been expressed by partnership staff that these factors could affect learners' ability to make fully informed decisions about HE and have a detrimental impact on rates of progression in the longer term. This is a particular concern among target groups who have been less engaged with the digital offer and who may continue to miss out while they catch up on their core subjects. Research by one partnership suggests that the outcomes from Uni Connect for learners in Years 10 and 11 could be most impacted in this context because, as one school leader pointed out, this is when most preparation for post-16 progression normally takes place.

There are also concerns among the partnerships that shared information that learner outcomes could be affected because, in some instances, online approaches may be less effective than face-to-face methods. Outcomes such as understanding the costs of HE and what student life is like are reported to have decreased following the virtual summer school. This is attributed to the lack of immersion in a real HE setting and limited personal interaction between learners and with HE students and staff. That said, there is also some evidence to indicate that other interventions, such as mentoring and multi-intervention programmes, are associated with positive outcomes, even when they are delivered online. One study reported a 10 per cent increase in the proportion of learners who said they were thinking about applying to HE after engaging in online activities delivered as part of a multi-intervention programme. In addition, evidence submitted by six partnerships in response to the wider call for evidence for the national impact evaluation demonstrates that they have successfully migrated their mentoring programmes to an online approach and achieved equally positive outcomes. <sup>v</sup> Given the evidence is still relatively limited, it is too early to say whether mode of delivery affects outcomes with any confidence.



Uni Connect is one of a number of factors that can shape and influence a learner's decisions about HE, and level of attainment at Key Stage 4 remains the key predictor of whether a learner will progress in the long term. School closures have impacted all young people, but there are widespread concerns that the existing attainment gap between the least and most advantaged will be exacerbated as a result of the pandemic.<sup>vi</sup> Research submitted by one Uni Connect partnership identified that family background and school culture had a strong influence on the support learners received during the pandemic, with learners whose parents/carers who were able to work from home typically receiving more support than those with parents/carers who were not. Level of parental/carer support with home learning is subsequently shown to impact learners' attainment and attitudes towards HE.

Given the disruption caused, there is speculation about consequences of the pandemic for HE progression rates, particularly amongst under-represented groups. Some fear it will have a detrimental effect in the context of increased financial pressures and concerns about the quality of the HE experience. However, the latest UCAS data<sup>vii</sup> demonstrates there has been a significant uptick in applications to HE for 2021-22, particularly among 18-year-olds, suggesting that the current context could be having a positive effect on progression rates.

## Challenges and opportunities

### Re-engaging target learners with outreach

- The focus in schools and colleges on ensuring learners catch up with the core curriculum is likely to continue, limiting the time and opportunities available for outreach. Partnerships may therefore need to consider targeting specific groups and prioritising specific activities in order to reach and engage learners most in need of support.
- To encourage schools and colleges to (re)engage in outreach, partnerships should draw on current evidence to demonstrate how Uni Connect is helping to increase learners' confidence, motivation, subject knowledge and attainment and how it can support schools and colleges in their efforts to ensure learners 'catch up' and achieve their potential.
- Partnerships may also wish to consider how they could work more intensively with younger learners (who missed out on support during the pandemic) in the later stages of their journey to ensure those with the ability and aspirations are supported and encouraged to progress to HE.



## **Integrating online and face-to-face delivery methods**

- Emerging evidence suggests that there are clear advantages, as well as some drawbacks, to delivering outreach online. Through their local evaluations, partnerships should capture learning on the elements of online delivery that work (as well as those that don't) for under-represented groups. Partnerships should also examine whether activities are as effective when delivered online as they are when delivered with face-to-face.
- Insights into the relative strengths of different modes of delivery should be used to inform blended approaches that overcome barrier to access and maximise engagement for under-represented groups.

## **Understanding the impact of COVID-19 on outcomes for learners**

- It is important to take account of the external context and the ways in which it could be driving learner behaviour when evaluating the impact of Uni Connect at both a local and national level. The impact of COVID-19 on learners' intentions towards HE is being explored through the longitudinal learner survey for the national evaluation. Drawing on this and data on how the wider social, political and economic context is changing post-pandemic will enable Uni Connect partnerships and the OfS to assess the impact of COVID-19 on target learners' progression to HE relative to learners overall in future analyses.

## APPENDIX 1: SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

Overview of material submitted	Summary of information		
	Learners' attitudes and progression to HE	Learners' engagement with Uni Connect	Programme delivery
<p>A draft journal providing insights from secondary school teachers leading on Uni Connect into the challenges schools faced in delivering HE outreach to their students during the pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six staff over a 12-month period between October 2019 and November 2020.</p>	<p>While all school staff felt it was too early to assess the full impact of COVID-19 on students' intentions towards HE, some reported that some students were worried about what going to university in 2020 would look like and had financial concerns. Online material was produced to allay their worries.</p> <p>The school staff perceived that the impact of the pandemic would be greater in schools where fewer students typically progress to HE rather than in schools where a culture of HE progression already exists and where students already have the social and cultural capital required to successfully apply and transition to HE.</p>	<p>Concerns were expressed about the impact of COVID-19 on the level of engagement of Year 10 learners in Uni Connect and the subsequent impact this could have on intermediate outcomes.</p>	<p>The first national lockdown meant in-person delivery was not possible and all external activities such as campus visits, taster days and summer schools were cancelled. During this time, the partnership launched its online learning platform, making several activities, including study skills workshops, available online.</p> <p>Outreach has largely been forced to take a back seat while schools concentrate on making up for learning lost during the school closures and focus on keeping students and staff COVID-safe.</p>

Overview of material submitted	Summary of information		
	Learners' attitudes and progression to HE	Learners' engagement with Uni Connect	Programme delivery
A report providing an overview of teachers' views on the role of outreach activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews were conducted with 21 teaching professionals who acted as their institution's key contact for the Uni Connect partnership in summer 2020.	Interviewees felt that those from less advantaged backgrounds faced greater challenges in the context of the pandemic and had less access to outreach activities. Their learners had expressed more doubts about the value of HE given increasing levels of youth unemployment. There was also an increased need to seek employment to support families where the main income earners had lost their jobs or been furloughed.	Some Uni connect learners could not access outreach activities due to a lack of technical equipment.  Staff anticipate challenges targeting learners from the Uni Connect cohort when the new school and college year starts. Partnerships will need to work with the groups (bubbles) that young people have been assigned to, which will contain a mix of Uni Connect and non-target learners. The partnership anticipated that it would need to modify its targeting approach/requirements.	The teachers interviewed praised the partnership for its effective communication and the speed with which it developed new online resources. These resources ranged from subject-based guides to information on routes into HE and advice on student budgeting.  Online resources were perceived to be effective because of the personal and relatable nature of the video materials, the accessibility of the language, and the opportunity presented to share and engage with parents, including via email and school Facebook pages.
A report that provides an overview of activity feedback data collected during the COVID-19 lockdown period.	Data showed an increase in intentions to go to university (from 51% to 57%), a decrease in the proportion of learners who were "not sure" about what to do after school/college (from 30% to 22%), and an increase in the proportion of those "thinking about applying" to HE (from 74% to 84%).	By the end of July 2020, there had been over 4,700 unique views of online resources. However, not everyone who viewed an activity started and completed the activity they viewed.	IAG materials were uploaded onto the partnership website. Learner feedback on activities was positive: 92% reported the activity was good or excellent, with 72% agreeing to using the information from the activity in the future. However, some learners noted links did not work and the website would often crash.
A summary outlining the way in which the partnership adapted their summer school delivery during the pandemic.	Participants in the virtual summer school reported better outcomes in relation to knowledge and attitudes	The summer school was delivered to a greater number of learners overall than would have been possible on	The partnership adapted their summer school from a residential campus-based activity to a virtual event delivered online. The virtual summer school offered

Overview of material submitted	Summary of information		
	Learners' attitudes and progression to HE	Learners' engagement with Uni Connect	Programme delivery
Using programme surveys, comparisons are made between online and face-to-face delivery.	towards HE than participants in the on-campus summer school in 2019. The 2019 cohort reported better outcomes in relation to knowledge of the costs of HE and what student life is like than the 2020 cohort that took part in the virtual summer school.	<p>campus, but many did not engage with the whole programme.</p> <p>Approximately 50% of learners who signed up for the residential summer school chose to attend the virtual summer school.</p> <p>Fewer Uni Connect target learners participated in the virtual summer school compared with the planned residential.</p>	<p>learners more choice in the sessions they could attend.</p> <p>Opinions about the mode of delivery were divided. Around half of learners felt that the online experience was not as good as face-to-face delivery and were less engaged as a result. The other half preferred online delivery or perceived it to be equally as good as face-to-face.</p> <p>Learners were not able to be seen or heard as they were not willing or able to use their cameras or microphones. The experience was not as interactive as it would have been if it had been delivered in-person.</p> <p>The benefits of attending and staying at a university campus could not be fully replicated for learners. However, the virtual summer school was more accessible to learners who would not want to, or be able to, attend a residential school for financial, emotional or cultural reasons.</p>

Overview of material submitted	Summary of information		
	Learners' attitudes and progression to HE	Learners' engagement with Uni Connect	Programme delivery
A summary report on the findings of a survey with schools/colleges involved in Uni Connect to gain further information and insights on how schools were operating during the lockdown period, with 29 responses received in April 2020.	Staff reported that they were concerned about learners' exam results, applications to and progression to HE. Learners have missed out on the wealth of information they would normally receive in the final weeks of school, including what to do if they have changed their mind about what they want to do next. Concerns expressed about Year 11 learners missing out on the reminders and support they get with their applications for post-16 options.	79% cited lack of IT equipment/access to internet as a barrier to learning. Respondents also commented on a lack of motivation, parental support, and a lack of home study space for students. Some schools/colleges responded by providing printed packs for students and IT equipment where possible.	No information on programme delivery.
A report illustrating the results of a survey of students who had participated in a mentoring programme. Eight out of 10 students completed the survey.	All eight students reported that the mentoring had helped them to explore their future options, understand more about HE and understand more about jobs and careers.	Due to constraints the intervention had to be cancelled. There is no further information on these constraints.	Students wanted more mentoring sessions but due to constraints on both sides they were not feasible. The mentor continued to provide resources to the students.

Overview of material submitted	Summary of information		
	Learners' attitudes and progression to HE	Learners' engagement with Uni Connect	Programme delivery
A report summarising an evaluation of a virtual residential event. Data is drawn from a survey of eight students.	The aim of the residential was to increase students' confidence and knowledge about future careers. Two more (out of eight) students said they now intended to go to HE after the activity. All eight said they could imagine themselves going to university, and all said they understood how it could benefit them.	Participation decreased as a result of moving the activity online – 45 students signed up to take part in the residential but approximately half dropped out when it moved to a virtual format (22 students took part).	The partnership set up an online mentoring platform so students could liaise with a student ambassador from the university. This was to encourage students to socialise with each other.
A report on the findings from a focus group with college learners in summer 2020 who were engaged in targeted activity during the pandemic. Learners were asked to reflect on their experiences and consider the impact the lockdown may have had on their studies and their future.	One learner said that they felt less pressure since studying from home, which allowed more time to consider options. They subsequently made the decision to go to HE.	Not explored in the report.	Studying at home was a challenge for learners, who highlighted issues with access to resources and the lack of a conducive environment to study in.

Overview of material submitted	Summary of information		
	Learners' attitudes and progression to HE	Learners' engagement with Uni Connect	Programme delivery
<p>A report focusing on parental assets and influence on young people's decision-making: engaging 'hard to reach' parents. The report draws on information from a literature review and interviews. There is a section on the challenges experienced by parents when supporting their children during COVID-19.</p>	<p>Family background and school culture are two factors impacting on the support young people received during the pandemic and which subsequently influenced attitudes towards HE.</p> <p>Parental occupation influenced whether they were present at home and could support home learning.</p> <p>Parents praised schools for providing online resources (virtual career fairs) that supported their children with decision-making about the future.</p>	<p>Not explored in the report.</p>	<p>Parents reported that COVID-19 had caused additional difficulties for them and their children, particularly the lack of technological equipment and additional teaching support they would ordinarily have access to.</p>
<p>Formative research into barriers to engagement in education following the start of the pandemic. The research captured learners' views on virtual learning in the broadest sense and did not focus on engagement in Uni Connect interventions specifically. It was used to inform the development of Uni Connect interventions in the future.</p>	<p>Lockdown and home learning have had a negative effect and impacted the future choices of many young people. Slightly fewer young people wanted to go to university, down 6% from 59% to 53%. There was a similar story for sixth forms, down 3% from 54% to 51%.</p> <p>The biggest barrier that</p>	<p>Students marginally preferred work being emailed to them than virtual lessons; 79% said virtual lessons worked 'to some extent' for them compared to 85% for emailed work.</p>	<p>No information on programme delivery.</p>



Overview of material submitted	Summary of information		
	Learners' attitudes and progression to HE	Learners' engagement with Uni Connect	Programme delivery
Data from a longitudinal survey (began in 2012) completed by 1263 young people in the area is summarised.	young people faced in planning their education was not knowing what opportunities were available (61%) followed by cost (41%).		
A report providing an overview of activity delivered in year 3 (2019-20) of the Uni Connect programme that was used as part of the end of year monitoring report in September 2020. It provides contextual information along with a summary of the successes and challenges of the programme, and the impact of COVID-19 on delivery.	Not explored in the report received.	Accessing learners virtually was challenging and as a result targets for engagement have been impacted on two of seven projects delivered.	Most interventions have continued, enabled by online platforms such as Teams, Zoom and a virtual learning environment. However, for some projects, navigating GDPR and safeguarding regulations was challenging.
A short paper based on a rapid response analysis of participant data exploring whether Uni Connect learners have consistent and appropriate access to internet. Analysis was conducted via ONS datasets on a) Internet users 2019 and b) household internet access.	Not explored in the report.	A third of learners who have engaged in the partnership's activities have limited access to the internet.	No information on programme delivery.

Overview of material submitted	Summary of information		
	Learners' attitudes and progression to HE	Learners' engagement with Uni Connect	Programme delivery
End-of-year programme evaluation report for 2019-20. Data derived from a one-off survey.	Intentions to go to university or HE increased across all year groups (Year 8 to Year 10) between 2019 and 2020.	62 (20%) of learners who attended a session met at least one of the partnership's widening participation indicators. 10 of those learners were Uni Connect target learners.	Staff developed a range of online resources that could be accessed by learners before the end of the 2019-20 academic year. These continue to be used in the 2020-21 academic year. As the impact of the pandemic on schools continues to be very real and disruptive, the initial work undertaken in 2019-20 provides a foundation for continued online provision.
A summary report exploring the impact of COVID-19 on outreach activities. The report is based on primary qualitative data gathered from co-ordinators who work directly with schools and students. It outlines the context and the difficulties of undertaking evaluation during this time.	Students with family members that work in customer-facing occupations such as retail, rather than office-based occupations that can be done from home, have been particularly impacted by the disruption caused by the pandemic. These students may lack support at home to access and persist in online learning and achieve their HE aspirations.	980 hours of planned activity were cancelled or postponed between March and July 2020, affecting approximately 10,000 learners. The partnership supported learners to access learning by purchasing and providing laptops and dongles (prior to the funding from DfE). Co-ordinators reported barriers to engagement with online activities, including access issues among Uni Connect learners, digital fatigue and the impersonal nature of communication.	Despite their lack of experience, and with few alternatives available, the partnership reshaped their outreach in order to move from in person to online activities. This was more appropriate for IAG interventions.  The partnership reports that accessing schools remains a challenge since they reopened because they are prioritising the core curriculum above outreach.

Overview of material submitted	Summary of information		
	Learners' attitudes and progression to HE	Learners' engagement with Uni Connect	Programme delivery
A report focusing on the ways in which COVID-19 has impacted learners' engagement with the partnership and programme delivery (masterclasses and IAG). The evaluation is based on data from a pre- and post-activity survey, interviews and learner diaries.	Not explored in the report.	Learner engagement with the virtual offer (masterclasses and IAG activities) since the pandemic began has been strong. While most learners would have preferred face-to-face encounters, they were grateful for the opportunities to partake in activities online.	The partnership offered virtual activities through Facebook. This acted as a barrier to those without an account. Other common challenges include poor internet connectivity, digital fatigue and boredom.
A summary of the activities (summer school, mentoring, workshops) delivered by the partnership during the pandemic. It covers changes to delivery as well as changes to evaluation processes, and explores what has worked well, not so well and lessons learned for future delivery.	<p>The summer school was successful in reaching a 65-75% threshold for outcomes such as increased knowledge of HE options (75%).</p> <p>16% of learner felt more confident they would progress to HE in the future as a result of mentoring.</p>	<p>The summer school reached considerably more learners than in previous years, with 129 registering to attend. Participation in activities was greatly enhanced by the flexible nature of the programme giving students the opportunity to access recorded content at any time. However, as attendance was not compulsory, or possibly because of limited or no digital access, up to a quarter of students did not engage with the summer school at all.</p> <p>Similar patterns occurred with the mentoring programme, with 28 students enrolling and 18 completing.</p>	A significant number of scheduled and anticipated activities with schools were cancelled. Where possible, activities were adapted to be delivered online and were offered to non-target ward students. The partnership reports it is more difficult to interact with students when activities are delivered online. Some learners find online activities less engaging, but others report that less personal interaction suits their learning style and gives them time to consider their responses. Providing students with the flexibility to complete activities in their own time, e.g., view recorded content, may increase participation.

# Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> OfS [guidance](#)

<sup>ii</sup> CFE is conducting four calls for evidence as part of the national impact evaluation of Uni Connect. The first was conducted in April 2019 and the findings published as part of the [End of Phase One report](#). The second took place in March 2020 and the findings presented in a [report](#) published in December. The third call closed in January 2021 and a short report of the key findings will be published in late spring. The fourth call will take place in summer 2021.

<sup>iii</sup> HOP case study of an immersive campus tour in CFE (2019) [The National Collaborative Outreach Programme end of Phase One report](#)

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

<sup>v</sup> CFE (2021) [Third independent review of the evaluation evidence submitted by Uni Connect Partnerships](#)

<sup>vi</sup> See for example UK Parliament: [COVID-19 and the disadvantage gap](#) and EEF: [Best evidence on impact of COVID-19 on pupil attainment](#)

<sup>vii</sup> UCAS [2021 cycle application figures](#)