

# A review of collaborative support for improving equality of opportunity in access to higher education

Final Report  
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## 1. Executive Summary

This report outlines the findings and conclusions of a review of the landscape of collaborative outreach in England. By ‘collaborative outreach’ we mean the ways that higher education institutions (HEIs) work together, and with partners, to improve equality of opportunity in access to higher education. Government funding for collaborative outreach is currently provided through the Uni Connect programme.

The Office for Students (OfS) commissioned a team from Public First to investigate and answer five key questions in relation to collaborative outreach:

1. What is working well about Uni Connect, and to what extent is there variation across the provision and partnerships?
2. What is not working well about Uni Connect, and to what extent is there variation across the provision and partnerships?
3. What are the opportunities for a future, more effective, model of collaborative outreach?
4. What are the risks of adopting a different funding and/or delivery model?
5. What are the risks associated with making the transition to a new model and how can these be mitigated?

To answer these questions, the review team conducted research between June and December 2023. This included desk research to understand the historical, international and wider public policy context of collaborative outreach, qualitative fieldwork with over three hundred stakeholders, site visits and a survey of staff in the Uni Connect programme. In parallel, Public First also conducted an analysis of Uni Connect’s economic and social impact.

### Key findings

**There is a strong underlying case for some form of centrally funded programme to encourage and deliver high quality collaborative outreach.**

- Collaborative outreach has been a feature of the system in England for more than two decades. Uni Connect is the latest of five (or depending on how we count it, six) centrally funded collaborative outreach programmes in that time.

- The literature review conducted as part of this review reveals a strong case in principle for collaborative outreach over and above action which might be taken by individual HEIs. This is for three main reasons:
  - Because HEIs have incentive to focus outreach activity on recruiting students to their own institution, especially students who are statistically more likely to attend and perform well throughout and beyond their courses. This would damage equality of opportunity for students that are currently underrepresented.
  - Because regulatory requirements to address this risk through Access and Participation Plans are still likely to incentivise individual action by universities, and thus lead to inefficacy, duplication of effort and gaps in outreach for some places and groups of students.
  - Because such collective action is likely to require additional funding since it is unlikely to be offered voluntarily at scale.
- Nearly everyone we spoke to as part of the review's fieldwork validated this in-principal case, confirming that collaborative outreach fulfils a real and ongoing need in the sector.

It would theoretically be possible to require HEIs to collaborate without any central funding. However, the overwhelming weight of evidence from our fieldwork suggests that Uni Connect's current work probably could not be sustained in the absence of some central funding. It is also unlikely that HEIs would be able or want to design and fund a successor collaborative model at a nationally consistent level.

**At their best, collaborative outreach programmes can be transformative for individuals and provide the 'connective tissue' that strengthens higher education access within regions and nationally.**

- Public First's analysis of data from the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) service found that students receiving an intensive package of outreach through Uni Connect had a significantly higher probability of attending university. For the estimated 2,350 additional students progressing to university in 2020/21 alone, we estimate a gain of £495 million of additional earnings in their lifetime.
- Based on this analysis, the economic benefit of Uni Connect is substantial – an estimated £5 to £9 of economic value generated for every pound of public money spent.
- This analysis looked only at a limited sample of students who received an intensive package of outreach, so we cannot assume the same kind of

transformational impact for the hundreds of thousands of students who engage less intensively with Uni Connect each year.

- However, evaluations suggest that engagement in a wide range of Uni Connect activities has a positive impact on students' knowledge of higher education. Many activities have a positive impact on students' self-confidence, skills (such as communication and problem solving), attainment and intention to apply to higher education.
- Stakeholders emphasised how Uni Connect partnerships can act as a connector, facilitating collaborative working between partners in a way that is responsive to local needs. In particular, through outreach that provides impartial information to groups of students that would otherwise be underserved.
- We also heard how Uni Connect partnerships have acted as a broker of relationships between schools, colleges and universities – successfully engaging schools and colleges that had not previously been engaged by higher education access initiatives.

### **Uni Connect could be more consistently effective and impactful.**

- National gaps in access to higher education between the most and least advantaged students have not narrowed during the lifetime of Uni Connect – and there is little evidence at a macro level of a reduction in the participation gap between Uni Connect target areas and the rest of the country.
- Much of the evaluation of Uni Connect activities does not allow us to make casual claims of impact – evidence of causal impact (i.e. attributable to Uni Connect) on student outcomes is only available for a small minority of activities.
- Although we heard stories during our fieldwork of transformational impact for individual students, we also heard from stakeholders whose experience of Uni Connect provision had not been so positive, suggesting that quality of provision varies between individual Uni Connect interventions and across the country.
- Some stakeholders compared their experience of Uni Connect unfavourably with that of other outreach providers – such as that delivered by individual HEIs and independent charities – which they described as having a more refined delivery model and better evidence of impact. In some cases, we heard that schools found Uni Connect outreach provision to be a useful default option, but only where provision more specifically tailored to their needs was not available.

- Similarly, although we know that Uni Connect partnerships can act as the connective tissue between local stakeholders, the extent to which Uni Connect partnerships are coordinating a truly collaborative approach to outreach with HEIs in their regions is mixed. Not all institutions are well engaged in the collaborative work of their local partnership and the programme's overall profile with schools – especially senior school leaders – is relatively low.

**There is evidence of several reasons for Uni Connect not consistently delivering to its potential.**

- *Lack of a shared understanding of what the strategic purpose of Uni Connect is – or should be.* Stakeholders did not express or point to a single or shared mission for the Uni Connect programme. At a basic level, we heard a difference of opinion about whether Uni Connect's fundamental purpose was to facilitate collaboration on outreach between HEIs, or to act as a separate and independent provider of impartial advice. And although Uni Connect's ability to act as the 'connective tissue' between different institutions and sectors is widely seen as its most valuable feature, there is a sense that this purpose has been eclipsed by a focus on activities rather than outcomes.
- *Shifting priorities from the OfS.* Stakeholders told us that they did not feel the OfS had articulated a sufficiently clear strategic mission for Uni Connect. No one we spoke to explicitly referenced the published aims of the programme. There was a sense that successive changes in emphasis from the OfS (the shift from 'targeted outreach' to 'strategic outreach,' the prioritisation and de-prioritisation of outreach to adults, the new priority on attainment raising) had created confusion about the programme's underlying purpose and frustrated partnerships' ability to build and refine a stable programme offer and their capacity to deliver and evaluate it. Sometimes stakeholder perceptions seemed to be at odds with the letter of OfS guidance – pointing to deeper challenges in communications and relationships between regional partnerships and the centre.
- *Some dispute over the efficacy or desirability of focussing on attainment raising.* From September 2023 the OfS has required Uni Connect partnerships to deliver evidence-based collaborative approaches to raise attainment in secondary schools. Although some Uni Connect partnerships have worked with schools to develop activities they are proud of, we heard widespread scepticism from across stakeholder groups about whether Uni Connect

should be undertaking this activity. For many in higher education, and in Uni Connect partnerships themselves, the new focus on attainment raising represents a further dilution of Uni Connect's mission, and an expansion into work that sits outside partnerships' core competencies. For schools, this has been a poorly explained (and even outright unwelcome) incursion into work they view as their own core competency.

- *Lack of central support functions across the 29 regional partnerships, and subsequent lack of consistent visibility of regional performance.* The regional structure for collaborative outreach is valued as an important way to understand and meet local needs. However, the current configuration of 29 regional Uni Connect partnerships may not be optimal, and could be driving variation in capacity. We heard that a lack of national or shared functions leads to duplication across partnerships. Recent efforts to strengthen common functions – such as TASO's development of common evaluation tools – are seen to have already added value. Some Uni Connect partnerships have invested heavily in data and evaluation capacity and have a sophisticated approach for measuring impact, but this is not universal, and limits the OfS's ability to judge with confidence how impact and performance varies between different types of activity and between regions. Accordingly, data and evidence on impact does not always appear to be driving decision making or accountability in the programme.
- *Low visibility among some non-HE stakeholders.* As noted above, Uni Connect has a relatively low profile within the school sector generally and with more senior school leaders in particular. There is no shared or consistent understanding across Uni Connect of which models for external partnership – including with schools, colleges or other regional partners, such as local government and employers – are most effective, despite general support for engaging a wider group of stakeholders in shaping the direction of Uni Connect.
- *Absence of multi-year funding, compounded by short-notice allocations of single year funding.* The most common feedback, by far, related to funding. None of the Uni Connect or predecessor programmes established since 2011 have been able to operate on a long-term footing, and it was widely cited that this has severely undermined their ability to plan effectively. Stakeholders described how this uncertainty makes it difficult for partnerships to retain staff and to evaluate and refine programming on a long-term basis, and the tensions it creates in relationships with HEIs, schools, colleges and other partners. The short-notice announcement of

funding on a single-year basis compounds the underlying sense of uncertainty.

**Although some stakeholder views did not always align, it is clear that the OfS can and should take some actions to strengthen the benefits of Uni Connect and maximise the value for money of a centrally funded programme in future years.**

- Stakeholders expressed different and sometimes conflicting views about what role they thought the OfS should play.
- Some concerns, especially around questions of volume of funding and the time period over which funding is allocated, are not just for the OfS but for the DfE as the OfS' sponsor department. Similarly, questions on strategic priorities and the latest focus on attainment raising as a core priority for Uni Connect comes from guidance given to the OfS and the Director of Fair Access and Participation by the Secretary of State in Spring 2022.<sup>1</sup>

### Options for reform and recommendations

**We believe there is a clear case for preserving some form of centrally funded collaborative outreach arrangement in England. However, we recommend that the OfS reforms Uni Connect, moving to an improved model for collaborative outreach** – one which addresses the challenges identified above and creates the conditions for more of Uni Connect's work to deliver the kind transformative impact we have seen is possible.

In designing a reformed model, the OfS should seek to achieve three overarching objectives:

1. Provide clarity about the ambition for long-term impact and the role of collaborative outreach in achieving it.
2. Give collaborative outreach practitioners and their partners the support and infrastructure they need to maximise impact.
3. Ensure the OfS has the levers it needs, both to hold regional partnerships to account for impact and to be responsive to national priorities.

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Secretary of State to the Chair of the Office for Students, "Guidance to the Office for Students on strategic priorities for FY22-23", 31st March 2022. Accessed here: [https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/be054f0b-696a-41fc-8f50-218eb0e3dcab/ofs-strategic-guidance-20220331\\_amend.pdf](https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/be054f0b-696a-41fc-8f50-218eb0e3dcab/ofs-strategic-guidance-20220331_amend.pdf)



These objectives speak to a key theme identified in our fieldwork – tension in the current relationship between the OfS and regional Uni Connect partnerships and a desire to reframe that relationship to achieve a better balance between accountability, regional autonomy and central capacity building and support. Stakeholders expressed different and sometimes conflicting views about what role they thought the OfS should play, but we heard a strong consensus in favour of the OfS setting a clear strategic direction for the programme and clear, stable parameters for partnerships to work within.

Whatever parameters the OfS sets are unlikely to please everyone. But the OfS's role in access and participation is not to please everyone; it is to provide effective stewardship of the sector in a way that delivers improved equality of opportunity for students, advances the policy priorities of the democratically elected government of the day (which can include short term changes) and ensures value for public money. In relation to collaborative outreach, fulfilment of the OfS's role might therefore take the form of providing leadership and support to regional partnerships, but it might also involve providing challenge where the programme is not living up to its potential for impact. Similarly – and in common with some of the international comparators discussed in the review – there may be instances in which the OfS concludes that national priorities are better addressed through central programming, rather than through an exclusively regional model.

To assist the OfS designing a reformed Uni Connect model, we have set out a decision-making framework, outlining the key questions to be answered. Where the evidence points strongly in one direction we have made recommendations accordingly.

### **Issue 1: What should the strategic mission for collaborative outreach be?**

- 1A: Should there be a relative focus of central government funding on 'connective tissue' or programme delivery?
  - **Recommendation:** Articulate a clear strategic mission and theory of change for collaborative outreach. These should clarify how the different activities of Uni Connect or a successor programme interact in service of long-term system change and improved student outcomes. In particular, they should clarify the intended balance of effort between 'connective tissue' or programme delivery, and the end state that the programme is trying to bring about in the medium to long term.
- 1B: What is the correct balance between delivering a consistent national programme and allowing for local autonomy? (For example, should OfS be

more prescriptive about which equality of opportunity risks partnerships should be focusing on, or leave it to individual partnership discretion?)

- 1C: Should a revised collaborative engagement programme maintain whole-of-England coverage? (versus focusing on a smaller subset of places or regions)
- 1D: What should the limits of scope for a revised collaborative outreach programme be; in particular, in relation to wider careers outreach? (i.e. how much, if at all, the programme should engage in providing IAG on postsecondary pathways that do not include higher education?)

### **Issue 2: What should the duration and level of funding for collaborative outreach from central government look like?**

- 2A: How important is multi-year funding in delivering a reformed collaborative outreach programme?
  - **Recommendation:** Make the case for a three- to five-year funding settlement for collaborative outreach, albeit with an interim solution pending the next Comprehensive Spending Review.
- 2B: Should a revised collaborative outreach programme be delivered with increased, maintained, or decreased overall level of funds?
- 2C: Should the OfS mandate provider contributions in a revised collaborative outreach programme?

### **Issue 3: How should funding for collaborative outreach be structured?**

- 3A: Should the OfS continue to dedicate some funds for a future collaborative programme to support central or shared services?
  - **Recommendation:** The OfS should deliver some functions centrally or commission their delivery on a shared basis for the benefit of the national network.
- 3B: Should OfS award some funds for a future collaborative programme via competition? (versus the current approach of allocating funds directly to regions via a formula)

### **Issue 4: What should the structure, size, and governance of the subunits of collaborative outreach be?**

- 4A: Should a future collaborative programme operate through a smaller, consolidated number of regional partnerships? (separate to the question about whole-of-England coverage)
  - **Recommendation:** Maintain a regional approach to collaborative outreach, but operate through a smaller, consolidated number of regional partnerships.

- 4B: Should a future collaborative programme set stronger requirements for multi-sector representation?
  - **Recommendation:** Require all regional partnerships to include in their governance arrangements representation from schools and colleges, and ideally from other regional stakeholders such as local authorities and employers' groups.
- 4C: Should future regional partnerships always be hosted by a 'lead partner' HEI?

**Issue 5: How should the success of collaborative outreach be measured, and accountability be delivered?**

- 5A: Should a future collaborative programme have stronger common standards and systems for evaluation?
  - **Recommendation:** Design a more comprehensive approach to impact evaluation linked to the programme's overall theory of change, and require regional partnerships to use that approach.
  - **Recommendation:** Establish common standards and systems for collecting, sharing and tracking data across the programme, streamlining the existing systems for tracking longitudinal impact.
- 5B: Should a future collaborative programme focus more on delivery of impact-based performance management? (i.e. reframing how the OfS manages the performance of regional partnerships to focus less on the activity they undertake and more on the impact they achieve, potentially with a greater emphasis on how collaboration between partners is leading to more impactful outreach in the aggregate)
  - **Recommendation:** Focus on holding regional partnerships accountable based on evidence of collective impact, rather than inputs and outputs.
- 5C: Should a future collaborative programme strengthen the links between collaborative outreach arrangements and the Access and Participation Plan (APP) regime for providers?
  - **Recommendation:** Better align planning and accountability for collaborative outreach with the APP regime.

Whatever way forward the OfS decides to pursue, the sequence of next steps it takes will be critical. To impose changes that would be seen by HEIs, colleges, schools and their partners as yet another relaunch of the programmes that have come and gone over the past two decades would be a wasted opportunity. But done well, there is a chance here for the OfS to make a genuine strategic shift, one that helps to catalyse a more collaborative, joined-up education sector and drives transformative outcomes for students.

Compared to most other areas of public policy, the overall aim of collaborative outreach is remarkably uncontroversial: stakeholders and the general public overwhelmingly support the proposition that students should have an equal opportunity to access the life-changing benefits of higher education. In implementing reform, perhaps the most important task for the OfS will be to harness the tremendous commitment and goodwill for this agenda.

## Glossary

<b>AHDP</b>	Access to High Demand Professions
<b>APP</b>	Access and Participation Plan
<b>CEC</b>	Careers and Enterprise Company
<b>CIAG</b>	Careers, Information, Advice and Guidance
<b>CITB</b>	Construction Industry Training Board
<b>CPD</b>	Continuous Personal Development
<b>DfE</b>	Department for Education
<b>EC</b>	Excellence Challenge
<b>EMWPREP</b>	East Midlands Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Partnership
<b>HEAT</b>	Higher Education Access Tracker
<b>HEFCE</b>	Higher Education Funding Council for England
<b>HEFCW</b>	Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
<b>HEI</b>	Higher Education Institution
<b>HEPPP</b>	Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program
<b>IAG</b>	Information, Advice and Guidance
<b>ITT</b>	Initial Teacher Training
<b>LEP</b>	Local Enterprise Partnership
<b>NCCEP</b>	National Council for Community and Education Partnerships
<b>NCOP</b>	National Collaborative Outreach Programme
<b>NERUPI</b>	Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions
<b>NNCO</b>	National Network of Collaborative Outreach
<b>OfS</b>	Office for Students
<b>PfP</b>	Partnerships for Progression
<b>RAG</b>	Red-Amber-Green
<b>SFC</b>	Scottish Funding Council
<b>SHEP</b>	Schools for Higher Education Programme
<b>SIMD</b>	Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation
<b>TASO</b>	Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education
<b>TUPE</b>	Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment)

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## 2. Methodology

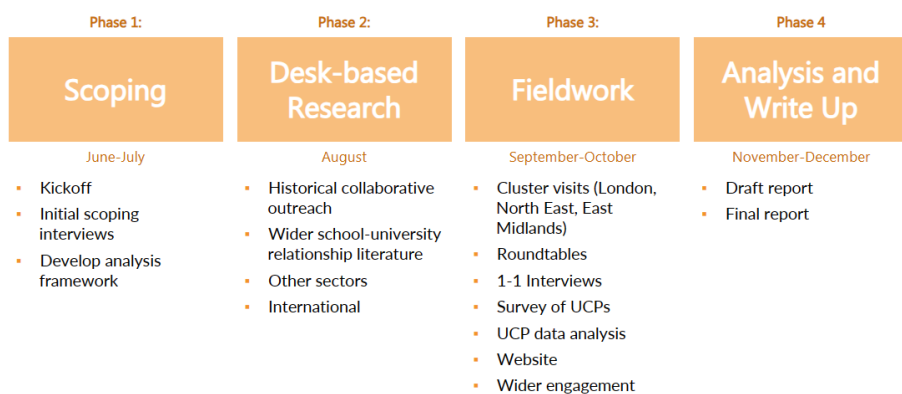
This report outlines the findings and conclusions of a review of the landscape of collaborative outreach in England. By ‘collaborative outreach’ we mean the ways that higher education institutions (HEIs) work together, and with partners, to improve equality of opportunity in access to higher education. Government funding for collaborative outreach is currently provided through the Uni Connect programme.

The review investigated five overarching research questions:

1. What is working well about Uni Connect and to what extent is there variation across the provision and partnerships?
2. What is not working well about Uni Connect and to what extent is there variation across the provision and partnerships?
3. What are the opportunities for a future, more effective, model of collaborative outreach?
4. What are the risks of adopting a different funding and/or delivery model?
5. What are the risks associated with making the transition to a new model and how can these be mitigated?

To answer these questions, we have taken a phased approach (Figure 1). This chapter gives an overview of the each of the four phases. The review team conducted research between June and December 2023. This included desk research to understand the historical, international and wider public policy context of collaborative outreach, qualitative fieldwork with over three hundred stakeholders, site visits and a survey of staff in the Uni Connect programme. In parallel, Public First also conducted an analysis of Uni Connect’s economic and social impact.

**Figure 1 – Our phased approach to this review**





### Phase 1 – Scoping:

First, we worked with colleagues from the OfS to finalise and confirm the approach and methodology for this review. We conducted six informal scoping interviews with experts from across the education sector and senior officials at the Department for Education (DfE) to test and validate our approach to the research.

Based on this input, we developed an Analysis Framework that unpacked the overall research questions into a series of detailed hypotheses and corresponding questions to test through fieldwork (Appendix A).

### Phase 2 – Desk-based research:

Next, we conducted desk-based research to understand the key evidence in relation to:

- Research and evaluations of collaborative outreach programmes since 2001
- The wider literature on school-university partnership working
- Collaborative outreach in other jurisdictions internationally
- Models for addressing ‘collective action problems’ in other sectors

We have produced a series of briefings on each of these four areas, which are summarised in this report and can be found in full in Appendix B.

As part of this phase, we also developed discussion guides designed to support a series of semi-structured qualitative approaches with stakeholders during the subsequent fieldwork phase. An example of a discussion guide can be found in Appendix F.

### Phase 3 – Fieldwork:

We undertook the bulk of our fieldwork over a period of roughly two months, gathering evidence to understand stakeholder views from across the education sector – and beyond – on collaborative outreach and Uni Connect. In total we spoke to 316 stakeholders as part of the review. This work included:

#### **One-to-one interviews**

We undertook 24 interviews with experts across the sector. These included senior stakeholders from schools and universities, sector figures and educationalists and wider regulatory bodies in different English sectors.

#### **Roundtables**

We undertook a series of six roundtables with groups of stakeholders from across the sector including:

- Access, outreach and leadership staff from post-92 HEIs.

- Access, outreach and leadership staff from research-intensive HEIs
- Access, outreach and leadership staff from small specialist HEIs
- Access, outreach and leadership staff at independent HEIs
- School and academy trust leaders
- Further education college leaders
- Leaders of third-sector organisations involved in higher education outreach

Across the roundtables we spoke to 56 individuals.

### **Regional cluster visits**

Members of the review team conducted site visits of three to four days each to experience Uni Connect’s work in three regions of the country, talking to stakeholders and understanding collaborative outreach in each area. In total we spent 29 days undertaking immersive research as part of cluster visits. The regions visited were:

- London – a large city with high numbers of schools and HEIs. Characterised by high attainment at GCSE and high progression rates to HE. Demographic markers include very varied levels of deprivation, low family history of HE and high ethnic diversity. Historically, low numbers of pupils have fallen into the target groups for Uni Connect interventions.
- North East – a diverse region which includes cities, post-industrial towns and rural areas. The region is characterised academically by low levels of attainment at GCSE and low progression rates to HE. The north east has high levels of socio-economic deprivation across much of the region. There is a low family history of higher education participation. The ethnic makeup is predominantly white British.
- East Midlands – a central region which includes several small cities and towns. Derby and Nottingham are both Education Investment Areas. The region has high levels of ethnic diversity and low levels of progression to HE.

**Figure 2: Elements of cluster visit approach**

<b>Research Element</b>	<b>Description</b>
One-to-one interviews	30-45 minute interviews with key stakeholders, including teachers, university leaders, Uni Connect partnership leads and practitioners, and relevant third sector partners.
Small-group interviews	30-90 minute interviews with small groups of individuals involved in collaborative outreach activity, including teachers, university leaders, Uni Connect partnership leads and practitioners, and relevant third sector partners.

University visits	Visits to a range of HEIs within the local area to observe widening participation activities, specifically Uni Connect funded widening participation activities on campus, and to speak to practitioners.
School visits	Visits to schools within the local area to observe university progression or careers information, advice and guidance (CIAG) provision and to speak to teachers and wider school staff.
College visits	Visits to further education colleges within the area to observe university progression or CIAG provision and to speak to college staff.
Third sector provision visits	Visits to local third sector provision delivered in collaboration with, or that intersects with, Uni Connect.

Across the three cluster visits, we spoke to 155 individuals.

**Uni Connect staff survey**

We provided an in-depth online survey for Uni Connect regional partnership leads, with questions developed in conjunction with our expert in-house polling team to elicit both quantitative and qualitative data. This was to ensure we provided all partnerships with the opportunity to share their experiences and have their views heard as part of the review process. The survey received 40 responses from across all 29 partnerships, as well as a shared submission from the partnerships as a collective.

**Wider engagement**

We launched a designated microsite on the Public First website, providing information about the review and inviting responses via a specific email address. This was available to ensure anyone who wanted to engage in the review had the opportunity to do so. We received 35 responses through this forum from a wide range of stakeholders including HEIs, individual schools, multi academy trusts, third sector organisations, companies providing educational services and educationalists.

**Phase 4 – Analysis and write up:**

All findings from Phase 3 were captured and coded in a confidential evidence database. This ensured that the depth and breadth of findings from the research teams were collected and systematised for analysis. We also undertook further desk analysis of data and documents provided by the OfS related to Uni Connect.

Taken in totality, we have used the findings and analysis from across the four phases of the review to produce this report.

**Confidentiality:**

Throughout this research, the identifying features of all participants have been blurred to protect their anonymity. This report uses ‘thick description’ to describe and interpret what has been observed and discussed so as to add broader context and provide analysis based upon the voices of the participants. Their words remain unchanged.

**Review team:**

This review has been led by Dr. Sally Burtonshaw (Associate Director, Public First), and overseen by Jonathan Simons (Partner and Head of Practice, Public First), along with Richard Eyre (independent education policy and strategy consultant, subcontracted through Public First).

The review team draws on the wide experience available at Public First:

- Jonathan Dupont, Partner and Head of the Economics and Data Practice
- Prof. Tim Leunig, Director
- Jessica Lister, Associate Director
- Ben Murphy, Research Manager
- Meg Price, Senior Policy Manager
- Ben Savours, Senior Economist
- Olivia Walsham, Associate Director
- Pete Whitehead, Senior Policy Manager
- Seb Wride, Director and Head of Polling
- Will Yates, Policy Manager

**Managing any potential conflicts of interest**

In undertaking this work, the review team built on their diverse experiences of working in and with the education sector, in England and internationally, over many years and in a wide range of policy and delivery roles. Inevitably, these experiences brought them into contact with organisations and individuals who have an interest in the topics under review.

Specifically, both Dr. Sally Burtonshaw and Richard Eyre have previously worked for higher education access charities (The Brilliant Club) and Sally has recently been appointed as a trustee of The Elephant Group (November 2023). Sally also worked previously at London Higher, a membership organisation for HEIs in London, which also has a subsidiary arm delivering outreach work on behalf of London Uni Connect. Public First has worked with access charities, universities and schools as previous and current clients. Members of the team, including Jonathan Simons and Dr. Sally Burtonshaw know John Blake, the Director of Fair Access and Participation, in a personal and professional capacity.

Public First's Partners are satisfied that none of these connections represents a live conflict of interest nor creates a risk of undue influence on conduct of the research. These connections did not affect the process or the outcome of the tender and John Blake was not involved in the commissioning process. No single team member has been responsible for the overall direction and decision making across the project. As a team of professionals, we are committed to transparency and research integrity throughout the process.

**Thanks and acknowledgements**

This review would not have been possible without the literally hundreds of individuals across the sector who shared their experiences, thoughts and knowledge with the Public First team. Our thanks go to all of these people who have enriched the evidence base and contributed to this process.

### 3. Context

In this review we use the term ‘collaborative outreach’ to mean – in its most basic sense – activity to promote equality of opportunity in access to higher education (HE) that is undertaken by a group of HEIs acting together in a joint effort. This is distinct from, but may complement, other outreach activity that providers undertake independently. In a broader sense, collaborative outreach usually involves engagement, and even deep collaboration, between HEIs and schools, colleges and other local partners with a stake in helping students make informed choices about future study.

Collaborative outreach work exists not just because people believe that access to higher education is a public good. It exists, over and above regulatory requirements imposed on HEIs individually via APPs, for three reasons:

- Because absent any form of regulation, many universities would be incentivised to focus on students who a) would likely attend their own university and b) exhibit characteristics that are more likely to make them perform highly throughout and beyond university, which correlates with certain socio-economic characteristics.
- Because individual regulatory targets to correct this (i.e. a requirement for universities to spend money on widening participation activity) are still likely to incentivise individual action by universities, and thus lead to duplication of activity, inefficiency of spend, and/or a focus on a small number of students from each university, which is collectively suboptimal.
- Because such collective action needs to be funded additionally (as opposed to being offered *voluntarily* or *compelled* via regulation), as HEIs would not opt to provide the required level optionally, or would not bind in all participants, and compulsion is likely to be seen as an unattractive facet by regulated universities.

The foundation of collaborative outreach in its present form, Uni Connect, is that:

- A regional infrastructure is funded on top of individual university activity.
- This infrastructure complements individual activity, and indeed ‘crowds in’ and helps direct further individual activity from participating universities.
- The benefits of this, to universities and to society as a whole, outweigh the cost to taxpayers of funding this collaborative activity.

A key theme we explore in this chapter is whether there might be other ways of solving this ‘collective action problem.’ As such, this chapter provides context for the review’s findings and subsequent options for reform. It is based upon desk-based research undertaken to better understand the wider landscape in which Uni

Connect operates. It sets out the key lessons we can learn from: research and evaluation of collaborative outreach programmes; the wider literature on school-university partnership working; collaborative outreach in other jurisdictions internationally; and models for addressing collective action problems in other sectors. More detailed discussion of each of these four areas is set out in Appendix B.

### 3.1 Lessons from research and evaluation of collaborative outreach programmes

Depending on how we delineate them, there have been five or six collaborative outreach programmes in the English higher education landscape over the last twenty years. These are summarised in Table 2 below.

**Figure 3: Collaborative outreach timeline**

Programme	Duration
Excellence Challenge (EC)	2001-2004
Partnerships for Progression (PfP)	2003-2004
Aimhigher <sup>2</sup>	2004-2011
National Network of Collaborative Outreach (NNCO)	2014-2016
National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP)	2017-2019
Uni Connect	2019-Present

These programmes can be broadly split into two phases, namely a first phase from 2001-2011, which included the Excellence Challenge, Partnerships for Progression and Aimhigher, and a second phase from 2014 to the present, including NNCO, NCOP and Uni Connect. Between these two phases (2011-2014) we see a gap in nationally funded collaborative outreach work. Each programme had different, albeit often similar, stated aims and the structure, funding and capacity of each programme varied significantly. Collaboration in each programme was differently conceived of and executed. Evaluation, review and research across the two phases can provide us with insight into both the impact and the challenges of these different programmes (Figure 3).

<sup>2</sup> Aimhigher amounted to a combination of the functions of EC and PfP into one body.

**Figure 4: Impact and challenges of historical collaborative outreach**

	Evidence of impact:	Observed challenges:
2001-2011	<p><b>Excellence Challenge Partnerships for Progression AimHigher</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Improved relationships</b> within and across institutions</li> <li>▪ Improved <b>attainment</b> for summer school pupils</li> <li>▪ Raised <b>aspirations</b> for pupils participating in activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Divergent aims</b> regionally</li> <li>▪ <b>Wide array of activity</b> – hard to evaluate</li> </ul>
Hiatus: 2011-2014		
2014-2021	<p><b>NNCO NCOP Uni Connect</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Single point of contact</b> for schools (appreciated after hiatus)</li> <li>▪ Increased targeting of <b>'cold spots'</b> and <b>collaboration with LEPs</b></li> <li>▪ School-reported impact on <b>learning and engagement</b></li> <li>▪ Refinement of <b>strategies</b></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Variable engagement</b> across schools, colleges and other stakeholders</li> <li>▪ <b>Demonstrating 'what works'</b> in terms of student outcomes</li> <li>▪ <b>Lack of stability</b> – a barrier to sustained outreach and relationships</li> </ul>



In summary, evidence for the impact of collaborative outreach programmes has been broadly positive. These collaborative arrangements have played an important role in connecting schools with HEIs in a more systematic, consistent and uniform way compared with both the situation before 2001 and the situation that emerged during the hiatus between the Aimhigher and NNCO/NCOP phases (2011–2014). In this sense, it seems that Uni Connect and its predecessors have at least somewhat addressed the collective action problem they were designed to tackle. That said, there has been limited conclusive evidence of the impact and value for money of collaborative outreach programmes, partly due to challenges in evaluating the range of activities undertaken. Lack of stability in collaborative outreach arrangements has also been cited as a barrier to fully engaging partners and sustaining longer-term (and thus potentially more impactful) activities.

### 3.2 Lessons from wider literature on school-university partnership working

Although, centrally funded collaborative outreach work in England has a twenty-year history, engagement and collaboration between schools or colleges and HEIs has existed in other forms (such as ITT, CPD and educational research) for far longer. From the existing research literature, we can better understand the characteristics of good inter-sector collaborative working in this shared space. Learning from school-university partnership literature is highly relevant to collaborative outreach and the aims of this review; whilst collaborative outreach programmes are structured as collaboration between different HEIs, a core aim, critical to their success is to collaborate with schools, as the primary sites of access and participation interventions. Moreover, as schools fall outside of regulatory remit of the Office for Students, the ability of Uni Connect programmes to engage schools on a voluntary basis is an important aspect of their intended function in building an infrastructure for HE outreach.

There are many definitions of school-university collaboration (usually referred to in the literature, and hereafter in this section, as ‘partnership working’), including Goodlad, who conceives of partnership working as “a deliberately designed, collaborative arrangement between different institutions, working together to advance self-interest and solve common problems” and Wiggans, who states that “partnership working requires a structured approach in which institutions plan a common approach and deliver a programme of work to meet agreed objectives.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Goodlad, J. I. (1988). School-University Partnerships for Educational Renewal: Rationale and Concepts. In K. A. Sirotnik & J. I. Goodlad (Eds.), *School-University Partnerships in Action: Concepts, Cases and Concerns*, Teachers’ College Press, p. 13; Wiggans, J. (2012).

Based on the literature there are six key characteristics of successful school-university collaboration in collaborative outreach:

1. **An equal or shared power balance between schools and universities** – it may be unrealistic for this to be fully equal, but partnership working should not be an entirely one-sided or ‘service provision’ relationship.
2. **Shared sense of the challenge that needs addressing** – schools and universities should share a sense of what is trying to be achieved, rather than serving the aims and metrics of one sector.
3. **Clear and consistent aims** – these aims should be constant across multiple years and have clarity of what success looks like for both sides.
4. **Sufficient ongoing funding** – collaboration needs to be funded in an appropriate and long-term manner to get buy in from both schools and universities.
5. **Commitment and resource to navigate organisations** – there needs to be a shared commitment to understanding the needs, capacity, calendars and key milestones that define each sector, and a will to navigate across the partnership.
6. **Ongoing evaluation** – activity delivered through partnership working should be evaluated regularly to demonstrate impact and provide assurance to all partners that this is a commitment worth making.

However, a frequent challenge raised about school-university partnership work is that it is theorised in a vacuum, one which ignores the wider (and often changing) policy and material contexts in which school-university partnerships operate. Gorard and colleagues’ review of progression to higher education research warns of the gap between theory and practice, stating that: “partnerships are a key strategy to both promote access to higher education and to change the structure and contents of higher education provision, but collaboration poses practical, organisational and cultural challenges.”<sup>4</sup> Realising the benefits of collaborative work in practice relies on the successful translation of theory to practice.

### 3.3 Lessons from other jurisdictions internationally

International evidence has relatively little to say about which models of collaborative outreach are most effective. Nevertheless, we have been able to

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*Collaboration and partnership working in a competitive environment*, Higher Education Academy, p. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Gorard, S. et al. (2006). *Review of widening participation research: addressing the barriers to participation in higher education*, University of York, Higher Education Academy and Institute of Access Studies, P. 85.

identify examples of the approaches taken in jurisdictions that are sufficiently comparable to England to yield potential insights and lessons. These are summarised in Figure 5.

The role of collaborative outreach in widening participation is an under-researched topic and there is a relative dearth of comparative studies in the international literature. Direct comparisons are also difficult because of the contextual variations between different countries' education systems. One analysis of policies to promote equality of opportunity programmes – as opposed to other policies for promoting equity – showed that they were a feature in a minority of countries, with England ranked as one of only six jurisdictions considered to be 'advanced' (along with Australia, Cuba, Ireland, New Zealand and Scotland).<sup>5</sup> Other countries' approaches to promoting equality focused on more foundational policy enablers of fair access, such as student finance provision and admissions practices, including 'affirmative action' approaches that prioritise the admission of students from under-represented groups.

Closer to home, both Scotland and Wales operate similar (though not identical) models to Uni Connect, but their systems supplement regional collaborative outreach with thematic programmes commissioned at the national level. Research suggests that initiatives such as the Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP) – the regional collaborative outreach programme in Scotland – have had a positive impact for participating pupils.<sup>6</sup>

Examples from the USA and Australia also provide a wide range of alternative models for facilitating intra- and inter-sector collaborative access (and student success) efforts, and for incentivising collaboration through government and philanthropic funding. The US Federal Government's GEAR UP programme, for example, has been found to have a positive impact on participating students' attainment and persistence in both school and higher education.<sup>7</sup> Nationally

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<sup>5</sup> Salmi, J. (2018). *All around the world – Higher education equity policies across the globe*, Lumina Foundation.

<sup>6</sup> Sosu, M. et al (2016). *Widening Access to Higher Education for Students from Economically Disadvantaged Backgrounds: What Works and Why?*, Retrieved 5 January 2024 from:  
[https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/57921/1/Sosu\\_et\\_al\\_2016\\_widening\\_access\\_to\\_higher\\_education\\_for\\_students\\_from\\_economically\\_disadvantaged\\_backgrounds.pdf](https://strathprints.strath.ac.uk/57921/1/Sosu_et_al_2016_widening_access_to_higher_education_for_students_from_economically_disadvantaged_backgrounds.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Sanchez, J., Lowman, J. and Hill K. (2018). *Performance and Persistence Outcomes of GEAR UP Students: Leveling the Playing Field in Higher Education*, *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* 2018, Vol. 20(3) 328–349.

commissioned research on the GEAR UP network has also managed to make robust comparisons between different regional partnerships and types of activity to inform future programming.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Kim, S. et al (2021). *Promoting Educational Success: Which GEAR UP Services Lead to Postsecondary Enrollment and Persistence?*, Educational Policy 2021, Vol. 35(1) 101 –130.

**Figure 5: International examples of collaborative outreach**

Wales	Scotland	USA	Australia
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Reaching Wider:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Regional collaborative outreach programme</li> <li>○ HEFCW funded, with mandated provider contribution</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Seren Network – national programmes of student-facing support to promote access to UK/worldwide for 'best and brightest'</li> </ul>	<p>National Schools Programme:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Regional collaborations with target schools (SHEP)</li> <li>▪ Access to High Demand Professions</li> <li>▪ Access to Creative Education</li> <li>▪ Advanced Higher Hub (GCU) – expands Level 3 options</li> </ul> <p>Scottish Wider Access Programme for adults with few or no qualifications</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ GEAR-UP:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Competitive 7-year grants to states or local partnerships</li> <li>○ Capacity building support</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ P-20 stakeholder councils (state and local level)</li> <li>▪ Greater focus on degree completion on 'pathways'</li> <li>▪ 'Early college' programmes with philanthropic support – facilitated by 'intermediary orgs'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Competitive grants via Regional Partnerships Project Pool and Regional Unity Centres</li> <li>▪ Innovative outreach to target groups funded via National Priorities Pool</li> <li>▪ Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program – outreach funds for all providers, but partnerships strand discontinued</li> </ul>

### 3.4 Lessons from models for addressing collective action problems in other sectors

Finally, we looked for lessons from policy responses to ‘collective action problems’ in other sectors. We considered five theoretical options for solving the collective action problem identified above by reference to the approaches taken in other sectors. These are presented in increasing order of regulatory power (Figure 6).

**Figure 6: models for tackling collective action problems.**

	Model 1: Social norms and community self-organisation	Model 2: Selective incentives (individual or collective)	Model 3: Regionally negotiated co-opetition	Model 4: Individual levy to fund collective action	Model 5: Collective regulatory action on outputs
	Change attitudes to eliminate market-failure behaviours	Reward participation in desirable activity	Bilateral or multilateral agreement for non-competition in a specific area of work or policy	Levy (can be set progressively) to fund activity that would otherwise be underprovided	Use regulatory levers to sanction failure to deliver desired objectives
<b>Examples</b>	Maine lobster fishers Cycling in Denmark	Staff performance pay Autonomy-for-participation (e.g., specialist schools)	Mobile phone data-sharing during pandemic Shared R+D	Apprenticeship Levy Industrial Training Boards	Universal Service Obligations in mail, telecoms and ferries Balanced portfolios (banking, MATs)

The first model relies on social norms – competitors deciding to cooperate because it is socially and culturally the acceptable way to behave. The second model involves the state providing financial or non-financial incentives to market actors that choose to cooperate, or disincentives for those who do not. The third model involves competitors collaborating on certain areas of work, underpinned by a formal negotiated agreement (rather than an implicit understanding, as in Model 1). The fourth model involves the state requiring competitors to make a financial contribution via a levy to pay for or support collective activity. The fifth model involves a regulator imposing collective obligations or restrictions on market actors to correct for an absence of desirable behaviour or an excess of undesirable behaviour.

Some stakeholders we spoke to as part of our fieldwork (see next chapter for more detail) expressed an inclination for Model 1, though it is not clear that Model 1 rolled out nationally (i.e. in the absence of any form of additional funding or regulatory action) would deliver nationwide coverage to the level required. Some non-university stakeholders expressed support for a version of Model 4. Model 2 is effectively delivered via national funding pots and strategic direction from the OfS, such as around care leavers – so by implication a similar approach could be taken in relation to other topics and groups of learners.

Each of the above models could theoretically be applied to higher education access. Some may require changes to the OfS's regulatory powers, but others may not. For example, it appears that section 70(3) of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, which provides for the Secretary of State to make regulations allowing the OfS to set registration fees, could form the basis of a levy to fund collaborative outreach (Model 4). Similarly, Part 1 of the same act – which establishes the OfS and its powers to set and enforce conditions of registration for HEIs – is likely a sufficient basis mandating collaborative behaviour (Model 5). In the current political landscape, such regulatory changes are, in practice, highly unlikely. In any case, the wider point is that in deciding how to approach the collective action outlined at the start of this chapter, the current approach of centrally funding collaborative outreach is one option in a range of alternative or complementary policy options open to the OfS.

## 4. Findings

This section sets out the key findings from our evidence gathering and fieldwork. It is organised under the five key topics in the review's Analysis Framework (which is presented in Appendix A), namely mission and purpose; impact; structure and internal capacity; stakeholder relationships; and funding. In relation to each topic, our focus is on addressing the review's first two research questions:

- What is working well about Uni Connect, and to what extent is there variation across the provision and partnerships?
- What is not working well about Uni Connect, and to what extent is there variation across the provision and partnerships?

For each topic we have highlighted the key insights from the evidence, illustrated with a representative sample of stakeholder comments and other evidence.

### 4.1 Mission and purpose

This review explored Uni Connect's mission and purpose. Specifically, we explored whether stakeholders thought there was a need for collaborative outreach work and what purposes they believed collaborative outreach should serve. We then looked at the extent to which Uni Connect had a mission that was both clear and aligned with the right principles.

#### **Stakeholders – especially universities and Uni Connect partnerships – agree that collaborative outreach fulfils a real need.**

Common reasons given for the importance of collaborative outreach included the provision of advice to students that is impartial, rather than promoting one type of course, pathway or institution; mechanisms for different institutions to coordinate their outreach work in order to avoid duplication of effort or unintentional gaps in coverage of local schools and colleges, and collaboratively plan work that would be impractical or unaffordable for a single institution to undertake alone; and forums for bringing different stakeholders together to understand and respond to local needs. The extent to which Uni Connect fulfilled these different functions in practice is discussed in subsequent sections (particularly 4.2 and 4.4).

“Uni Connect provides the impetus to fund and drive delivery towards shared goals that would otherwise be missing.... It isn't perfect but it's doing a really important job and we shouldn't scrap it” – Mission group representative

“Uni Connect solves a market failure that I don't understand how you would otherwise solve” – HE sector body representative



“Uni Connect should be a connecting body – that is where their real value lies, in knowing people and connecting us all up” – Further education college practitioner

“There’s an enormous benefit of encouraging collaboration between providers; it reduces competition and duplication” – HE sector body representative

Some stakeholders felt that describing the current iteration of Uni Connect as ‘collaborative outreach’ was actually a misnomer.

“It must be understood that Uni Connect activity is delivered by staff employed at partner HEIs via Uni Connect funding and that this is not ‘collaborative outreach’ in the sense that partner HEIs are involved in the planning or delivery of these activities. There may be one or two examples of collaborative projects delivering by Uni Connect and recruitment/access teams based at partner HEIs, but the vast majority of work delivered by Uni Connect is done so without the involvement of partner HEIs” – Uni Connect lead

**But stakeholders do not have a shared understanding of what Uni Connect is for.**

We heard a number of similar themes referenced by stakeholders when describing the purpose of Uni Connect. These included: widening participation or promoting fair access to higher education, especially for students who are currently underrepresented; raising aspirations or expectations; giving or connecting students to impartial advice and guidance; and connecting schools, colleges and HEIs. From a policy perspective, a centrally funded programme like Uni Connect is also self-evidently an important means for the OfS to mobilise outreach activity on strategic national priorities, rather than relying solely on its regulatory levers.

However, stakeholders did not express or point to a single or shared mission for the Uni Connect programme. No one, for example, referenced the published aims of the programme.<sup>9</sup> In fact, many stakeholders explicitly told us that Uni Connect lacked a clear mission, or at least that they were confused about what its mission was. At a basic level, we heard a difference of opinion about whether Uni Connect’s fundamental purpose was to facilitate collaboration on outreach between HEIs, or to act as a separate and independent provider of impartial advice.

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<sup>9</sup> Office for Students (2023). *Advice and Guidance*.

Stakeholders told us that they did not feel the OfS had articulated a clear strategic mission for Uni Connect, and that repeated changes to OfS guidance about the sorts of activities Uni Connect partnerships should or should not engage in had created confusion about the programme's underlying purpose.

This lack of strategic clarity has made it difficult for Uni Connect to position itself within the wider education and skills landscape or develop a brand that is widely understood and trusted. This lack of clarity surrounding collaborative outreach has been documented over a number of years, beginning with the first review of NCOP, which stated that "a lack of understanding of the aims and objectives of NCOP and the difference between NCOP and wider outreach continues to present a challenge. A weak national brand, compounded by a proliferation of local brands, is perceived to be contributing to this issue."<sup>10</sup>

"I couldn't tell you what the mission of Uni Connect is – it's changed so many times. The focus is shifting too much.... The OfS has seen Uni Connect as fixed-term projects rather than a long-term infrastructure" – University outreach manager

"There's too much churn in policy – it's hard for people to understand" –Further education college senior leader

"Uni Connect needs to decide whether it's a networking service or a delivery service" – Headteacher

"The issue with Uni Connect is they're reassessing their role every six months, and then constantly scrambling to reinvent themselves, and using up all their bandwidth on that and never being able to get good at anything" – Education charity leader

"There's always a review of Uni Connect and it's always a transition year!" – Uni Connect senior leader

"The constant change in guidance and scope as we have moved through each phase of the programme has led to a lot of instability, and confusion over what we as a programme are there to do" – Uni Connect partnership lead

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<sup>10</sup> Bowes, L. et al. (2019). *The National Collaborative Outreach Programme: End of Phase 1 report for the national formative and impact evaluations*, Office for Students, P.34.

**Although Uni Connect’s ability to act as the ‘connective tissue’ for collaborative outreach is widely seen as its most valuable feature, there is a sense that this purpose has been eclipsed by a focus on activities rather than outcomes.**

The stakeholders who were most positive about Uni Connect emphasised the way in which their Uni Connect partnerships acted as a connector, facilitating collaborative working between partners in a way that was responsive to local needs. Indeed, supporting strategic local infrastructure is one of Uni Connect’s stated aims.<sup>11</sup>

However, the priorities set for Uni Connect’s work by the OfS are often perceived as a limiting factor of the programme, both from the perspective of those working directly for Uni Connect and their partners. Some of this frustration relates to previous phases of the programme – in particular, the way ‘targeted outreach’ activity was restricted to specific students. This was compounded by the fact that the criteria used were unfamiliar and often felt badly matched to schools’ and colleges’ assessment of need.

Although the newer remit for ‘strategic outreach’ gives Uni Connect partnerships more scope to shape their activities around local needs, we heard continuing frustration that OfS guidance focuses Uni Connect on delivering a (frequently changing) menu of short-term outputs, rather than allowing the flexibility to set truly strategic local priorities based on what is most likely to drive long-term improvements in student outcomes.

“The OfS keep moving the goalposts [for Uni Connect] on an annual basis. And they keep changing the criteria that you’re supposed to be working towards. It makes it hard to communicate the programme to schools and other partners”  
– University outreach practitioner

“The narrow targeting criteria when Uni Connect first started was a huge barrier – by the time you had identified pupils who were eligible and matched them with the activities that would be useful, there were very few pupils who could attend” – School careers coordinator

“We have been saddened to see the constant change in direction and the restrictions placed on year groups and specific activities. Precise targeting can negatively impact our delivery, having autonomy to work at a class level would ensure it was easier for schools and there would be more contact with students who were most at need – Uni Connect partnership lead

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<sup>11</sup> Office for Students (2023). Advice and Guidance.

For example, we heard widespread demand for Uni Connect partnerships to be allowed to undertake outreach to younger students (in early secondary and primary school), to work with older students as part of efforts to promote a smooth transition to higher education and with those in non-mainstream settings such as SEND specialist settings and Pupil Referral Units. There was also a strong desire to work with parents.

“There are many areas of work that could benefit from being delivered under a collaborative structure, e.g. outreach with care-experienced students, but these are currently peripheral to the main Uni Connect focus and there is not always scope for Uni Connect partnerships to extend their work into these areas. Clear guidance and corresponding budget could facilitate this across many groups identified in the Equality of Opportunity risk register” - Uni Connect partnership lead

“When you’re trying to change kids’ idea of what they can be, you have to start early – at the age of 7. And we can’t do any of that through Uni Connect because of the targeting criteria, and because [we] won’t see the results of that work within a year, or even within the life of an APP” - University outreach practitioner

“Evidence shows that working with students from primary school age is essential, and this is an area we feel we could also add real value and is not one that HEIs would particularly focus on” - Uni Connect partnership lead

We also heard concerns that OfS guidance prevents partnerships from working with certain students, such as those in special schools or alternative provision, and 14-16 year olds educated in further education settings, even where partners believe that there is a need to do so. We accept that according to the letter of the guidance, under the ‘strategic outreach’ priority partnerships, can work with any groups that are likely to benefit, having done their own local needs assessment. However, the existence of this perception among stakeholders (including some managers in Uni Connect partnerships themselves) is noteworthy.

An example of changing priorities frequently cited by Uni Connect partnerships, and some of their partners, was the decision to expand Uni Connect’s aims to include outreach to adult learners in 2021, only for outreach to adults to be deprioritised a year later. Again, while the guidance theoretically permits

partnerships to work with adult learners under the 'strategic outreach' priority, in practice stakeholders have perceived this change as removing outreach to adults from their remit.

"Frankly, it was embarrassing to introduce working with adult learners as a new strategy, asking partners to rapidly develop this work, and then being told by the OfS that they were dropping it the following year" - Uni Connect partnership lead

Stakeholder frustrations about shifting priorities and remit were usually expressed in general terms, rather than in reference to a specific piece of guidance. Each annual funding round and each government decision to extend the lifespan of Uni Connect has been accompanied by updated guidance documents. Sometimes, this has involved updating the programme's high-level priorities to reflect ministerial priorities (as one would expect in a democracy) or to take account of real-world developments, such as academic learning loss during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, based on what heard from stakeholders, we would highlight three key implications:

- First, since stakeholder perceptions of 'the guidance' are sometimes at odds with the letter of the actual guidance published by the OfS, there is a challenge to address in ensuring that changes in programme priorities are communicated clearly enough to be understood on the ground.
- Second, although recent changes to the programme priorities were made for legitimate policy reasons, they did represent significant changes in direction within a short space of time and do appear to have contributed to a sense that Uni Connect does not have a clear, stable mission.
- Third, stakeholders express a mix of views about whether OfS guidance (or other arrangements for managing the programme) is too specific, or not specific enough, or specific about the wrong things. This points to a lack of shared clarity about the extent to which Uni Connect is or should be a coherent national programme versus a network of autonomous regional entities.

There were some concerns that mission creep was being driven by the cuts to other wider services and a desire from Uni Connect partnerships to ensure that they were meeting the needs of schools and partners. Sometimes this resulted in providing activity that was several steps removed from traditional outreach.

“Because of cuts to other services in recent years, there have been some examples of mission creep in the last few years from some partnerships nationally such as delivering mental wellbeing support, careers advice, employer engagement, and, dare I say, the large focus on attainment raising” - Uni Connect partnership lead

**The new focus on attainment raising has not been well received by stakeholders.**

From September 2023 the OfS required Uni Connect partnerships to deliver evidence-based collaborative approaches to raise attainment in secondary schools (but not sixth forms or learners aged 14-19 in further education colleges). Standing up this new area of programming was a significant undertaking. Although some Uni Connect partnerships have worked with schools to develop activities they are proud of, we heard widespread scepticism from across stakeholder groups about whether Uni Connect should be undertaking this activity. For many in higher education, and in Uni Connect partnerships themselves, the new focus on attainment raising represents a further dilution of Uni Connect’s mission, and an expansion into work that sits outside partnerships’ core competencies. For schools, this has been a poorly explained (and even outright unwelcome) incursion into work they view as their own core competency.

“[The new focus on] attainment raising is fundamentally misguided. This is what teachers do” - Headteacher

“And now universities are asked to raise standards in schools, which they have no capability to do in my view. [They have] neither the means nor the skills to do that really” - Academy trust senior leader

“[With the recent shift to attainment raising work it] feels like universities are sitting on a goldmine and drilling for oil – why don't they do what they can do really well, rather than trying to do stuff that schools already do?” - Academy trust senior leader

“I don't think attainment raising should be in our remit. The schools are the experts on this; we do not receive enough funding to enable us to do this in the numbers necessary to make a difference. If we are to do it at all, it should just be in post-16 where the funding and support for the students taking re-takes is really lacking” - Uni Connect partnership lead

**Varied opinions exist on how far Uni Connect’s remit should stretch (CIAG) that is not specific to higher education.**

We heard widespread support for the need to promote access to the full range of higher education options, not just traditional three-year degrees. Some

stakeholders see helping pupils and schools navigate the increasingly complex set of choices available as an important part of Uni Connect's current role.

Everyone we spoke to agreed that it was important to have coherence between the different publicly funded programmes that intersect with postsecondary learning and careers. However, individual stakeholders differed in their views about whether this was best achieved by Uni Connect expanding its focus or by better delineating its remit from that of other programmes. For example, some stakeholders questioned whether giving advice about apprenticeship pathways – including Level 2 and 3, or even Level 4 or 5, apprenticeships – was an appropriate role for Uni Connect.

“It feels like Uni Connect is progressing to be closer and closer to a replacement for Connexions. This isn't necessarily a bad thing, but its mission creep is confusing” – Mission group representative

“There is some duplication, and increasingly so, with the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) – this seems a waste” – Education sector body senior leader

“CEC and Uni Connect are doing very overlapping things but with different strengths – engaging employers versus engaging HEIs. There should be common strategy between the two programmes” – Local Enterprise Partnership practitioner

“[Uni Connect partnerships should be] providing information and pathways into all education and training routes – particularly Apprenticeships – to ensure all learners are aware of the full range of opportunities available to them” – Uni Connect partnership lead

## 4.2 Impact

The review explored the impact of Uni Connect. Specifically, we explored the extent to which Uni Connect can be said to have had a positive impact, how data and evidence is used to understand Uni Connect's impact, and how far Uni Connect lives up to its stated aim of both contributing to a stronger evidence base around 'what works' in higher education outreach and strengthening evaluation practice across the sector.

### **At its best, the impact of collaborative outreach can be transformative.**

Public First's analysis of data from the HEAT service found that students receiving an intensive package of outreach through Uni Connect had a significantly higher probability of attending university than their statistical peers, equating to an estimated 2,350 additional students progressing to university in the 2020/21 academic year who would not otherwise have done so. The vast majority of these students were from the lowest participation neighbourhoods (POLAR4 index, quintiles 1 and 2). These students, we estimate, will gain a total of £495 million of additional earnings in their lifetime. Moreover, by counteracting the phenomenon of students from lower socioeconomic groups 'undermatching' (applying to courses with entry requirements lower than their predicted grades), the analysis estimated that, for 2020/21, Uni Connect led to a further £97 million of additional lifetime earnings.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, although the national gaps in access to higher education between the most and least advantaged students have not narrowed during the lifetime of Uni Connect<sup>13</sup> – and there is little evidence at a macro level of a reduction in the participation gap between Uni Connect target areas and the rest of the country<sup>14</sup> – one cannot dismiss the fact that that Uni Connect has had a potentially lifechanging impact for thousands of young people.

### **But, despite a significant body of evaluation evidence, it is difficult to make robust conclusions about the impact of Uni Connect activity in general.**

The analysis cited above looked at a sample of students, tracked through HEAT, who had received an intensive package of outreach (11 or more hours over multiple activities), which it found was strongly associated with increased progression to

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<sup>12</sup> Public First (2024). *Breaking Barriers: The economic and social impact of Uni Connect*.

<sup>13</sup> OfS Access and Participation Data Dashboard. Retrieved on 9 January 2024 from: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard/data-dashboard/>

<sup>14</sup> Public First (2024). *Breaking Barriers: The economic and social impact of Uni Connect*.



higher education.<sup>15</sup> However, the number of students who had received such intensive outreach was relatively small compared to the more than 440,000 learners from Uni Connect target areas reached in phases 1 and 2 of Uni Connect,<sup>16</sup> so the impact cannot be extrapolated across all students served.

Since Uni Connect's inception, partnerships have been tasked with contributing to a stronger evidence base around 'what works' to increase progression to higher education. Local evaluations from partnerships are collated as part of an Evidence Bank. This evidence is analysed regularly as part of national impact evaluations (five have been published so far) to understand changes in intermediate outcomes that are associated with increased progression to higher education, such as learners' knowledge of and attitudes towards higher education, subject knowledge and study skills, and interpersonal skills such as motivation and self-confidence.<sup>17</sup> Overall, these evaluations suggest that a wide range of Uni Connect activities have a positive impact on students' knowledge of higher education, and many have a positive impact on students' self-confidence, skills (such as communication and problem solving), attainment and intention to apply. They also provide some insight into the evidence base for different broad types of intervention – for example, summer schools, IAG, mentoring, campus visits and outreach to parents. This 'bottom-up' evidence collection has been complemented by a national longitudinal learner survey commissioned by the OfS, which reinforces key insights such as the value of more intensive, multi-intervention approaches.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> The most recent impact report from HEAT confirmed a similar picture. See HEAT (2024). *Uni Connect HEAT-HESA Track Impact Report*, Retrieved on 9 January 2024 from: <https://heat.ac.uk/how-it-works/tracking-research-and-evidence/uni-connect-heat-hesa-track-impact-report/#Uni%20Connect%20impact%20on%20HE%20Progression>

<sup>16</sup> OfS (2022). *Uni Connect annual report: Phase two, August 2020 to July 2021*, Retrieved on 9 January 2024 from: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/86307f48-e4b8-4a66-a18c-070968cd8bbd/uni-connect-annual-report-2022.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> CFE Research (2023). *Fifth independent review of impact evaluation evidence submitted by Uni Connect partnerships*, Retrieved on 9 January 2024 from: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/1ae19b4a-7026-4604-bb33-ce3107809973/fifth-review-of-impact-evaluation-evidence-from-uni-connect-partnerships.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> CFE Research (2023). *The impact of Uni Connect on intermediate outcomes for learners: A report on the learner survey findings after Wave 4*, Retrieved on 9 January 2024 from: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/76b704d1-5710-4034-ac01-39aea5631cf7/uc-impact-evaluation-cfe-w4.pdf>

However, a series challenges make it hard to draw clear, transferable lessons about 'what works' from the evidence base. In particular:

- Variation in activity design – because of the high degree of variation in programming between the 29 Uni Connect partnerships it can be difficult to make like-for-like comparisons between activities, even within the same broad type.
- Variation in evaluation methodology – because evaluations are designed by individual partnerships it can be hard to compare their results (although, as we shall see there has been some valuable work recently with Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) to address this).
- Lack of causal evidence – of the 314 sources of evidence reviewed as part of the latest national evaluation only 14 were the kind of 'causal' evidence that allows evaluators to attribute impact to the programme. Evaluations that yield causal evidence are inherently more difficult to carry out, but especially – as in the case with Uni Connect – where the students numbers involved in each intervention are small and differences in activity design make it harder to aggregate and compare data.
- Time lag – the earlier outreach takes place in a student's life, the longer the wait before the impact on outcomes like progress to higher education is known.

Several stakeholders we spoke to during our fieldwork recognised these challenges and supported efforts to build a more coherent national picture of 'what works'. In addition, some stakeholders pointed to a related challenge: that Uni Connect's short-term funding cycles and shifting remit had given rise to a proliferation of new projects, thus making it harder to identify and scale the most promising types of intervention so that more students might benefit from the kind of transformative impact noted above.

"Define parameters for national evaluation of impact, both qualitative and quantitative. All partners nationally working to one evaluation. Allows for regional comparison and a national picture" – Uni Connect partnership lead

"It might have been more productive to encourage people to use a shared framework, which would create a much bigger dataset for comparing interventions" – Uni Connect manager

"I think that the way the programme was set up drove the impact measurement of it in a really peculiar way from the offset and led to short-termism" – Education charity leader

“I really hope NCOP had an impact on students in targeted wards, but we don’t know if it did” – University outreach practitioner

“Uni Connect is driving best practice with independent evaluations, but the gradual build-up of the evidence base takes time and you cannot rush it – we just have to see cycles of pupils go through to understand impact” – Mission group representative

**One of the key ways that Uni Connect has impact is in its outreach to groups of students that would otherwise be underserved, sometimes based on detailed mapping of gaps in regional partner provision.**

We saw and heard evidence of Uni Connect partnerships delivering carefully designed and multifaceted outreach projects for specific groups of learners. Beneficiaries of these programmes included students from military families, care experienced students, students with Black heritage, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller, Showmen and Boater learners, and refugees. Many university partners told us that they valued and supported these projects, and would have struggled to devote the resources needed to make them happen without Uni Connect coordination. Data published by the OfS on demographics engaged by each partnership corroborates this picture – albeit this data relies on partnerships’ stated intention to engage with each group, verified by the OfS but not based on comprehensive student-level demographic data.<sup>19</sup>

In some cases, Uni Connect partnerships and their university partners described how the partnerships had led ‘mapping and gapping exercises’, whereby institutions pooled data on the schools, colleges and students they were engaging with to identify and address geographical and demographic gaps in outreach provision.

We also saw examples of Uni Connect designing projects to complement universities’ own access and participation efforts – for example, a project to build self-efficacy and resilience with Year 10 students of Black heritage was designed in response to a partner’s identification of an awarding gap for undergraduate students from this demographic.

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<sup>19</sup> Office for Students (2022), Uni Connect: data snapshot 2021-22, P.2.

“Our region is saturated with universities trying to offer outreach. So being able to see where work is already happening, work that we can get involved with, and also areas where there might be cold spots... having that oversight of the whole area is really, really useful. Uni Connect analysis tells us which schools have been contacted and where the gaps are” - University outreach practitioner

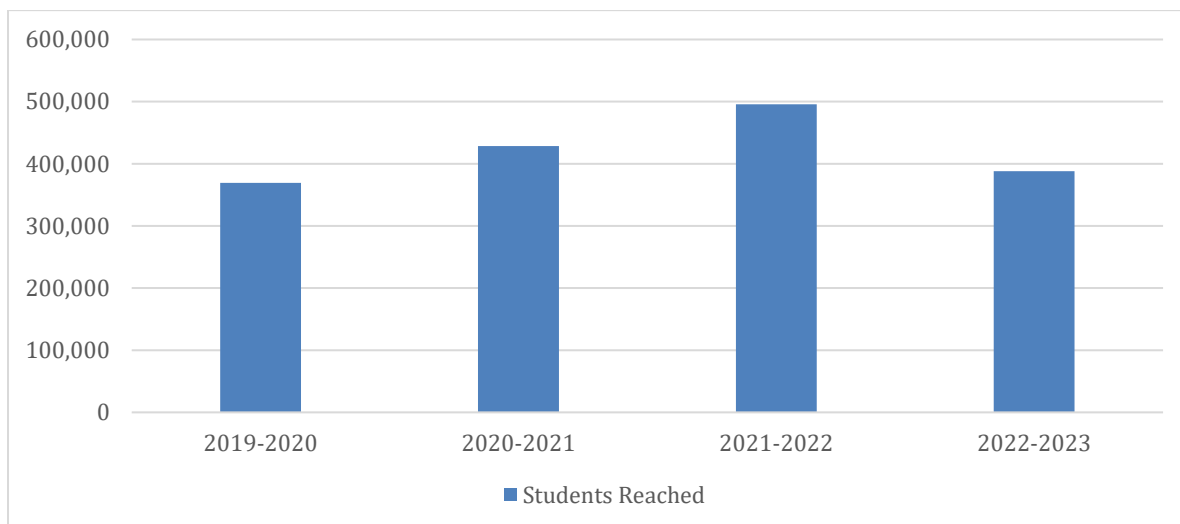
“A benefit is the ability to work together on some of the smaller, more niche target groups, such as service children, care experienced young people, disadvantaged males – we can work together to do research projects and put on events and activities that we wouldn't be able to otherwise do independently” - University outreach practitioner

“Uni Connect has improved understanding across the [region] of the schools which are hard to engage, and different organisations in the region now share contacts and information to create a more coordinated plan for careers and IAG activity – they've created a joint 'RAG rating' for schools” - Local Enterprise Partnership practitioner

“It's been the bespoke projects that we offer, designed for specific groups of students, where I've seen the most positive impact. We can focus on groups that are too small or young for providers to work with” - University outreach practitioner working on Uni Connect

“[The Uni Connect partnership we work with] has a hyper-focus on outcomes for participants, which is very important to us. Work with HEIs tends to bend us out of shape to fit with academic requirements. It's great to do something which is more about life chances and ambition” - Cultural sector outreach practitioner

**Figure 7: Total learners engaged by Uni Connect over time.**



*Chart depicting the total learners engaged over time, between 2019 and 2023.*

Uni Connect has reached hundreds of thousands of learners each year (see Figure 7). It is hard to make like-for-like comparisons between different kinds of outreach programmes, but as a crude comparison, three of the biggest national higher education access charities had a combined reach of around 60,000 students in 2021/22, suggesting that Uni Connect’s reach is significant in national terms, as the chart in Figure 7 demonstrates.

**Although the impartial advice provided by Uni Connect is valued, and there is anecdotal evidence of visible impact from specific projects and staff roles, some Uni Connect provision is seen as relatively weak.**

Stakeholders largely confirmed that Uni Connect lives up to the promise of providing impartial advice and guidance, something they saw as an important counterbalance to outreach by individual institutions. We also heard compelling stories from teachers, parents and students about the life-changing impact of specific Uni Connect projects or one-to-one advice and support from embedded Uni Connect staff in schools and colleges.

However, we also heard from stakeholders whose experience of Uni Connect provision had not been so positive, suggesting that quality of provision varies between projects and across the country. Some stakeholders compared their experience of Uni Connect unfavourably with that of other outreach providers – such as individual HEIs and independent charities – which they described as having a more refined delivery model and better evidence of impact. In some cases we heard that schools found Uni Connect outreach provision to be a useful default

option, but only where provision more specifically tailored to their needs was not available. Similarly, we heard from some staff in schools that frequent changes in Uni Connect's programme offer tend to undermine their faith in whether some of the activities are sufficiently 'tried and tested', and whether there is sufficient chance to evaluate them.

"I think there's fantastic work and it's having a big impact on my region" - University Vice-Chancellor

"As a teacher I knew there was a [care experienced] student who was two years younger than the targeting group, but I knew would really benefit. The impact on him has been huge - in terms of behaviour, in terms of confidence. Now he wants to be a zoologist. This project is his salvation, his safe place" - Teacher

"Uni Connect's advice is more impartial, they're always very clear about that. Universities sometimes only want to work with Year 12s, but Uni Connect will work with Year 9s" - School careers coordinator

"By far the biggest benefit is about the impartial advice and guidance that we can get out to the young people in our localities, because we can come together to do something that is far away from recruitment activity" - University outreach practitioner

"Uni Connect is really hit and miss: where you are in the country depends on what you get as a school" - Education sector body representative

"Some Uni Connects are much better than others" - Academy trust manager

"Some of the school-led stuff they fund is quite random" - University outreach manager)

Don't get me wrong, I'm sure there's some people doing incredible work as individuals, but on the whole it's pretty low-grade stuff. - Education charity leader

They'll do anything we want them to and deliver sessions but the quality is fairly poor - I would tend to look at other options first. (School careers coordinator)

**Data and evidence on impact does not always appear to be driving decision-making or accountability in the programme.**

As we saw above, despite the significant level of effort that goes into evaluating Uni Connect, it is difficult to make robust comparisons between partnerships and activities. Without access to regular, comparable data on impact, we heard that conversations between the OfS and partnerships tend to focus on the volume of activity and outputs produced each year and whether these conform to the latest guidance and targeting criteria.

As noted above, this situation inhibits evidence-based decision making that might otherwise have led to effective interventions being continued and scaled, less effective interventions discontinued, and partnerships making the case for greater investment in work with younger age groups or more sustained outreach (a term that we heard is frequently used in the network, but which is not well defined).

“OfS have said we don't need to submit evaluations this year – it feels like a constant chopping and changing.... We do evaluations and then send them to [an OfS contractor] who rank them into three different colours as to whether they are good enough – it's so arbitrary.... We've had no guidance on what is impact or what is good impact.” - Uni Connect manager

“Often we feel like we are just delivering activity and then fitting it to the data that we know the OfS want.” - Uni Connect manager

**Some Uni Connect partnerships have invested heavily in data and evaluation capacity and have a sophisticated approach for measuring impact – but this is not universal.**

“They'll do anything we want them to and deliver sessions but the quality is fairly poor – I would tend to look at other options first.” - School careers coordinator

“I came across someone who I had met in 2003, on an Aimhigher trip, who was still basically doing the same job, which is great and fantastic and great institutional memory. But the activities are exactly the same as they were 20 years ago.” - Academy trust leader

“I don't believe that the impact they sometimes claim is true, or that what they're doing is truly evidence-led. There needs to be an evidence base for each of the many different activities they run, if that's how they want to deliver their outreach.” – HE sector body representative

We heard and saw evidence of a high degree of variation in how data and evidence is used between partnerships. In some partnerships, specialist staff have developed easy-to-use tools that enable colleagues and partners to interrogate data, and sophisticated approaches to evaluation that have been rolled out across the team. In other partnerships, impact monitoring is resented or seen as necessary for compliance purposes rather than a valuable practice in its own right. We heard that an understanding of impact was not driving leadership decision-making in all Uni Connect partnerships and is not on the radar of many front-line outreach practitioners.

An example can be seen in relation to the three longitudinal data tracker services that the OfS part-funds (HEAT, Aimhigher West Midlands, EMWPREP). Some Uni Connect partnerships make extensive use of these services, share analyses of student outcomes with their partners, and wish there was even better integration between these services, the UCAS Outreach Evaluation service (previously called STROBE) and datasets held by the DfE (such as the National Pupil Database). Staff and managers in other Uni Connect partnerships saw them as tangential to their work – something they collected data for, but never saw results – while some delivery staff were even unaware of the trackers.

More generally, the handling of data was seen as an area of unhelpful duplication across the programme, with each of the 29 partnerships developing their own policies and procedures for collecting and processing data from students and schools and sharing data with the longitudinal tracker services (which are separate, although they use a common framework, allowing the OfS to collate data at the programme level for reporting purposes). Some partnerships seemed to have developed more efficient, less bureaucratic processes or arrived at different understandings of what they were lawfully allowed to do with the same data.



“There may be an underestimation of the level of technical skill needed for complex evaluation – most people in Uni Connect are practitioners first. Feels like evaluation is not valued enough within partnerships, partly because of the short timeframes they’re working within.” - HE sector body representative

“The way in which outreach work is recorded needs more consistency across APP holders and Uni Connects with greater transparency and awareness of what other organisations are doing particularly when engaging schools and colleges.” - Uni Connect partnership lead

“The DfE and OfS do not share data and/or systems, limiting our capacity to show impact at a learner (and then group) level.” - Uni Connect partnership lead

“More access to data would help to inform our decision-making, and also save a lot of time/energy that is involved in trying to get this data from schools.” - Uni Connect partnership lead

“Consider whether data could be provided directly from the DfE (or other appropriate body). This would better support Uni Connects to track pupils and meet their evaluation obligations – and reduce the burden on schools.” - Uni Connect partnership lead

“[Uni Connect should] establish a uniform process for Uni Connect partnerships to acquire pupil data from schools. My understanding is partnerships have different ways of collecting data – some still using paper forms, others having data sharing agreements. One agreed process would make sense.” - Uni Connect partnership lead

“We’re working with [tracker] to analyse the relationship between engagement and destinations – ultimately would like to link intermediate outcomes to destinations as well. We’re now getting HESA data at the student level via [tracker], but not UCAS STROBE data. And progress towards getting this level of data was based on a chance conversation.... One of the larger limitations of the programme has been that we can’t access DfE data, we have to negotiate data-sharing school by school.” - Uni Connect manager

**Recent efforts to strengthen the evaluation capacity of Uni Connect as a network are seen to have already added value.**

Established by the OfS in 2019, TASO has been working to strengthen the evaluation capacity of Uni Connect partnerships and the higher education access sector more generally. For example, TASO has run training for outreach evaluation staff and created resources, such as a question bank for use in student surveys. Stakeholders who were aware of this work expressed their appreciation for the additional support. Some advocated for an even greater emphasis on ensuring consistent evaluation across the Uni Connect network, rather than merely promoting good practice.

Where Uni Connect partnerships have embraced data and evaluation, they are using their role as convenors of collaborative outreach to influence their partners. Some university partners explicitly told us that they valued Uni Connect's role in sharing good practice and building evaluation capacity in the wider sector.

“Providing more centralised evaluative support to partners. Lots of universities don't have evaluation expertise within their Outreach Teams. Uni Connect could be a good source of support and (if funded appropriately) be a good way of impartially evaluating the impact of activities delivered by HEIs' outreach teams as part of their APPs.” – Uni Connect partnership lead

“The regional Uni Connects could be utilised to develop and support a network of evaluators who can share practice, evaluation tools and evidence best practice at regional and national levels, supported by bodies like TASO and NERUPI.” – Uni Connect partnership lead

“Can we be confident that Uni Connect or collaborative activity is more impactful? Probably not. But it's a useful tool for mandating and pushing people to do high-impact interventions rather than just going after low-hanging fruit.” – HE sector body representative

“I've done a version of our [evaluation] tool for all the other Uni Connects. We share through the Uni Connect data working group.” – Uni Connect manager

“Most Uni Connect data cannot be used by individual institutions due to data sharing issues and this is a huge loss.” Mission group representative

“Some of the evaluation work [our Uni Connect partnership] has done has been so helpful. We don’t have capacity to do things like schools mapping in the same way, so it’s great to share it.” University outreach practitioner

### 4.3 Structure and internal capacity

The review explored the structure and internal capacity of Uni Connect. Specifically, we explored whether Uni Connect was structured in the most effective way it could be and the extent to which Uni Connect staff have the knowledge, skills and motivation they need for the programme to be effective.

#### **There is value in having a regional structure for collaborative outreach.**

A range of different stakeholders told us that they saw the regional collaborative structure of Uni Connect as a valuable feature of the programme. We heard a broad consensus that regions of England have their own distinct needs, which a regional structure is best placed to meet. Stakeholders described how Uni Connect has provided a forum for collaboration between different HEIs, including some which historically did not work well together, and those for which regional outreach was not previously a priority.

“Uni Connect partnerships bring a regional unification. Universities have their specialisms, but with Uni Connect you can bring together a coordinated offer across different silos.” – Headteacher

“At the beginning there were turf wars.... I think some [Uni Connect partnerships] have been sensationally successful in overcoming that. If you look at [region and universities within it], and all those folks working together, that would have been unimaginable 15 years ago. So in some places it’s done an incredible job of people coming together around a common aim and agenda.” – Education charity leader

“If you defund Uni Connect you risk losing the closeness of providers at a local level – Uni Connect brings together providers who have historically not worked together and had poor relationships.” – Mission group representative

In some cases, stakeholders also highlighted the role of Uni Connect in engaging schools, colleges and other regional partners beyond higher education. Stakeholder relationships are discussed in more detail in section 4.4.

“It's just getting everyone around the table. I think particularly we have a lot of further education colleges who are in our partnership and just getting them around the table to agree to some collaborative activity that is seen as truly collaborative, and not competitive, has been something that without [Uni Connect] simply wouldn't have happened.” – University outreach manager

We heard and saw how the internal structure of Uni Connect partnerships varies between regions. Typically, partnerships have a senior-level multi-stakeholder governance board to set strategic direction for the partnership, supported by a working-level steering group or similar arrangement to coordinate partners' work.

Partnerships also differed in their staffing and delivery models. Some have adopted an 'area based' staffing structure, in which small teams act as liaisons for schools and colleges at a sub-regional level; other partnerships deliver most of their work through sub-contracted intermediary organisations, focused on a sub-regional area or particular audiences (e.g. colleges). Partnerships also fund embedded staff within schools, colleges or universities, although this is much more prevalent in some regions than others. As discussed above (see section 4.2), we heard a mix of views about the efficacy of all these different organisational models, and it is difficult to say definitively whether one approach works better in any given context.

**The current configuration of 29 regional Uni Connect partnerships may not be optimal, and could be driving variation in capacity.**

There is significant variation in capacity among Uni Connect partnerships. We heard that while retention of staff is a challenge across the network, some partnerships have struggled more than others to retain staff – especially where the organisation employing staff (usually the lead university) has decided only to employ staff on twelve-month contracts, given the risk of Uni Connect's funding being discontinued. In addition, some partnerships may be too small to maintain all the skills and institutional knowledge they need to be effective, especially specialist skills such as evaluation.

“This is the opportunity to redraw the boundaries – smaller partnerships are teetering on the verge of not being viable. Big partnerships like [example] can survive, but you need most of the same key roles to run a smaller partnership.” - University senior manager

“There’s a case for going back at going back and looking at the partnerships. Where are the regional economic agendas? Where are the combined authorities? Some partnerships probably don’t make sense anymore.” - University outreach manager

“I’d be comfortable with a smaller number of partnerships with a bigger footprint as long as local knowledge and intelligence isn’t lost in the mix.” - University senior manager

In many cases, the stakeholders closest to Uni Connect partnerships (or those with experience of more than one partnership) questioned whether the 29 current regions were the best way to organise Uni Connect. The geographic footprints of the current partnerships largely reflect the structure that was established in 2014 when HEFCE commissioned NCOP, Uni Connect’s predecessor programme. HEFCE held an open competition for partnerships to bid for funding to serve a subset of 997 identified target wards. Some of the successful bidders were continuations of legacy partnerships that had survived since the discontinuation of the original Aimhigher programme in 2011 and others came together to bid for NCOP funding. Stakeholders told us that while some footprints made sense, especially where they covered areas with a meaningful regional identity or aligned with other regional structures, such as combined authorities and city-regions, others did not. Lack of alignment with other public sector boundaries was seen as particularly confusing for schools and colleges located near the edge of Uni Connect regions.

“If you were starting from scratch, you wouldn’t have partnerships covering those geographical regions.... In some places Uni Connect was sort of a continuation of the old Aimhigher, especially in the metropolitan areas where there was very little turnover of personnel.” - University senior manager

"I don't think regions are the right spatial geography. In recruitment terms, take [region], [major city] is different from [nearby smaller city]. Spatial geography has to work for an area. It should be negotiated between the partnerships and OfS." - University senior manager

"Phase 1 was manic and created lots of problems in terms of future setup because decisions were rushed." - Uni Connect manager

"You wouldn't design collaborative outreach this way - it feels like an imperfect system." - Uni Connect outreach practitioner

Some stakeholders also noted that regional collaboration does not always fully meet the needs of HEIs with campuses in multiple regions, or schools and colleges that want to help their students to consider options beyond their home region.

"As a private provider with multiple campuses around the country, we're not in a Uni Connect consortium because we aren't located in one place." - University outreach manager

"If you were starting from scratch, you wouldn't have partnerships covering those geographical regions.... In some places Uni Connect was sort of a continuation of the old Aimhigher, especially in the metropolitan areas where there was very little turnover of personnel." - University senior manager

"We find it handy for a lot of our activities to be regional, but we do want our students to look further afield - that can perpetuate narrowing of what people expect to do.... We have to arrange out-of-region things ourselves... that can be easiest with the Oxbridge colleges because they have more resources." - School careers coordinator

"I would love it if universities worked with us nationally and across our group of schools. And we do have a couple of those national partnerships, which are developing and have some promise. But there are very few trusts that are national in that way. And there aren't that many universities which are really national." - Academy trust leader

**Many stakeholders value the capacity that exists within Uni Connect partnerships.**

Stakeholders, including some school and college staff, reported that Uni Connect staff have local knowledge, relationships and skills that would be hard to replace,

or which would not have an obvious home without a dedicated collaborative outreach programme. As funding for the programme has fallen, the leaders of Uni Connect partnerships have tended to prioritise maintaining their teams over funding external provision.

**But a lack of national or shared functions also leads to duplication across partnerships.**

A common theme we heard was that while flexibility to regional needs is crucial, that does not mean that there are 29 completely different ways of doing collaborative outreach. Uni Connect partnerships' staff and their university partners often worried that work was being duplicated unnecessarily, and that mechanisms for spreading good practice across the network (for example, various working groups and a practitioner forum) were relatively weak and informal.

"It is hard to share best practice with 29 leads." - Uni Connect manager

"Compared to Aimhigher, the devolved model of Uni Connect leads to a lot of duplication of resources – why do we have all these single point of contact websites, rather than one national one?" - University outreach manager

"The thing that frustrates me is that lack of a national kind of brand, as well as the confusion it causes for school partners and learners. It's just a phenomenal waste of resource." - University outreach manager

"If we centralised some of this analysis a bit more it would save a lot of duplicated effort. We're a bigger partnership so we have more staff on data and evaluation than most." - Uni Connect outreach practitioner

"There are 29 different brochures on higher education finance, or guides to personal statements or guidance on how to apply for an apprenticeship. Should we just have one national website or one modular thing for everyone to adapt?" - Uni Connect outreach practitioner

From the perspective of external stakeholders, such as national charities, variations in practice between partnerships also made the programme harder to work with.

“Very broad and varied... every one is run differently, so as a national organisation you have to spend a long time figuring out how to work with each one.” - Education charity outreach practitioner

“The local autonomy means they are very variable which is challenging to work with – lots of resource goes into forming relationships with them.”  
-Education sector body senior leader

In some cases we heard clear examples of functions that might be more efficient and effective if they were undertaken centrally by the national programme or on a shared basis between partnerships. This included branding and communications and some aspects of evaluation and data analysis. Since some partnerships have invested in understanding and meeting the needs of specific groups of students, several stakeholders also suggested it could be beneficial to commission or incentivise those partnerships to create and share resources on behalf of the whole network. Similarly, since Uni Connect is regionally focused, some stakeholders suggested that it would be valuable to create shared resources or programming on access to courses that are highly specialised or only available in a small number of institutions (e.g. Medicine).

“There’s a lot of expertise in partnerships that could be drawn on more widely. We could produce more specific resources for individuals groups... students without indefinite leave to remain for example.” - Uni Connect outreach practitioner

“Not everything needs to be done at the same level.... There are some groups like Gypsy, Roma and Traveller students, that I think need national focus... and probably looked-after children, carers.... And then there are others that maybe there's a regional dimension.” - Education charity leader

“A great benefit is having a central, dedicated team rather than having this work as something that is done in someone's spare time or a tiny fraction of their role within an institution and with competing aims.” - University senior manager

**There is a high degree of tension in relationship between the OfS and Uni Connect partnerships, and a desire to reframe that relationship to achieve a better balance between accountability, regional autonomy and central capacity-building and support.**

The relationship of the OfS to Uni Connect partnerships was frequently raised – especially by partnership staff, but also by other stakeholders. In some respects,



such as directing partnerships in what sort of activities they undertake and how, stakeholders saw the OfS as too hands-on; in other respects, such as providing central supports and capacity building, they thought the OfS was too hands-off. For many stakeholders, this combination was the worst of both worlds, representing a funder that is quick to issue instructions, change its mind and criticise, but reluctant to take responsibility, engage in constructive dialogue or provide practical help. To their credit, colleagues at the OfS acknowledged that there have been challenges in having constructive dialogue with partnerships and that they are keen to resolve these issues going forward.

“I’d argue that it’s not a national programme. There could be a much stronger framework rather than the loose guidance we receive. We should have a clearer sense of what works.” – Uni Connect manager

“More explicit guidance would promote a national model that is more consistent. This would strengthen the identity of Uni Connect and enable improved evidence of impact.” – Uni Connect partnership lead

“Create one identity for Uni Connect partnerships, including websites and resources. This would reduce operational costs but allow delivery to align with regional needs. It would also assist with cross Uni Connect partnership collaborative projects, such as care-experienced programmes working across counties.” – Uni Connect partnership lead

“Capacity has to be tended like a vegetable garden and the OfS haven’t always been good gardeners – you can’t just assume that capacity exists and try to direct it to your priority of the day.” – University senior manager

“Too much of Uni Connect work – including [Uni Connect partnership] board meetings – is focussed on responding to OfS need... writing reports, doing evaluations – not talking about activity and actions for young people in [our region].” – Headteacher

“No one from the OfS has ever visited here. They need to listen more about what the needs are.” – Uni Connect outreach practitioner

“A more supportive working relationship between the OfS and partnerships. Being new to the role it would have been good to be approached by the OfS to sit down and discuss the priorities, deadlines, support available.” – Uni Connect partnership lead

“We need help from the OfS to push the message out to schools.... It's ridiculous for us to have to have the same conversation over and over and to make the point we are funded by DfE. Schools think we are a private company.” - Uni Connect manager

The evidence we heard from stakeholders – including colleagues at the OfS – points to an interconnected set of challenges, many of which link directly to issues that arise elsewhere in this chapter. First, a lack of clarity about Uni Connect's overall strategic mission is driving different perceptions of what respective roles different actors should play. Second, there is an open question about the extent to which Uni Connect is a national programme – that is, a regional infrastructure for addressing national policy priorities – versus a loose network of autonomous regions. Third, there is a perceived need for more active stewardship, capacity-building and support to enable partnerships, and the network as a whole, to be more impactful and to reduce duplication and inefficiency. Resolving these challenges in a coherent way will necessarily involve a reset of the relationship between the different actors involved in Uni Connect. The next chapter sets out how the OfS could approach such a reset and the decisions it will need to make in doing so.

Finally, some stakeholders argued that the OfS, as a regulator, was ill-equipped to oversee a programme that is fundamentally about the stewardship of a public service and collaborative working, rather than the regulation of a market. Although there was no consensus on this point, some stakeholders suggested that responsibility for collaborative outreach should be transferred to another agency, such as the DfE.

“It doesn't make sense that Uni Connect sits with the regulator – it's not a regulatory function.” - University outreach manager

“OfS are too regulatory in their approach.... They don't nurture what they've commissioned.... In many ways they're weirdly hands off. They give us these random pieces of guidance but then they take no interest in what is being delivered.... The genuine lack of clarity surrounding the programme's aims and what we're supposed to do is really unhelpful, and when asked about it, it's not received in good faith.... Often OfS staff double down... “we think we've been clear in the guidance”... even when we're saying that it's not clear!” - Uni Connect manager

## 4.4 Stakeholder relationships

The review explored stakeholder relationships. Specifically, we explored the extent to which Uni Connect is a valued partner for different groups of stakeholders and the extent to which Uni Connect acts as a 'connective tissue' between different partners.

### **There are some clear examples of where Uni Connect partnerships have built strong relationships with local stakeholders.**

We heard how Uni Connect partnerships have acted as a broker of relationships between schools, colleges and universities, facilitating connections that might otherwise not have been made. In particular, we heard stories of how Uni Connect partnerships had succeeded in engaging schools that individual HEIs had not historically managed to engage. Similarly, we heard that some further education colleges had been engaged through Uni Connect in ways that they had not previously been engaged by other higher education access initiatives.

"Because it's a small school there's been a challenge in how to deal with multiple partnerships.... I could go and build employer and university relationships on a one-to-one basis but each one would take months, so it's not scalable. Having [Uni Connect] as an intermediary creates opportunities we wouldn't otherwise know about." - Headteacher

"Rather than having to manage a whole load of relationships with different institutions [Uni Connect] have got a group of universities that can put out a programme offer and for schools to go, "oh, this would work well with this cohort, this would work well with this group." - Academy trust careers lead

"And as a university, we've got good relationships with lots of schools that we've built up. But there have been some schools where we haven't actually been able to engage directly, despite lots of efforts. But through [our Uni Connect partnership] that's been a much easier journey. And that's partly because of, or predominately because of, that sense of impartiality, and that they can facilitate access to a whole range of different opportunities about different types of university." - University outreach practitioner

Many Uni Connect partnerships are also highly networked with other regional efforts connected to education and careers such as local enterprise partnerships (LEPs), local authorities, academy trusts and forums attached to DfE Priority Areas (and previously Opportunity Areas). Some Uni Connect partnerships have also built strong links with local and national charities working in their region (and with cultural sector organisations) as a way of sharing expertise and developing programming that speaks to diverse student needs.

“We tie into other local networks like the DfE Priority Areas and the [local city] headteachers’ group... Because we’re plugged into so many networks, we can almost act as an impartial broker who knows what’s on offer everywhere – it helps us respond to schools with very diverse needs.”  
- Uni Connect manager

“We have worked closely with all five local authorities and they have been absolutely key in getting school buy-in, but also helping us to develop programmes and resources that are beneficial for the whole region.” - Uni Connect lead

“There’s lots of crossover between Uni Connect and the LEP – we sit on each other’s boards and aim for mutuality and transparency.” - LEP manager

“The partnership has been really positive in terms of open communication.” - Cultural sector outreach practitioner

**However, the extent to which Uni Connect partnerships are coordinating a truly collaborative approach to outreach with HEIs in their regions is mixed.**

Some higher education partners clearly view Uni Connect as a complement to their own institutional outreach work and an important facilitator of partnership working, especially in relation to identifying and addressing gaps in provision (see section 4.2). However, not all HEIs are involved in a Uni Connect partnership – although the vast majority are – and some are much more active partners than others. We heard that some partner HEIs see Uni Connect as relatively tangential to their outreach work, and not something they factor into their own planning.

Although Uni Connect is framed as a collaborative programme, we heard concerns that because partnerships are hosted by a lead partner – in practice, a university – their focus tends to be distorted. In some cases, this takes the form of Uni Connect partnerships ‘defaulting’ to designing activities that showcase or involve campus

visits to the lead partner institution; in other cases, we heard from Uni Connect partnerships that they had not welcomed additional collaborative outreach activity organised outside the auspices of Uni Connect.

We were in an Opportunity Area and that was much more collaborative in terms of setting an agenda jointly with schools, colleges, the local authority, the LEP and other partners, and it was easier to include that work in our APP – University outreach practitioner

More emphasis needs to be put on bringing together key stakeholders from across schools, colleges, universities and the third sector to create a strategic vision for a region as to how underrepresented young people can be supported throughout their educational journey – Uni Connect partnership lead

[X organisation] in [place] has not been welcomed – there was already enough work in this space and they have put their [programme] in an area of high activity already – Uni Connect partnership lead

Also, while partnerships stress that that they promote the full range of higher education choices, some stakeholders from smaller, specialist providers, and from further education colleges that deliver their own Level 4 or 5 courses, told us that they felt the focus of Uni Connect programming was unhelpfully skewed towards promoting three-year undergraduate degrees at larger universities.

“Small specialists institutions often provide active academics [to take part in Uni Connect activity] rather than having central teams like big institutions.... This can cause problems because they are set up differently.”  
– Mission group representative

“People I'd expect to know about Uni Connect don't, especially senior leaders in universities. Sometimes it seems that the lead institution is the one that sets the direction and defines the work. How do we engage all universities in it to the same extent?” – HE sector body representative

“The steering and governance boards are all very nice, but there’s no real steer for us to work collaboratively rather than seeing [Uni Connect] as a separate entity.” – University outreach manager

“Some Russell Group institutions are not part of [Uni Connect in our region].... It causes a credibility issue, but they have enough money that they don't need to collaborate.” – Uni Connect manager

“Some partnerships are much more difficult because they include institutions that compete.” – Uni Connect manager

**Misalignment between the planning cycle for Uni Connect and APPs tends to undermine the influence of Uni Connect and collaborative outreach more generally.**

APPs are the key mechanism by which HEIs set out to their regulator (the OfS) how they will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in, and progress from higher education. Although OfS guidance permits providers to reference collaborative outreach work (including Uni Connect) in their APPs, many stakeholders highlighted problems with this process.

First, APPs cover a four-year period, but the Uni Connect programme has been extended on a one- or two-year basis, and providers are reluctant to include partnerships in their APPs that might cease to exist mid-plan. Second, different providers now submit their APPs in different ‘waves’, making it difficult for the HEIs within each Uni Connect partnership to plan collaboratively. Third, although the guidance permits HEIs to set targets for outreach work based on intermediate outcomes, we heard a perception from some stakeholders that because the access and participation regime has increased providers’ sense of accountability for their own recruitment outcomes, it has had the perverse effect of shifting their focus away from outreach that is unconnected to recruitment, even if it serves an identified regional need. We heard a broad consensus in favour of creating better alignment between the APP process and Uni Connect business planning.

“I was gutted that they didn’t include Uni Connect in the new APP framework.... It had a huge impact on our interactions and the faith institutions had.” – Uni Connect manager

“APPs drive what universities prioritise, and the APP timeline is not synced to Uni Connect’s shorter timeline, so it’s harder to get institutional commitments.” – University outreach manager

**Uni Connect has a relatively low profile within the school sector generally and with more senior school leaders in particular.**

Although we spoke to some school leaders who are working closely with their local Uni Connect partnership, we also heard from many senior leaders in schools, academy trusts and school sector organisations who were either unaware of Uni Connect, or who had a negative perception of the programme and its relevance for schools. This is striking given the large volume of outreach undertaken by Uni Connect – between 2017/18 and 2022/23, almost half of the outreach activities recorded on HEAT were delivered by, or in partnership with, Uni Connect partnerships.<sup>20</sup>

Stakeholders described several factors that are likely driving lack of awareness or negative perceptions of Uni Connect in schools. In terms of awareness, each Uni Connect partnership has its own branding, and so the 29 regional brands may be less well placed to gain recognition than a coherent national brand, especially alongside the other brands operating in university outreach. At a more fundamental level, we heard that successive changes in Uni Connect’s remit have made it harder to establish a consistent reputation for what the programme does. Similarly, we heard Uni Connect’s specific targeting criteria and changing menu of activities have contributed to a perception that the programme is bureaucratic and inflexible to work with. This last point was also linked to a perception from some stakeholders that Uni Connect is – or at least was historically – an extension of the higher education sector, rather than genuine collaboration between higher education and schools. Figures 8-10 show that HEIs are the most widely represented type of stakeholder on Uni Connect partnership boards, although the representation of other stakeholders has increased in recent years. Although, we heard examples of efforts to be more responsive to the needs of schools, several stakeholders told us they thought schools should have a greater say in shaping collaborative outreach work.

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<sup>20</sup> HEAT (2024). *Uni Connect HEAT-HESA Track Impact Report*, Retrieved on 9 January 2024 from: <https://heat.ac.uk/how-it-works/tracking-research-and-evidence/uni-connect-heat-hesa-track-impact-report/#Uni%20Connect%20impact%20on%20HE%20Progression>

“To be honest, I don't know much about it.... It feels like they work with certain schools on certain things at certain times, but I'm not sure what those things are.” – Headteacher

“Uni Connect is almost invisible within our college except to a few people who're aware of it.” – Further education college practitioner

“I sometimes get the message fed up to me that Uni Connect is owned by higher education rather than by schools.” – University senior manager

“It often feels like we're doing something to schools and colleges rather than forming a partnership with them.” – University outreach practitioner

“In my experience of Uni Connect, there is so little collaboration, so little engagement, and so little kind of co-design and co-production, that I can't imagine that there could be any less than there actually is.” – Academy trust leader)

“Schools [in our region] are overloaded with opportunity from other HEIs that aren't involved in Uni Connect, employers, charity and third sector partners. [Our Uni Connect partnership] hasn't been able to build a distinct brand – I would like to see more political weight behind Uni Connect and it pushed as a brand that is pitched to senior school leaders to help buy in.” – Uni Connect manager

“We have several legacy relationships which hinder our capacity for new relationships with schools – the schools we work with would not be exactly the schools I'd now pick but developing and dropping relationships with schools is hard.” – Uni Connect manager

“When we first went into schools, they wanted to know how long it was funded for because they didn't want to put effort into programme that was going to get cancelled after a year.” – Uni Connect manager

“Schools need to be more engaged, without them a lot of our work is less impactful and they are a missing voice around the table.” – Further education college principal

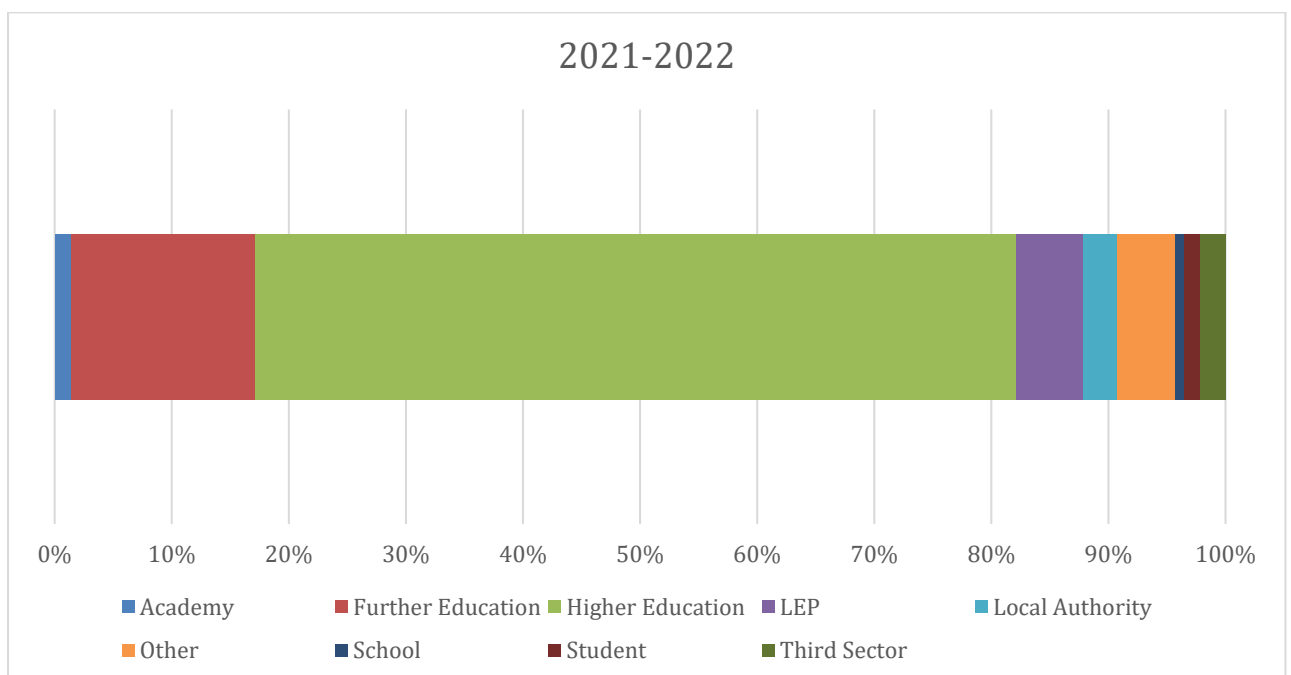


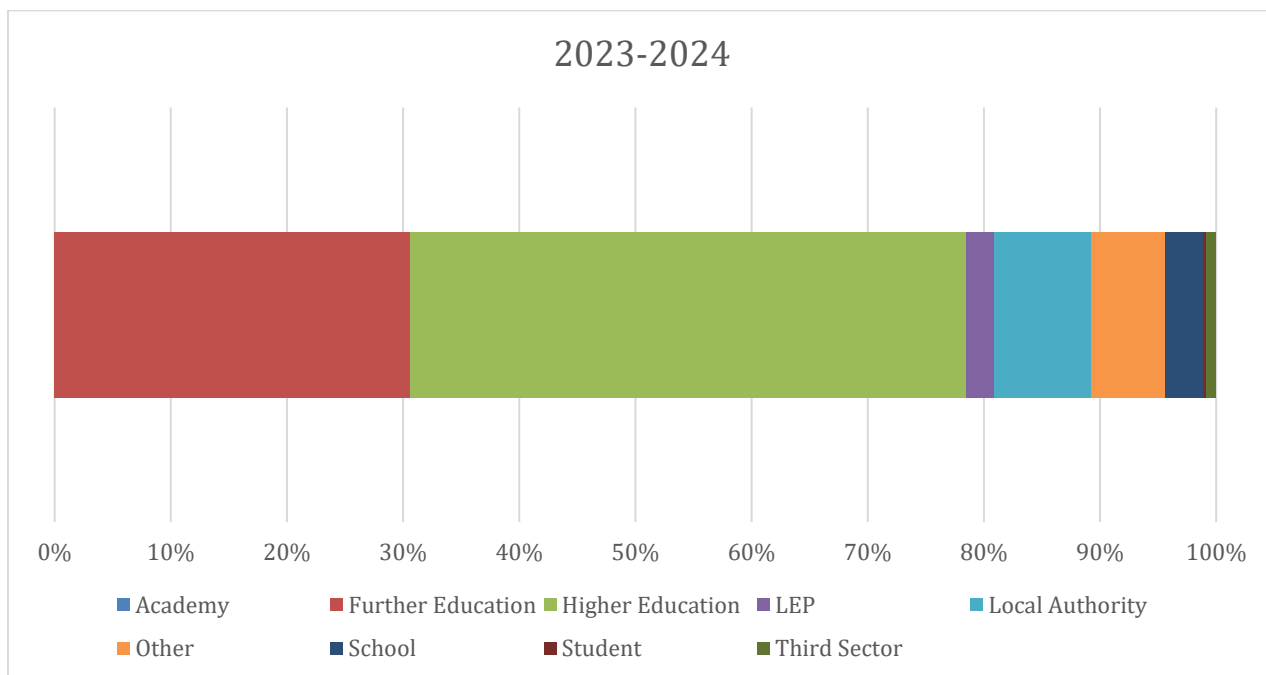
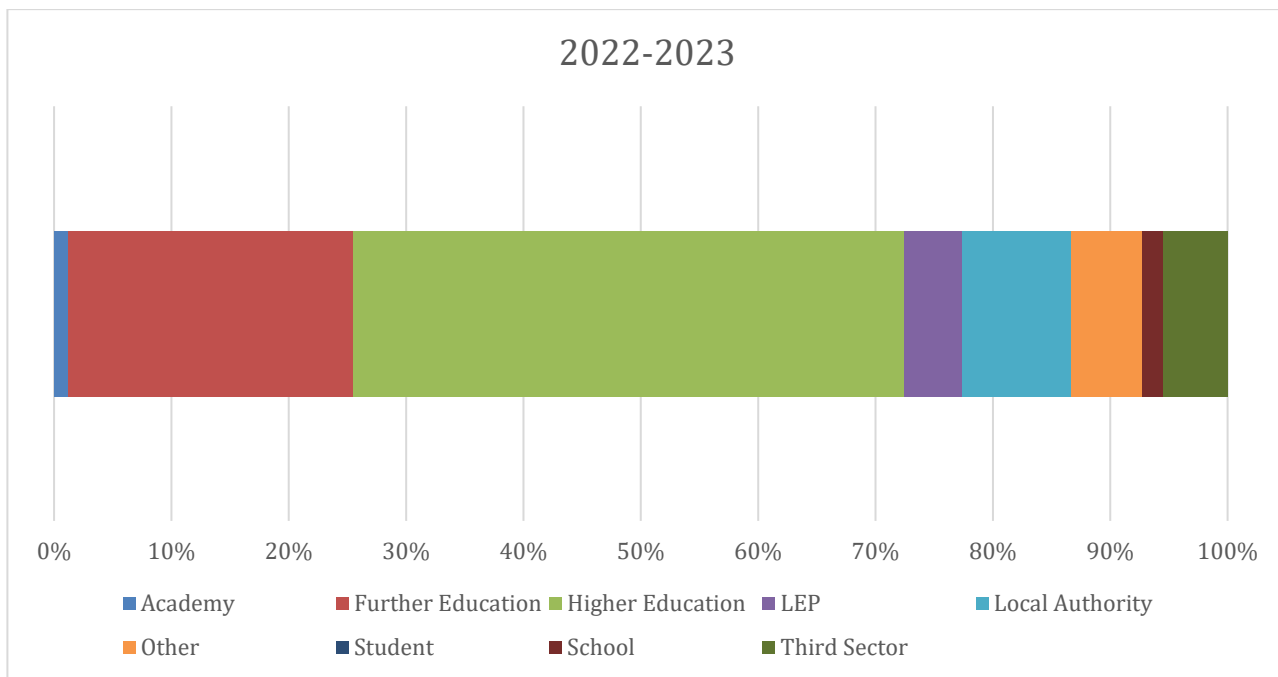
“Schools and colleges should have a greater voice in how collaborative outreach money is spent.” - University outreach practitioner

“We would welcome a greater role for schools and colleges, particularly when it comes to determining programme aims. Whilst we have embraced creating and delivering attainment raising activities, we question how much the schools value this and feel strongly that a future model should allow schools and colleges to input into setting the collective direction of Uni Connect delivery and address the common need of local students from disadvantaged/underrepresented groups more broadly.” - Uni Connect partnership lead

“Active support from the DfE through writing to schools with an expectation to engage with Uni Connect if they have been identified. Some schools choose not to engage for a variety of reasons with their learners missing out. One school with the highest proportion of target ward learners has barely engaged over the last six years and we’ve found no evidence they are getting that support from elsewhere.” - Uni Connect partnership lead

**Figure 8-10: composition of Uni Connect partnership boards over time.**





**There is no shared or consistent understanding across Uni Connect of which models for external partnership are most effective.**

Although many stakeholders valued Uni Connect partnerships' autonomy to organise themselves around regional needs (see section 4.3), we heard about the ways in which Uni Connect partnerships with different stakeholders are more informed by past practice and individual preferences than by evidence of what works. OfS guidance on partnership governance is extremely loose. It suggests that, for example, "Partnerships may also want to consider the merits of inviting colleges, schools and wider stakeholders to join their strategic governance group(s) to provide external perspectives and challenge decisions."<sup>21</sup> The firmest OfS recommendation on partnership models (based on findings from the 2018 evaluation of NCOP) is to retain a degree of central control where partnerships devolve funds (Ibid, p. 40).

"OfS could give us more in terms of what works operationally, not just on interventions. I'd like to know more about how other partnerships work – like, how do they work with CEC?" – Uni Connect outreach practitioner

Uni Connect is not resourced to engage in the same level of activity with every school or college, but we saw examples of how some partnerships use data to prioritise their outreach to schools and colleges with the highest-need student populations, while providing a lower tier of support and signposting for other schools and colleges. However, this strategic approach to relationships did not appear to be universal. In some areas, the decision as to which schools and colleges were engaged seemed to be driven more by legacy relationships and chance.

## 4.5 Funding

Lastly, the review explored funding. Specifically, we explored:

- The sustainability of the current way in which Uni Connect is funded.
- The extent to which Uni Connect provides value for money.
- The likely impact of any decision to further reduce central government funding for collaborative outreach.

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<sup>21</sup> Office for Students (2022). Uni Connect programme guidance From 1 August 2022, P. 39.

**Instability of funding and short-notice announcement of funding was the most commonly cited challenge for Uni Connect partnerships.**

The uncertainty of Uni Connect’s year-to-year funding situation, alongside the changes in programme remit that often accompany funding awards, heavily shapes the ways that partnerships operate. Stakeholders described how this uncertainty makes it difficult for partnerships to retain staff and to evaluate and refine programming on a long-term basis, while tensions are created in relationships with HEIs, schools, colleges and other partners. This message was consistent across groups of stakeholders. We heard a broad consensus that stable funding for three to five years was the minimum needed to enable Uni Connect partnerships to maintain a robust infrastructure for collaborative outreach.

“The yearly funding is a nightmare for schools – they need far more notice to plan ahead than we’re able to give them.” – Uni Connect manager

“Uncertain funding makes it really hard to retain staff, and therefore retain expertise, which is crucial for running an actual evidence-based program that will deliver impact.” – University outreach manager

“It’s not embedded in our strategic outreach plans because we can’t rely on the funding. If they won’t be here in a couple of years, why bother?” – University outreach manager

“Funding has waxed and mainly waned over the years – this makes us hesitant to work with [Uni Connect] because they promise schools things and then let them down.” – Education charity outreach manager

Some stakeholders also argued that the way Uni Connect and its predecessor programmes have been extended multiple times since 2014 highlights a fundamental dissonance in central government’s vision for collaborative outreach. The programmes have been funded as if their mission is time-limited, but then extended again and again, with no clear exit strategy and no clear vision for the end-state they are trying to move the system towards.

“The impact of annual funding over the long term is particularly challenging – It is supposed to make sure we don't have longevity but now we've had staff that have been here years we do need an exit strategy.” – Uni Connect manager

“Surely, if we're committed to something for five years and we know we're going to get fresh funding every year for five years. Can't we just commit to five years?” – University outreach manager

**Although partnerships feel the impact of decreased funding there is a recognition that the early phases of NCOP had 'too much money' and struggled to spend it effectively.**

Several stakeholders, including some Uni Connect partnership staff, acknowledged that, in its early years, the programme had been very generously funded and had struggled to spend that money impactfully. Since then, Uni Connect partnerships have repeatedly reshaped and adjusted their offering to reflect significant reductions in the budget, often by cutting back on third-party provision and subgrants. Changes to the funding structure, and how that money has been spent, are clear in the following figures (Figures 11-16).

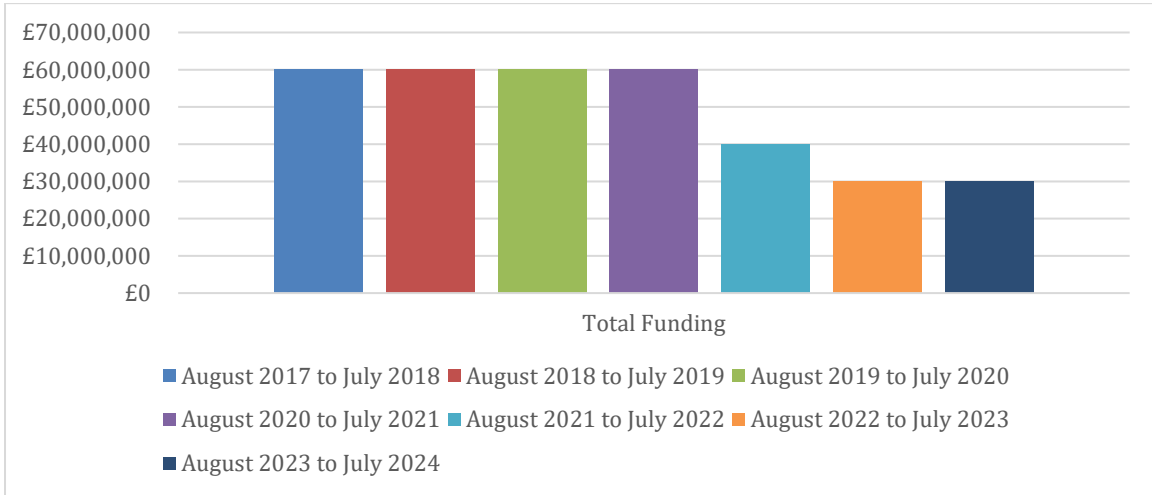
The need for more sustainable, predictable funding was raised much more frequently by stakeholders than the overall level of funding. However, a response to our survey submitted on behalf of all heads of Uni Connect partnerships suggested that total funding for the programme should be increased to take account of rising staffing costs and wider inflationary pressures on partnerships' budgets.

“They essentially had too much funding to start with... So their priority was spending it at first and then it was like right, slam on the brakes, find ways to show that this money is having an impact, but that's no fault of their own. They've constantly been reacting to the latest imperative. And they've never been able to have any security and, like, any sense of 'we're going this far, we're going to be this size for this long.'” – Education charity leader

“At the beginning there was too much funding – we couldn't spend it properly in time.” – Uni Connect manager

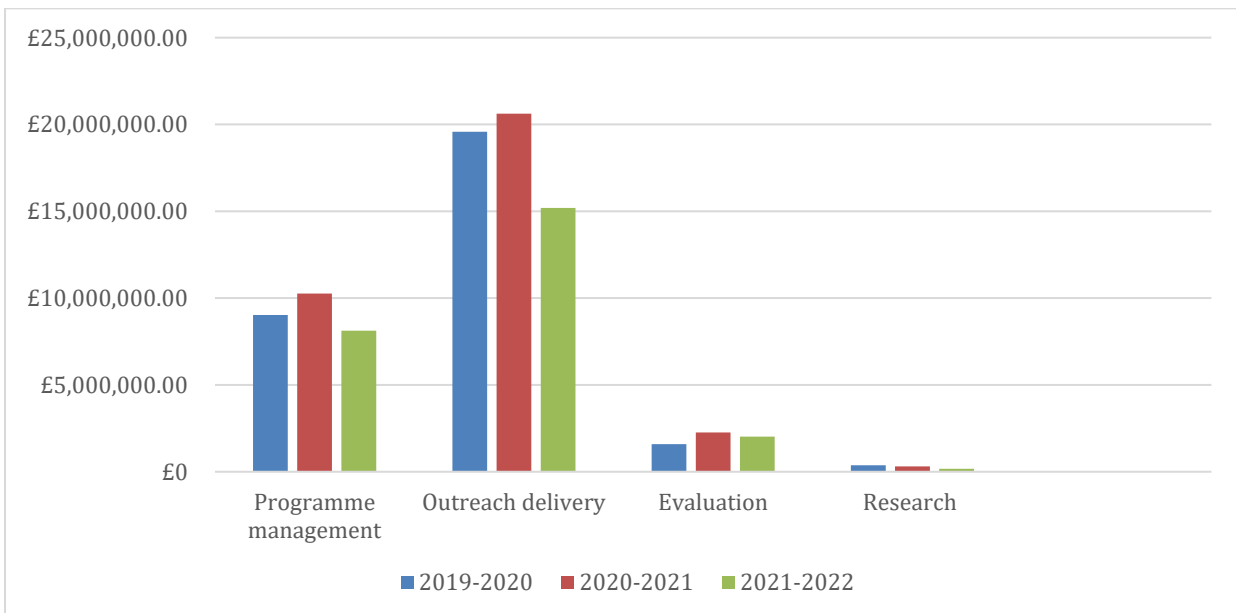
“The scope of Uni connect has expanded significantly since 2017 whilst also losing 50 per cent of its funding.” – Uni Connect partnership lead

**Figure 11: Total funding for Uni Connect over time.**



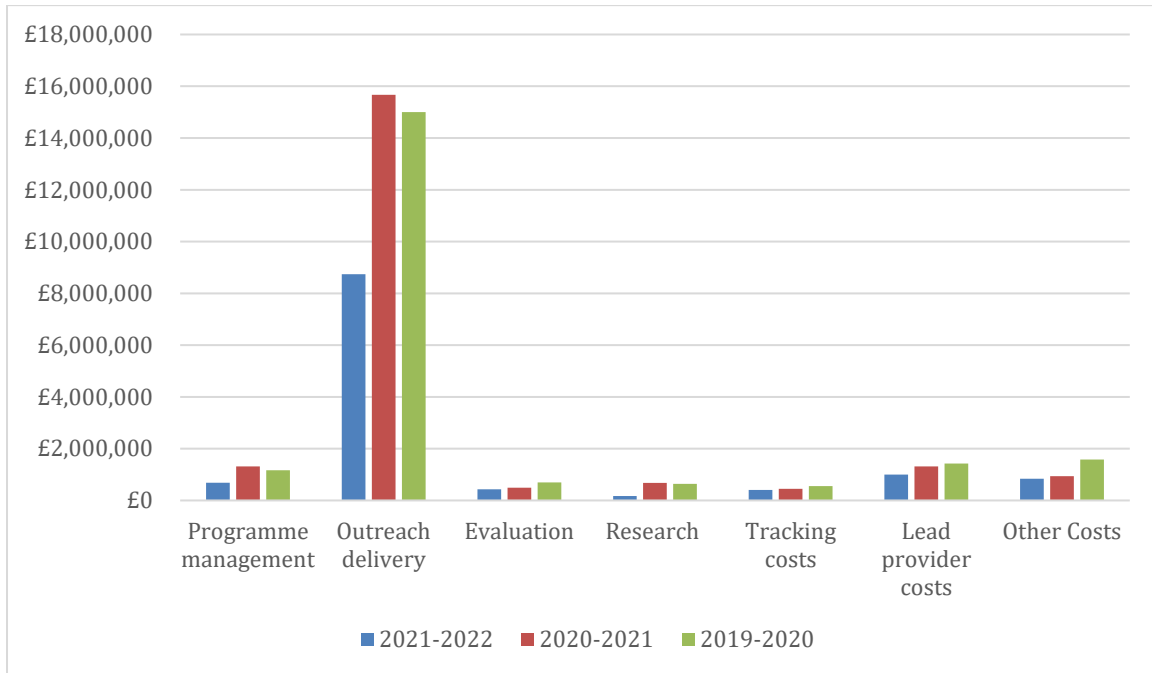
Bar chart showing the total funding for Uni Connect over time, between August 2017 and July 2024.

**Figure 12: Staff Costs, Uni Connect Partnerships spend 2019–2022**



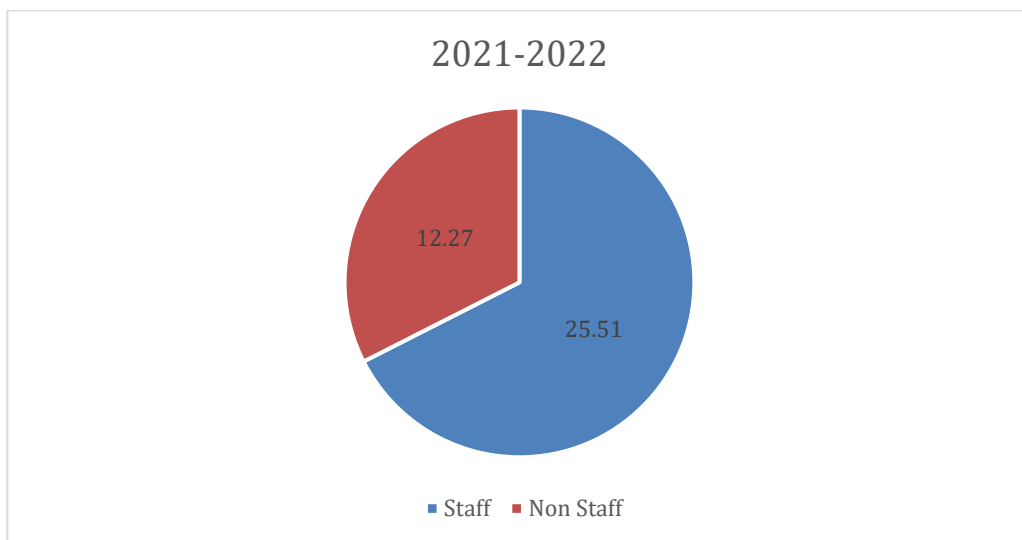
Bar chart showing the staff costs for Uni Connect Partnerships over time, between 2019 and 2022.

**Figure 13: Non-staff costs, Uni Connect partnerships, 2019–2022**

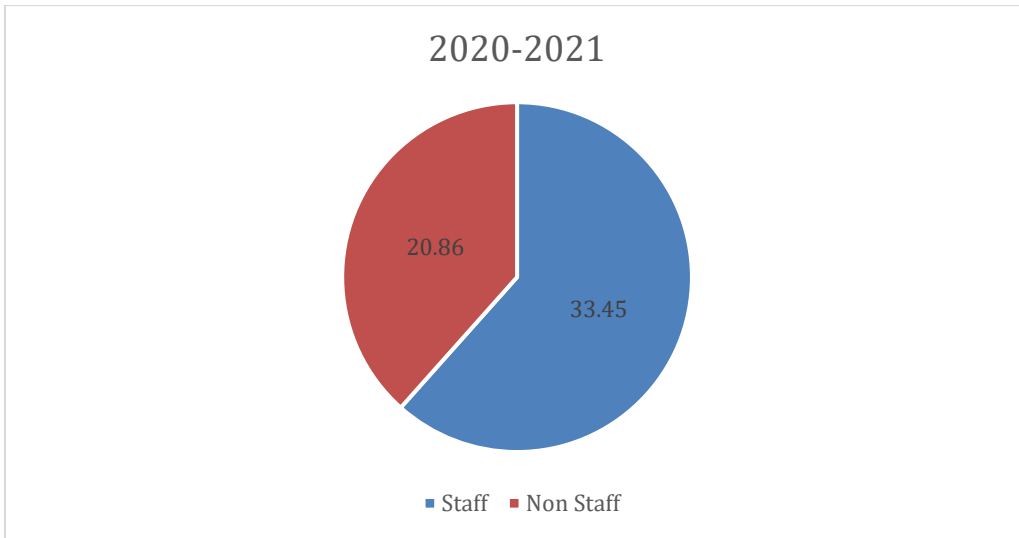


Bar chart showing the non-staff costs for Uni Connect Partnerships over time, between 2019 and 2022.

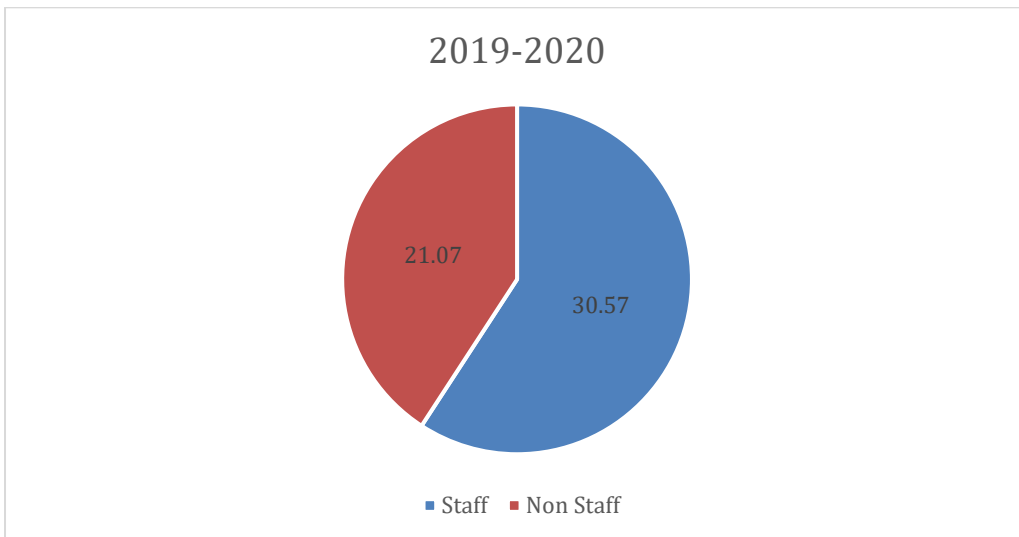
**Figure 14–16: Uni Connect partnership spend 2021–2022: staff versus non-staff.**



Pie chart showing split between non staff costs and staff costs for Uni Connect Partnerships, between 2021 and 2022.



*Pie chart showing split between non staff costs and staff costs for Uni Connect Partnerships, between 2020 and 2021.*



*Pie chart showing split between non staff costs and staff costs for Uni Connect Partnerships, between 2019 and 2020.*



**Economic analysis suggests that Uni Connect provides good value for money – but gaps in the evidence base make it difficult to make a conclusive assessment for the whole programme.**

Analysis conducted by Public First (see section 4.2) calculated the economic benefit of the estimated additional 2,350 students who – based on HEAT data – progressed to university in 2020/21 academic year as a result of their receiving an intensive package of outreach interventions through Uni Connect.<sup>22</sup> This benefit alone – that is to say, excluding any other economic benefits the programme might have generated in relation to other students – when compared to the total cost of Uni Connect in 2020/2021, suggests that every £1 spent on the programme led to between £5 and £9 of economic benefit.

Due to the difficulties in evaluating the totality of Uni Connect's impact (discussed in section 4.2) it is not possible to make a comprehensive estimate of the total economic impact of the programme. Neither is it possible to make robust comparisons between the value for money offered by different activities (beyond the very high level of comparisons given in the TASO Evidence Toolkit)<sup>23</sup>, or among Uni Connect partnerships, or between Uni Connect partnerships and other outreach providers.

The practical consequence of not knowing, with any degree of precision, the relative value for money of different aspects of Uni Connect's work is that it limits decision makers' ability to improve and refine the programme. We know that the most intensive interventions are relatively expensive on a per-student basis, but – based on the analysis noted above – that the returns are capable of far outweighing the initial investment. However, there are also likely to be lower-cost, more scalable activities that are less impactful but still worth it. For example, we do not know if, or in what circumstances, the impact of embedded Uni Connect staff within schools justifies the high opportunity cost of concentrating resources in individual schools or colleges. Likewise, funding transport to campus visits is extremely popular with schools, but many Uni Connect partnerships have struggled to justify this expenditure without being able to quantify the relative impact. We heard from various stakeholders how, as partnerships have adjusted to shrinking budgets, decisions about how to prioritise spending have largely been left up to professional judgment and personal preference.

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<sup>22</sup> Public First (2024). *Breaking Barriers: The economic and social impact of Uni Connect*.

<sup>23</sup> TASO (2023), Evidence Toolkit.

Reflecting more broadly on the question of value for money, some stakeholders argued that a Uni Connect model based on 29 separate partnerships was not the most efficient way to distribute a national pot of funds for collaborative outreach. A few stakeholders suggested alternative models, such as making grants directly to schools and colleges or commissioning work nationally from charities or other providers.

“Having dozens of partnerships doing this work seems like a poor use of the money.” – Education sector body representative

“One year of funding is very short sighted and causes lots of wasted resource.” – LEP practitioner

“One-year funding means it's hard to mature the programme fully, and to properly evaluate it.” – Uni Connect outreach practitioner

### **Some partnerships have developed additional lines of revenue.**

Several Uni Connect partnerships supplement their OfS funding with subscriptions from HEIs, colleges, schools and other partners. Different ways in which Uni Connect partnerships have leveraged partner contributions or matched funding to support collaborative projects include, for example, from local employers, charities and nonprofit organisations or from other public sources of funding, such as LEPs, Opportunity Areas and Arts Council-funded providers. Again, we heard that uncertainty over Uni Connect’s annual funding can limit the appetite of partners to match funds.

“We run in our Uni Connect partnership parallel with a subscription as well.... So all the institutions are also subscribing members.” – University outreach practitioner

“[Our Uni Connect partnership] invites annual bids for matched funding. But in an ideal world we’d want to commit to something as a three-year programme and evaluate it. But because Uni Connect funding is uncertain, it’s hard for us to commit.” – University outreach manager

“Uni Connect funding enabled me to get matched funding from the school to support the project and make the interventions more sustainable.” – School careers coordinator

“[One of our partners], which is a community interest company, match-funded the project we codeveloped with them for students with complex home lives.” – Uni Connect outreach practitioner

**It is unlikely that HEIs would be able or want to voluntarily design and fund a successor collaborative model at a nationally consistent level.**

We pressed stakeholders from HEIs (especially the senior leaders we spoke to) on the question of whether institutions could take on all or part of the cost of funding collaborative outreach as an alternative to relying on central government funding. Generally, stakeholders told us that they thought this would not be feasible given the wider pressures on HEIs’ finances, and would lead to collaborative outreach arrangements (currently funded via Uni Connect) dissolving or scaling back in ways that would reduce their impact.

Specifically, we heard that if the OfS took steps to mandate contributions from HEIs, this new requirement would likely be met by making cuts to their institutional outreach activity. Some stakeholders argued that the nature of collaborative working means that some central funding may always be needed, and that current level of OfS funding for Uni Connect is relatively modest on a national scale compared to the amount of collaborative working it catalyses.

“The market isn’t going to sort itself; without funded collaboration universities won’t do collaborative work.” – University outreach manager

“Any expectation that providers should fund Uni Connect, in the current climate, with the reducing unit of resource, is totally unrealistic.” – University senior manager

“If the work is not funded by DfE/OfS then it will stop.” – Uni Connect partnership lead

“Funding from any other source such as HEIs would compromise the impartiality of the project.” – Uni Connect partnership lead

“One of my big worries is that OfS might say that collaboration has to continue but can’t be funded centrally. I’d struggle to make the case internally to fund a collaborative [effort], so I’d have to cut something else. Collaborative work is a hard sell because it’s not recruiting students.” – University outreach manager

“If funding is reduced the only other reasonable source of this funding would be if universities were regulated to contribute a percentage of their pre-entry APP access funding. This as you can imagine would be difficult to enforce and regulate when you look at the size and scale of the sector. One per cent of funding for a Russell Group institution may not be as significant as one per cent to a small specialist provider.” - Uni Connect partnership lead

“Should it be expected that funding could be obtained from Uni Connect partnerships then it must be taken into serious consideration that any financial obligations put to higher education partners must be mandated and not be of a voluntary nature, and that any such arrangement would take in excess of two years from now to become reality due to the lifespan of the existing APPs and the commencement of new ones. It is already too late to secure any funding from the 2024/25 academic year.” - Uni Connect partnership lead

“If you remove central government funding then some partnerships will keep going but they will not be in the areas that need it most – you need something centralised to drive forwards a central set of goals long term.” - Mission group representative

“Uni Connect is infrastructure for collaboration and no one ever wants to pay for infrastructure that benefits the whole community. It’s really hard to get infrastructure funded other than by central funding.... We’ve been doing something like Uni Connect for something like 30 years, maybe let’s recognise it as a permanent part of the landscape”. - Academic

## 5. Future options for collaborative outreach

This chapter and the two that follow focus on the review's final three research questions:

- What are the opportunities for a future, more effective, model of collaborative outreach?
- What are the risks of adopting a different funding and/or delivery model?
- What are the risks associated with making the transition to a new model and how can these be mitigated?

We saw in the previous chapters how collaborative outreach is valued as an important way to correct 'market failures' in higher education access and address gaps in outreach provision that would otherwise exist. However, we also saw evidence of the challenges and potential weaknesses of the current arrangements for organising collaborative outreach in England. Based on these findings, we have evaluated the three fundamental options available to the OfS:

1. **Maintain the current approach** – with no significant changes to the current model for collaborative outreach via Uni Connect.
2. **Reform or replace Uni Connect** – moving to an improved model for collaborative outreach.
3. **Discontinue Uni Connect** – without an equivalent replacement model.

In this chapter we:

- Set out our evaluation of these three fundamental options.
- Unpack the key decisions for the OfS to make if it decides to reform or replace Uni Connect.
- Outline the roadmap of actions the OfS would need to take in implementing each of the three fundamental options.

Throughout this chapter and the subsequent ones, we highlight the opportunities and risks to be managed. Where the evidence points strongly to a certain option or decision, we have recommended the path we believe the OfS should take.

### 5.1 Fundamental Options

#### Option 1: Maintain the current approach

This would be the least disruptive option while the OfS, DfE and HM Treasury consider the long-term options for funding collaborative outreach programmes from central government. Maintaining the current Uni Connect programme without any significant structural changes would minimise the risk of losing staff expertise, relationships and institutional knowledge (some of which we know are highly valued by stakeholders) in a transition to a new or different model.

We know from the evidence discussed in previous chapters that the quality and impact of Uni Connect's current work is variable. Even those stakeholders who told us they would like to see a similar model retained highlighted significant areas for improvement and pressing issues to revolve – for example, the lack of a coherent mission for the programme, instability of funding arrangements, inconsistency in evaluation practices, duplication of work between the 29 regional partnerships, and an insufficient profile with (and voice for) the school sector. Maintaining the current approach limits the scope for addressing these issues and improving the impact of the programme.

### Option 2: Reform or replace Uni Connect

**This is our recommended option.** There are a range of potential ways to improve arrangements for collaborative outreach, which are discussed in the remainder of this chapter. These draw heavily on the evidence we gathered from stakeholders, as well as what can be learned from looking at other jurisdictions, collective action problems in other sectors and the wider literature on university access and outreach.

At the most basic level, a decision to reform or replace Uni Connect would represent a recognition that: (a) collaborative outreach fulfils a vital ongoing role in our education system; but (b) the programme as currently configured is not optimal. The review found strong evidence to support both of those propositions.

The feasibility of any reformed model would depend on the specific decisions made in designing that model, including the quantum of future OfS funding availability. Following the Chancellor's Autumn Statement in November 2023 and the update of the Public Sector Productivity Programme, it is possible that OfS will be required by the DfE to make additional budgetary reductions to programme and administration spend across its functions, and this may impact upon the viable options for Uni Connect's future.

Based on the evidence within this review, the recommendation of this review is to reform or replace Uni Connect, moving to an improved model for collaborative outreach that reflects the best of the current model and addresses its challenges, creating the conditions for more of Uni Connect's work to deliver the kind transformative impact we have seen is possible. In the next section (5.2) we set out a decision-making framework, outlining the key questions to be considered when making decisions regarding the reform of Uni Connect.

### Option 3: Discontinue Uni Connect

Discontinuing the programme without a replacement would save the Government up to £30 million a year at 2023/24 funding levels. However, such an approach risks a repeat of the situation that came between the discontinuation of Aimhigher in 2011 and the establishment of NNCO in 2014, namely a significant lapse in coordinated outreach provision and the exacerbation of cold spots. We saw in previous chapters how many stakeholders see the 'connective tissue' function of Uni Connect as essential to facilitate collaboration between institutions that are otherwise in competition. The main losers (aside from Uni Connect staff) would be schools and colleges, who would lose a single point of contact for impartial advice on higher education, and students from the smaller, marginalised groups that Uni Connect currently reaches but are often under-prioritised by institutional outreach. The OfS would also lose its vehicle for mobilising outreach activity on strategic national priorities, rather than relying solely on its regulatory levers.

It is possible that the OfS could mitigate these risks – for example, by requiring inter-provider collaboration via APPs. However, it is possible, or likely, that this would become less efficient: if, as we heard, the current arrangement of 29 regional partnerships is already too fragmented, it seems unlikely that further atomisation of collaborative outreach would produce a better result.

Ultimately, discontinuing Uni Connect without a replacement is the most disruptive option, under which it would be hardest to preserve the aspects of the programme that are currently valued by stakeholders and the impacts documented in the evaluation evidence. It would be both difficult and expensive to reverse the reduction in infrastructure once such an option has been pursued.

## 5.2 Five key decisions for reforming or replacing Uni Connect

If, as we recommend, the OfS decides to preserve some form of centrally funded collaborative outreach arrangement in England – in the shape of a reformed Uni Connect programme or a replacement programme – this section now covers the issues that need to be considered around how such reform might be framed.

In designing a reformed model, the OfS should seek to achieve three overarching objectives:

- Create clarity about the ambition for long-term impact and the role of collaborative outreach in achieving this.
- Give collaborative outreach practitioners and their partners the support and infrastructure they need to maximise impact.

- Ensure the OfS has the levers it needs, both to hold regional partnerships to account for impact and to be responsive to national priorities.

These objectives speak to a key theme identified in our fieldwork – tension in the current relationship between the OfS and regional Uni Connect partnerships and a desire to reframe that relationship to achieve a better balance between accountability, regional autonomy and central capacity-building and support. Stakeholders expressed different and sometimes conflicting views about what role they thought the OfS should play, but we heard a strong consensus in favour of the OfS setting a clear strategic direction for the programme and clear, stable parameters for partnerships to work within.

Whatever parameters the OfS sets are unlikely to please everyone. But the OfS's role in overseeing access and participation is not to please everyone; it is to provide effective stewardship of the sector in a way that delivers improved equality of opportunity for students, advances the policy priorities of the democratically elected government of the day (which can include short term changes) and ensures value for public money. In relation to collaborative outreach, fulfilment of the OfS's role might therefore take the form of providing leadership and support to regional partnerships, but it might also involve providing challenge where the programme is not living up to its potential for impact. Similarly – and in common with some of the international comparators discussed in the review – there may be instances in which the OfS concludes that national priorities are better addressed through central programming, rather than through an exclusively regional model.

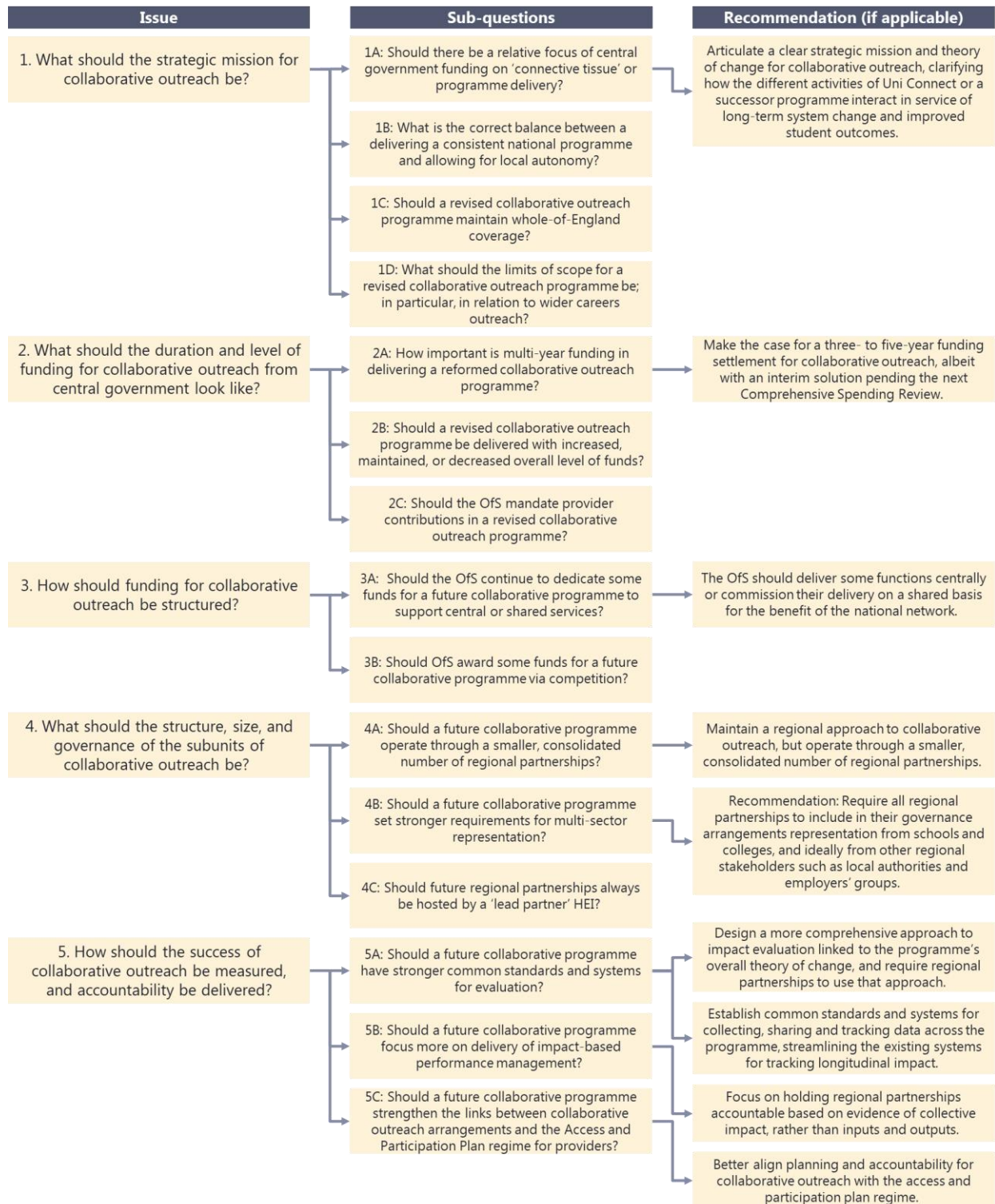
To assist the OfS designing a reformed Uni Connect model, we have set out a decision-making framework, outlining the key questions to be answered. The decision-making framework builds on the analysis framework used to gather evidence for the review (which looked at mission and purpose; impact; structure and internal capacity; stakeholder relationships; and funding). It structures the decisions facing the OfS as five key issues, each one framed as a question, while recognising that all five issues are inter-related – they cannot be decided in isolation. The five key issues are:

1. What should the strategic mission for collaborative outreach be?
2. What should the duration and level of funding for collaborative outreach from central government look like?
3. How should funding for collaborative outreach be structured?
4. What should the structure, size, and governance of the subunits of collaborative outreach be?
5. How should the success of collaborative outreach be measured, and accountability be delivered?



The rest of this section discusses these issues in more detail, breaking each issue down into more specific sub-questions. Where the evidence points strongly in one direction, we have made recommendations accordingly. The whole framework is summarised below as a diagram:

**Figure 17: Diagram of framework**



## Issue 1: What should the strategic mission for collaborative outreach be?

A major theme in our findings is the lack of shared understanding of what Uni Connect is for. As such, there is a compelling case for clarifying the strategic mission of a reformed or replacement programme.

### **1A: Should there be a relative focus of central government funding on 'connective tissue' or programme delivery?**

In the early phases of NCOP and Uni Connect, the focus was on commissioning student-facing programming, typically through contracts with external outreach providers or sub-grants to HEI partners, schools and colleges. With hindsight, we heard concerns about the value for money that was achieved by taking this approach. Subsequently, Uni Connect's budget has been scaled back significantly, such that Uni Connect's role providing the 'connective tissue' between partners accounts for a larger proportion of its activity relative to the commissioning or delivery of student-facing programming. However, the findings of this review show that this de facto mission shift is not widely or clearly understood.

Going forward, the main challenge for the OfS is to articulate clearly what the programme is trying to achieve in terms of student outcomes, and a coherent overall theory of change for how a collaborative outreach programme will achieve that. For example, it may be that the most important contribution Uni Connect or a successor programme can make is to align and catalyse the activity of different partners across a region, and that the commissioning or delivery of student-facing outreach is done in service of that mission – a way of strategically filling gaps and making the regional partnership more than just a 'talking shop' by ensuring that conversations can result in collective action. At the moment, Uni Connect does not have this level of clarity. The programme's stated aims and priorities are presented as a list, without a strong sense of how they relate to one another, or their relative importance in achieving an overall outcome. When that list changes – or stakeholders perceive the OfS's priorities to have changed – it can further undermine the coherence of the mission. Similarly, there is currently no clear sense of the end state that Uni Connect is trying to bring about, namely what would be different in three, five, 10 or 20 years if collaborative outreach was successful.

**Recommendation:** Articulate a clear strategic mission and theory of change for collaborative outreach, clarifying how the different activities of Uni Connect or a successor programme interact in service of long-term system change and improved student outcomes.

In articulating the mission, the OfS should be mindful of the level of change fatigue that exists within partnerships. Positioning a new strategic mission and a genuine, long-term reframing (rather than 'yet another change to the programme priorities') will require careful two-way communication.

**1B: What is the correct balance between delivering a consistent national programme and allowing for local autonomy?**

A secondary but important decision in relation to the mission is how tightly to prescribe the kind of work that Uni Connect or a successor programme is allowed to do in service of the mission, versus what is left to local discretion. We heard from stakeholders that more specific guidance from the OfS would be welcome in some areas (such as evaluation), but also, paradoxically, that the OfS is too prescriptive or prone to changing its mind in other areas. This was a key factor cited as driving 'churn' in the Uni Connect programme offer and thus undermining partner engagement. As noted above, stakeholders expressed different and sometimes conflicting views about what role they thought the OfS should play, but we heard a strong consensus in favour of the OfS setting a clear strategic direction for the programme and clear, stable parameters for partnerships to work within.

There is a clear interdependency with other decisions discussed in this chapter, such as clarifying the overall theory of change, how funding is devolved to regions and expectations for governance and evaluation. The better placed the OfS is to understand impact and performance across the programme, the more confident it can be in giving regional partnerships freedom to decide how best to deliver on the mission based on their own local needs and priorities. Likewise, the more partnerships understand the role they are being asked to play, and their level of autonomy and discretion in setting the local agenda, the better placed they will be to engage stakeholders in the work and build the right capacity to deliver.

**1C: Should a revised collaborative outreach programme maintain whole-of-England coverage?**

At the moment, Uni Connect's network of regional partnerships covers the whole of England. One option for reform would be narrow its remit and focus only a smaller subset of places or regions – for example, those with the lowest higher education participation rates. Such an approach might resemble what the DfE has done through its Opportunity Areas and latterly Priority Areas programmes, or what the United States Government or the Australian Government have done through their own competitive grant programmes to support higher education access.

The advantage of such an approach would be to concentrate attention and funding on the most severe and persistent geographical areas of challenge, leaving the wider national task of outreach to institutions themselves and third-sector outreach organisations. This approach might also be a way to reduce the total cost of the programme.

However, moving away from whole-of-England support for collaborative outreach was not a solution that was proactively suggested to the review by stakeholders. Such an approach might negate the benefits of promoting collaboration more generally. There is also a risk that viewing outreach through a purely place-based lens would further reduce support for groups such as care-experienced students and Gypsy, Roma, Traveller, Showmen and Boater students, who are severely underrepresented in higher education but located across England rather than in a few specific places.

**1D: What should the limits of scope for a revised collaborative outreach programme be; in particular, in relation to wider careers outreach?**

The line between higher education and technical qualifications is rightly becoming more blurred: many HEIs and courses have a technical or vocational focus, and routes such as degree apprenticeships emphasise learning in the workplace. We heard broad support from stakeholders for the proposition that advice and information to students should not be siloed or presented as a false binary between ‘university’ or ‘careers.’ That said, it is also important that different government-funded programmes do not duplicate effort, and that outreach activity is high-quality and appropriately specialised, rather than trying to be ‘all things to all people.’

A key decision for the OfS in articulating the strategic mission for a reformed collaborative outreach programme is how much, if at all, the programme should engage in providing IAG on postsecondary pathways that do not include higher education. As part of this, there is an opportunity to position Uni Connect or a successor’s role more clearly in relation to that of the Careers & Enterprise Company.

**Issue 2: What should the duration and level of funding for collaborative outreach from central government look like?**

There are a series of key decisions in relation to how Uni Connect, or a successor, is funded and how much funding it should receive.

## **2A: How important is multi-year funding in delivering a reformed collaborative outreach programme?**

For reasons discussed at length in the previous chapter, uncertainty of funding year to year was the most commonly cited barrier to Uni Connect's effectiveness and efficiency. Stakeholders, especially Uni Connect partnerships themselves, generally saw stable funding as more important than the specific level of funding for the programme. There is an argument that if it is not possible to achieve a sustainable funding settlement, it would be more favourable to discontinue the programme and explore other long-term policy options.

Although Government cannot commit to funding any programme in perpetuity, there is an opportunity to give a clearer signal (compared to previous funding rounds) that a reformed Uni Connect or a successor is intended to build long term infrastructure for collaborative outreach. This would help partnerships plan more effectively, aid stronger stakeholder engagement and potentially unlock more sustainable partner and matched funding.

However, we accept that the timing of the Spending Review cycle and the upcoming general election may make it practically impossible for the OfS to secure a sustainable funding settlement in the next 12 months. It will be important to communicate these practical constraints to stakeholders alongside short-term decisions on funding.

**Recommendation:** Make the case for a three- to five-year funding settlement for collaborative outreach, albeit with an interim solution pending the next Comprehensive Spending Review.

## **2B: Should a revised collaborative outreach programme be delivered with increased, maintained or decreased overall level of funds?**

Data from the OfS shows how the differences in access to higher education between the most and least represented demographic groups have not closed, and by some measures may be increasing.<sup>24</sup> As such, the underlying case for Government intervention to promote equality of opportunity in access to higher education is still very much present. There is an argument that to close such a stubborn gap, even greater investment in collaborative outreach would be justified.

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<sup>24</sup> Office for Students (2023). Findings from the access and participation data dashboard.

However, as previously noted, we heard evidence that NCOP and Uni Connect sometimes struggled to spend funding effectively when they had larger budgets. Likewise, the current evidence base for Uni Connect's impact is too weak and fragmented to make a compelling case for significantly greater funding levels, especially in the current challenging fiscal climate.

Several of the options set out in this chapter represent ways for the OfS to realise potential efficiencies, savings or reinvestment while retaining a core infrastructure for collaborative outreach. The challenge for the OfS in setting future levels of funding is to ensure that the cumulative effect of any reforms leaves Uni Connect or a successor programme with sufficient capacity, appropriately well organised across the programme, to deliver on its mission.

### **2C: Should the OfS mandate provider contributions in a revised collaborative outreach programme?**

The strong message we heard from stakeholders was that HEIs would be unlikely to increase their voluntary contributions toward the running of Uni Connect or a successor beyond what they currently contribute in subscriptions (where applicable) and in-kind support. It would therefore be necessary for the OfS to mandate any increased contributions via some kind of levy, or at least by signalling its willingness to impose a levy, absent a regionally negotiated agreement. This would be very unpopular given the wider financial pressures on HEIs and might displace funds that would otherwise be spent on providers' own outreach activities. There is also a risk that a shift from government funding to provider funding could reinforce the existing perception that collaborative outreach 'belongs to higher education' rather than schools.

That said, provider contributions present a way of decreasing direct costs to the taxpayer (albeit the money would still be coming indirectly from the public via the tuition fee/student loan system). There is an argument that, since collaborative outreach corrects a market failure, paying a levy – for example, through providers' annual registration fees – should be part of the price of competing in the market for recruiting undergraduates. A levy also offers the potential to require all providers to support collaborative outreach arrangements, which is not the case at present, and to set a fair level of contribution from each provider based on the size of the institution (and potentially by reflecting the numbers of graduates from underrepresented groups currently recruited). For comparison, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales currently mandates the level of funding that each provider must contribute to the Reaching Wider regional collaborative outreach programme.

### Issue 3: How should funding for collaborative outreach be structured?

Whatever the duration and level of funding, it will be important to consider how funds flow outward from central government and the implications for the effectiveness and efficiency of the programme or a successor.

#### **3A: Should the OfS continue to dedicate some funds for a future collaborative programme to support central or shared services?**

The review found evidence that the practice of devolving almost all Uni Connect funding to the 29 regional partnerships leads to duplication, both in support functions such as communications and evaluation and in the creation of resources and design of outreach programmes for students. By holding back funds for currently duplicative functions the OfS could realise efficiencies, ensure more consistent practice across the programme and free up staff in regional partnerships to focus on the needs of their regions rather than 'reinventing the wheel'.

Retained funds could be used centrally by the OfS – such as for a central web development team or a central analytics function to support evaluation. They could also be used to commission services on a shared basis such as funding one regional partnership to develop a guide to applying for degree apprenticeships that becomes the core resource used nationally; funding one or more partnerships to become the national centre of excellence for developing outreach programmes for refugee students; or funding a subset of partnerships to become evaluation hubs, providing evaluation support to their neighbouring partnerships.

Whatever the specifics of the approach taken, retained funding represents an opportunity for the OfS to take a more active stewardship role in building the capacity of Uni Connect or its successor. However, in implementing such an approach it would be important to ensure that regional customisation to context is not lost and that flexible or modular resources and supports are provided where there is no one-size-fits-all solution. As part of this decision, the OfS may also wish to revisit the question of whether to unify the programme under a consistent brand, rather than allowing regional partnerships to operate with their own individual brands.

**Recommendation:** The OfS should deliver some functions centrally or commission their delivery on a shared basis for the benefit of the national network.



### **3B: Should OfS award some funds for a future collaborative programme via competition?**

Presently funding is allocated to Uni Connect partnerships via a formula. It would be open to the OfS, in a reformed model, to allocate some or all funding for collaborative outreach via competitive grants or contracts. This option is particularly pertinent if the OfS decides to move away from whole-of-England coverage (see above), if it decides to retain some funding to commission shared services on behalf of a national network (see above also), or if it decides to move away from the 'lead partner' model (see below).

Greater use of competitive funding is an opportunity to promote innovation and channel funds to partnerships with the most compelling ideas and the strongest track records for impact, particularly in relation to creating centres of excellence on specific topics. It could also provide an impetus for partners from different institutions and sectors to collaborate in new ways and leverage new sources of matched funding. However, it would be important to manage the risk that competition among partnerships undermines cross-partnership collaboration. It would also be imperative to combine any such approach with a plan to codify and share best practices nationally, rather than creating yet more examples of fragmented or duplicative programming.

#### **Issue 4: What should the structure, size and governance of the subunits of collaborative outreach be?**

Even if funding for Uni Connect, or a successor programme, is not entirely dispersed to regional partnerships (as it is now), at least some of the delivery of collaborative outreach activity must take place at a sub-national level. As such, it is important to consider how that regional partnership and delivery should be organised and the degree to which that might differ from current arrangements.

#### **4A: Should a future collaborative programme operate through a smaller, consolidated number of regional partnerships? (This is separate to the question about whole-of-England coverage.)**

The findings of the review validated the importance of regional collaborative outreach, but highlighted challenges with the existing configuration. There is an opportunity to realise economies of scale by merging some partnerships, especially where the current regional partnership is small and struggles to support a viable team of staff that includes the full range of specialist skills needed to coordinate, deliver and evaluate an effective programme. At the same time, there is an opportunity to revisit some of the legacy regional footprints that have survived since the establishment of NCOP, and which stakeholders told us no longer made

sense. A comprehensive reassessment of regional footprints would also allow the OfS to pursue better alignment with other regional boundaries (such as the new combined authorities and metro mayoralities) and challenge any latent parochialism between providers.

**Recommendation:** Maintain a regional approach to collaborative outreach, but operate through a smaller, consolidated number of regional partnerships.

The key risk to manage in redrawing the regional footprints is creating regions that are too big to have an identifiable set of regional needs, accepting that no region is completely homogenous. There are also important transitional considerations to manage, such as determining whether existing Uni Connect staff would be entitled to transfer to new regional partnerships under Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment) regulations (TUPE), and what this would mean for their conditions of employment and place of work.

#### **4B: Should a future collaborative programme set stronger requirements for multi-sector representation?**

One of the main arguments for regionally based collaborative outreach is its ability to put the voices of regional stakeholders at the centre of decision making. We heard widespread support for giving schools and colleges a stronger voice in decision making as part of collaborative outreach, and for making connections between collaborative outreach for higher education and other local and regional efforts to promote in-demand careers, economic development and community empowerment. Some Uni Connect partnerships have invested time in engaging a wider range of stakeholders and highlighted the benefits this has brought to their work.

Conversely, we heard that Uni Connect is not always seen as relevant to schools, or sufficiently joined-up with other regional agendas. This drives a perception that the programme serves the interests of the higher education sector, rather than being jointly owned by everyone with a stake in fair access. The current OfS guidance on partnership governance requires representation from further education providers, but leaves the question of representation from schools and other stakeholders open for the current (higher education dominated) governance boards to decide.

**Recommendation:** Require all regional partnerships to include in their governance arrangements representation from schools and colleges, and ideally from other regional stakeholders such as local authorities and employers' groups.

#### **4C: Should future regional partnerships always be hosted by a 'lead partner' HEI?**

Although (as discussed in previous chapters) Uni Connect partnerships have a variety of internal structures, a common feature of the current model is that grant funding for each partnership is paid by the OfS to a 'lead partner' HEI who manages the funds on behalf of the partnership. Lead partners tend to be large institutions with stable internal systems and access to a range of valuable resources such as office space, HR and finance support, and venues for outreach events.

However, it also seems that the lead partner model can tend towards a situation where one institution has an oversized role in what is supposed to be a collaborative arrangement, with other partners taking a back seat. The need to work through a lead partner institution also limits the OfS's options where a partnership does not appear to be working well, but no other institution is keen to take on the lead role. Accordingly, in framing a reformed model for collaborative outreach, the OfS should consider the following alternative options for partnership governance:

- A. **Keep the lead partner model** for regional partnerships, but strengthen requirements for collaborative governance.
- B. **Require partnerships to be constituted as separate entities** (such as charities or companies) even if, in practice, they are physically hosted by HEIs.
- C. **Bring the programme in house**, establishing regional subsidiaries or teams of the OfS to facilitate collaborative outreach, overseen by regional partnership boards.
- D. **Allow a mix of governance models**, potentially allowing different organisations and institutions to compete to host regional partnerships.

Clearly, each option has advantages and disadvantages. Option A is the least disruptive, but is still reliant on the existence of an effective lead partner in each region. Option B creates a more formal demarcation between partners and Uni Connect but could result in a bureaucratic exercise without real change. Option C allows the OfS to ensure consistency across the programme, but might be less effective in securing buy-in and a sense of shared ownership from partners. Option D gives the OfS more levers to find an approach that works effectively in each

region, including where partners make a compelling case that the current model is already working for their region, but risks introducing more complexity.

As with the above decision on changing regional footprints, Options B, C and D would all require the careful management of transitional arrangements including any rights for staff to transfer under TUPE.

### Issue 5: How should the success of collaborative outreach be measured, and accountability be delivered?

Evaluation came across as both a key aspect of what stakeholders value about Uni Connect now and an area they identified for growth and improvement. There are also some important decisions in relation to how an improved understanding of programme impact could drive improved performance management practices in higher education outreach.

#### **5A: Should a future collaborative programme have stronger common standards and systems for evaluation?**

We heard and saw how – despite collation of evidence as part of national evaluations – a fragmented approach to evaluation at the regional level undermines the OfS's ability to know how different parts of the programme are performing, and which types of activities are having the most impact and delivering the best value for money; it also reduces the potential of Uni Connect to influence the wider higher education access sector to invest in more impactful outreach. This is despite the Director for Fair Access and Participation's broadly welcomed emphasis on evidence and evaluation, and the support from TASO that has accompanied it.

Many stakeholders told us that they would favour a more consistent approach to evaluation as a way to strengthen outreach practice and increase the efficiency of evaluation work by reducing duplication between partnerships. Any new approach would need to be consistent enough to allow comparison of similar activity across partnerships, but flexible enough to allow regional customisation of programming.

One specific area identified for improvement was the unhelpful level of variation in how different partnerships collect and share student data, and the lack of interoperability between the three OfS-funded longitudinal trackers (notwithstanding that the three trackers themselves use a common standard). There may even be scope to connect data systems used for collaborative outreach with other datasets, such as the National Pupil Database.

Decisions to standardise evaluation are linked to any other decisions the OfS may make about the extent to which functions should be centralised or delivered on a shared basis (see above).

**Recommendation:** Design a more comprehensive approach to impact evaluation linked to the programme's overall theory of change, and require regional partnerships to use that approach.

**Recommendation:** Establish common standards and systems for collecting, sharing and tracking data across the programme, streamlining the existing systems for tracking longitudinal impact.

### **5B: Should a future collaborative programme focus more on delivery of impact-based performance management?**

Although the picture of Uni Connect's impact is far from clear, that is not for a lack of management reporting on the part of regional partnerships, which spend a significant amount of staff time accounting to the OfS for the inputs and outputs of their activities. Although accountability for spending is a necessary feature of any publicly funded programme, we heard that many Uni Connect staff and their partners (including schools) perceive the current approach to be excessively bureaucratic. Crucially, the review found that this approach is not driving consistent performance or impact across regions. Partly, this is related to the lack of robust impact data, and partly to the lack of levers for the OfS to intervene or 're-broker' partnership governance where performance is weak. As such, the approach to accountability for Uni Connect represents the worst of both worlds: bureaucratic but also toothless.

There is an opportunity for the OfS to reframe its approach to managing the performance of regional partnerships to focus less on what they do, or plan to do, and more on the impact they achieve. Within this, there is an opportunity to place a greater emphasis on how collaboration between partners is leading (or not) to more impactful outreach in the aggregate, not merely through outreach directly delivered or funded through Uni Connect or a successor. This last point links to the relationship between collaborative outreach and the OfS's other levers for regulating access and participation (see below) – it also highlights a potential trade-off between shared accountability for collective impact and the level of autonomy afforded to regional partnerships.

**Recommendation:** Focus on holding regional partnerships accountable based on evidence of collective impact, rather than inputs and outputs.

### **5C: Should a future collaborative programme strengthen the links between collaborative outreach arrangements and the APP regime for providers?**

We heard consistently how lack of alignment between the planning cycle for Uni Connect and the different planning cycles for HEIs' APPs frustrates collaborative planning. Creating better alignment is easier said than done, but in essence, there are three, non-mutually exclusive options open to the OfS:

- A. **Synchronise APP waves within regions** – so all HEIs within each regional partnership are working to the same timeline.
- B. **Require all providers within a regional partnership to agree collaborative targets for inclusion in their respective APPs** – to reinforce the role of collaborative outreach in coordinating activity between providers, not just providing extra activity on their behalf.
- C. **Require all HEIs to be part of a regional collaborative outreach partnership** – addressing the current 'free-rider problem' whereby some providers benefit from collaborative outreach without contributing, and other (often smaller) providers find it difficult to engage with partnerships.

Further analysis may be required to establish which of these options can be achieved within the OfS's existing powers, or whether new legislation would be needed. In implementing any of these options, it will also be important to manage the risk of further reinforcing a perception that collaborative outreach 'belongs to higher education' rather than schools, further education colleges and other stakeholders (see above recommendation on requiring more representative partnership governance).

**Recommendation:** Better align planning and accountability for collaborative outreach with the APP regime.

## **5.3 Roadmaps for implementation**

Whichever way forward the OfS decides to pursue, the sequence of next steps it takes will be critical. There is an opportunity here to learn from the past two decades of collaborative outreach, but there is also a risk of repeating past mistakes. As such, we have mapped out the key considerations for the OfS in

implementing any of the three fundamental options discussed above (section 5.1), and highlighted what we see as the main decision points in each roadmap.

### Roadmap to maintain the current approach

Even if the OfS decides to continue the Uni Connect programme in essentially the same model as at present, there is still a case for formally reflecting and responding to the findings of this review and signalling to partnerships any non-structural refinements that OfS is minded to make. For example, the OfS could create greater clarity around the programme's mission. This clarity could then allow for a more focused conversation about how to align evaluation and impact measurement, building on existing efforts, as well as inter-partnership dialogue about what best practice and value for money approaches should be adopted more widely across the programme.

**Figure 18: Roadmap to maintain the current approach**

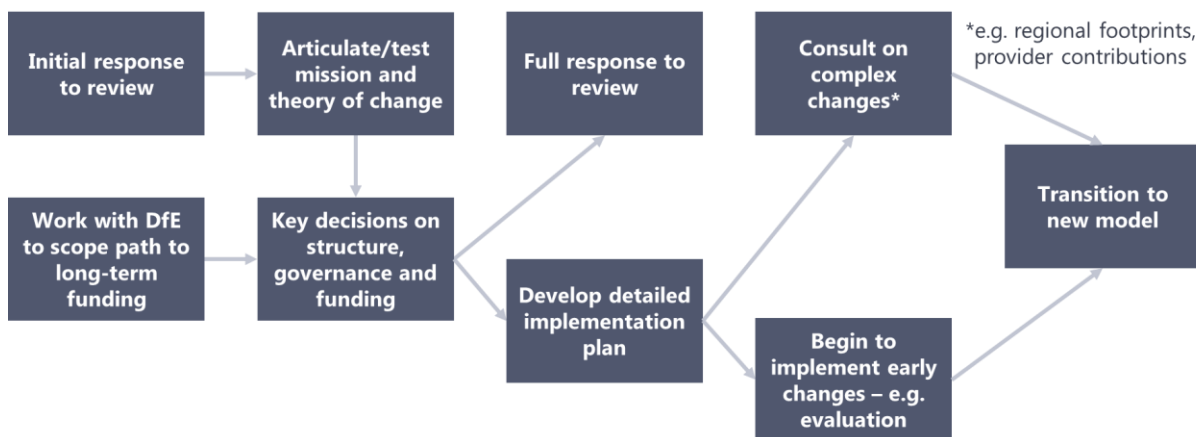


Given the ongoing anxiety about Uni Connect's funding arrangements, it would be important to message any proposal for non-structural refinement carefully, and in the context of wider messaging about likely levels of funding for 2023/24 and future years.

### Roadmap to reform Uni Connect

If the OfS decides to reform or replace Uni Connect with an improved collaborative outreach model, this will necessitate a series of related decisions, some of which will require input from the DfE and possibly HM Treasury. There will be an important balance for the OfS to strike between giving itself and other policymakers space to make these decisions, and keeping regional partnerships and other stakeholders engaged, since stakeholder buy-in will ultimately be a critical factor in the making the new model a success. Accordingly, it will likely be helpful for the OfS to publish an initial response to this review, setting out the options under consideration and the high-level timeline for decision making, with a full response coming later and setting out the policy decisions that have been made.

**Figure 19: Roadmap to reform Uni Connect**



Because many of the decisions on structure, governance and the devolution of funding are interdependent, it will be important for the OfS to reach positions on these decisions and then set out a coherent model for reform. However, that need not prevent the OfS from involving stakeholders in dialogue sooner to create alignment about the strategic mission and theory of change for collaborative outreach. Clarity on these topics will be important to inform the design of the new model. In planning to implement the new model, the OfS may wish to move faster on some elements, for example:

- Designing a more comprehensive approach to impact evaluation.
- Setting common data standards and beginning to align systems.
- Identifying and starting to deliver/commission some functions on a central or shared basis.
- Setting requirements for representative partnership governance.
- Developing an impact-based approach to performance management.

Other elements are likely to require more iterative planning and consultation:

- Drawing regional footprints to consolidate the number of partnerships (and working through the implications for staff transitions).
- Any changes to governance arrangement away from the lead partner HEI model;
- Any moves to require partner contributions.
- Any changes to the APP regime.

Crucially, in planning for and communicating about the transition to a new model, the OfS should repeatedly emphasise the strategic nature of these reforms and the long-term goals for impact. Any perception that this is ‘just more change’ will undermine stakeholder buy-in and therefore impact.

### Roadmap to discontinue Uni Connect

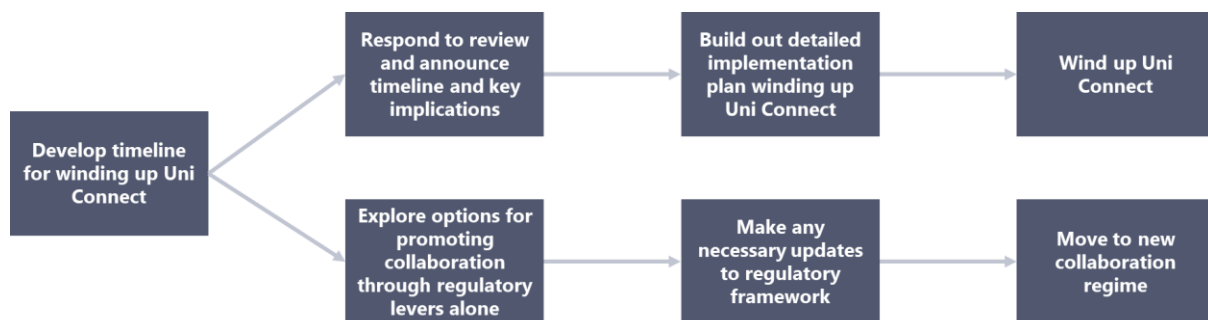
If the OfS decides not to continue with a centrally funded collaborative outreach programme, two parallel streams of work will be needed to implement the decision. First, and most urgently, the OfS will need to:



- Decide on the timeline for winding up the existing Uni Connect programme.
- Announce the overall decision, timeline and high-level implications (for example: the orderly transition of staff and redundancy processes; collection and preservation of intellectual property and resources; and information sharing with partners to sustain relationships and facilitate continued work, on a non-funded basis, where possible).
- Work through each of these implications to develop a detailed implementation plan, and then work with partnerships and current lead partners to implement that plan.

Second, the OfS will likely wish to explore options for promoting collaborative outreach in the absence of a funded programme, which could include some of the ideas outlined in this chapter in relation to a reformed programme. Some of these options may require changes to the regulatory framework set by the OfS – for example, revising the conditions of registration to require collaboration between providers on outreach work in the absence of a centrally funded programme.

**Figure 20: Roadmap to discontinue Uni Connect**



Although these two streams of work can be pursued in parallel, it will be important to carefully coordinate them so that: (a) valuable outreach activity is not lost unnecessarily in the transition between two different regimes; but (b) policy formulation does not delay the operational decisions needed to wind up Uni Connect in orderly manner, including informing staff about the future of their roles in a respectful way and at the earliest possible opportunity.

## 6. Conclusion

The options before the OfS are complex and the decisions which must be made are perceived to have high stakes by many of those working in the sector, particularly staff working in Uni Connect partnerships themselves. These decisions are to be made at a challenging time for our country, in an education sector and a society that is weathering the aftermath of a pandemic, instability across the globe and economic hardship at home. Some of the choices are inherently controversial and it is clear that no single way forward would represent the ideal solution for every stakeholder.

Nevertheless, compared to most other areas of public policy, the overall aim of collaborative outreach is remarkably uncontroversial: stakeholders and the general public overwhelmingly support the proposition that students should have an equal opportunity to access the life-changing benefits of higher education. In implementing any of the decisions framed by this review, perhaps the most important task for the OfS will be to harness the tremendous commitment and goodwill for this agenda that exists in schools, colleges, HEIs and their partners.

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## Appendix A – Analysis Framework

### Research Questions

The top-level research questions for this research project are:

1. What is **working well** about Uni Connect, and to what extent is there variation across the provision and partnerships?
2. What is **not working well** about Uni Connect, and to what extent is there variation across the provision and partnerships?
3. What are the **opportunities** for a future, more effective, model of collaborative outreach?
4. What are the **risks** of adopting a different funding and/or delivery model?
5. What are the risks associated making the **transition** to a new model and how can these be mitigated?

### How to use this Analysis Framework...

This Analysis Framework breaks down the key hypotheses we might want to test through our research in relation to the research questions under five thematic elements (Mission and Purpose; Impact; Structure and Organizational Capacity; Stakeholder Relationships; Funding). The purpose of the framework is to help the research team to:

- Organise and check back against our initial hypotheses
- Identify the detailed questions we need to consider in desk research and pose in fieldwork to test our hypotheses
- Organise the evidence we gather in a way that makes synthesis easier and provides a potential structure for our interim and final reports.

This Analysis Framework is **not** intended to be an exhaustive list of issues to investigate in the research or to pre-empt the review's findings – these will be driven by the evidence. Neither is a tool for conducting interviews/roundtables (we will develop interview guides for each audience).

### Coding

Team members inputting evidence from desk research and fieldwork into the **Evidence Database** should code each piece of evidence (e.g., each point made by an interviewee) using one of the following codes. This coding system will enable faster synthesis because it allows us to sort our evidence by the five elements of the Analysis Framework and, within each element, the five overall research questions.

Mission and Purpose	Impact	Structure and Org Capacity	Stakeholders Relationships	Funding
A1. Mission & Purpose: Working well	B1. Impact: Working well	C1. Structure & Org Capacity: Working well	D1. Stakeholders Relationships: Working well	E1. Funding: Working well
A2. Mission & Purpose: Not working well	B2. Impact: Not working well	C2. Structure & Org Capacity: Not working well	D2. Stakeholders Relationships: Not working well	E2. Funding: Not working well
A3. Mission & Purpose: Opportunities	B3. Impact: Opportunities	C3. Structure & Org Capacity: Opportunities	D3. Stakeholders Relationships: Opportunities	E3. Funding: Opportunities
A4. Mission & Purpose: Risks	B4. Impact: Risks	C4. Structure & Org Capacity: Risks	D4. Stakeholders Relationships: Risks	E4. Funding: Risks
A5. Mission & Purpose: Transition risks	B5. Impact: Transition risks	C5. Structure & Org Capacity: Transition risks	D5. Stakeholders Relationships: Transition risks	E5. Funding: Transition risks

### Analysis Framework

Element	Key Hypotheses	Probing Questions
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<p><b>A. Mission and Purpose</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uni Connect (UC) has a clear mission</li> <li>• There is a clear mission but it isn't widely understood</li> <li>• Different stakeholders have competing ideas about what UC is for</li> <li>• There is no unifying mission</li> <li>• Current arrangements reflect the legacy of earlier programmes rather than a coherent new mission</li> <li>• Changes to UC's mission have made it harder for UC partnerships to establish their role with local partners</li> <li>• Moving away from a centrally funded program risks a loss of coherence</li> <li>• Uni Connect's mission speaks to a current need in the sector</li> <li>• The most important function for collaborative outreach is coordinating at a regional level (e.g. to address cold spots)</li> <li>• There is still a need for collaboration to balance the incentive for competitive student recruitment</li> <li>• There is still a need for economies of scale</li> <li>• There is still a need for more efficient relationship building with schools and colleges</li> <li>• There is still a need for gathering and sharing good practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What do you understand as Uni Connect's mission? Why does it exist?</li> <li>• Is a 'collaborative outreach' mechanism like Uni Connect still needed?</li> <li>• What (if any) are the main reasons for continuing Uni Connect or some other form of collaborative outreach?</li> <li>• Are there any important needs in the sector that are outside Uni Connect's current scope?</li> <li>• What should be the mission of Uni Connect (or a successor model)?</li> <li>• How important is the regional aspect of Uni Connect's mission?</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Literature makes the case for the value of collaboration in other sectors or jurisdictions</li> <li>• UC only exists because the OfS mandates it</li> <li>• There are unmet needs not currently within scope of Uni Connect mission</li> <li>• 'Outreach' is too ambiguous to express the need for higher education access work beyond student recruitment</li> <li>• UC could play a greater role in creating 'connective tissue' for coordination between higher education, schools/colleges and the third sector</li> <li>• Non-regional needs (e.g., small specialist providers) are currently neglected</li> <li>• There is an opportunity for more emphasis how outreach can support student success in higher education</li> <li>• There is an opportunity to give UC partnerships more freedom to innovate within a shared framework</li> <li>• UC connect is/was too narrowly targeted (year 9-13 and POLAR Q1-2)</li> </ul>	
<b>B. Impact</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is strong evidence for the impact of Uni Connect</li> <li>• There is strong evidence of UC contributing to closing the participation gap</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the most impactful thing that UC does? What's the evidence for that?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is qualitative evidence of UC's impact, which is less tangible than hard metrics</li> <li>• There is a clear connection between UC's impact and regional needs</li> <li>• There is strong evidence of UC 'filling a gap' in access provision</li> <li>• There are valued services only UC provides</li> <li>• There is greater investment in 'sustained and progressive' because of UC</li> <li>• Students get more 'non-recruitment outreach' and impartial information because of UC</li> <li>• UC is a champion for underserved groups of students</li> <li>• UC provides an impactful lever for improving equality of opportunity beyond what OfS can achieve through regulation</li> <li>• Uni Connect works better in some places than in others</li> <li>• Strength of evidence of impact is similar across UC partnerships</li> <li>• There are 'bright spots' of particularly effective practice</li> <li>• There are outlier partnerships with particularly ineffective practice</li> <li>• Some partnerships have struggled to refocus from targeted student outreach to strategic outreach</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is it possible to draw a line from UC's work to improved outcomes? Is its value-add less tangible than that?</li> <li>• How much variation in impact is there between UC partnerships?</li> <li>• Are some UC partnerships centres of excellence in one or more aspects of outreach?</li> <li>• To what extent does UC 'fill a gap' in higher education access provision that would otherwise exist?</li> <li>• Has UC's approach to student targeting in any sense skewed it's impact?</li> <li>• What's the biggest contribution that UC has made to the evidence on what works?</li> <li>• To what extent does UC facilitate good practice and evidence in the access and participation 'sector'?</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UC's approach to targeting drives perverse behaviour (poaching, parochialism)</li> <li>• Uni Connect has made a major contribution to the evidence base on 'what works' in access and participation</li> <li>• UC has made contributions to the evidence base which it would have been difficult for a single institution to make</li> <li>• Some UC partnerships have made a bigger contribution to the evidence base than others</li> <li>• There are strong examples of UC-led mechanisms for sharing good practice and evidence</li> <li>• UC collaboration at the national level has improved understanding of effective practice for smaller underrepresented groups</li> </ul>	
<b>C. Structure and Internal Capacity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uni Connect's structure is conducive to effectiveness</li> <li>• Structural arguments for UC partnerships are clear</li> <li>• UC partnerships are too big / small</li> <li>• UC's 'regional' structure makes it hard to focus on non-geographical aspects of need</li> <li>• UC partnerships don't work well together</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent is UC's structure conducive to being effective?</li> <li>• What are the advantages and disadvantages of UC having a local/regional structure?</li> <li>• How easy does UC find it to recruit and retain staff?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UC's 'regional' structure is important for meeting specific local needs</li> <li>• There is a lack of alignment on the extent to which UC partnerships exist to deliver a national OfS agenda</li> <li>• Uni Connect staff have the knowledge, skills and motivation they need to be effective</li> <li>• UC finds it easy to recruit and retain great staff</li> <li>• UC staff grow and develop in their roles</li> <li>• UC staff have specialist expertise not readily found elsewhere</li> <li>• There are specific skills and capacities that tend to be lacking in UC teams</li> <li>• UC's historical mission of student-facing interventions means hubs have not developed capacity to lead strategic thinking across providers</li> <li>• UC workforce are action oriented and have a reputation for 'getting things done'</li> <li>• UC is adaptable to changes in needs and environmental conditions (e.g. COVID)</li> <li>• UC partnerships have strong institutional memory</li> <li>• UC partnerships often lose momentum because of staff turnover</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To what extent to UC teams have the knowledge, skills an capacity needed to be effective?</li> <li>• Is there any expertise that UC partnerships tend to have that isn't found elsewhere?</li> <li>• How could UC maximise its capacity for delivery and impact – including its ways of attracting, growing, retaining and sharing expertise?</li> <li>• To what extent would you say that UC has good knowledge management and a strong institutional memory?</li> <li>• How (if at all) would you structure collaborative outreach work differently?</li> <li>• To what extent should the OfS retain a role in convening collaborative outreach?</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UC partnerships have weak systems for knowledge management</li> <li>• There is a real risk of losing specific expertise and relationships if UC is discontinued (or in transition to a new model)</li> <li>• Strong alternative models are available</li> <li>• The literature points to applicable models that could be borrowed from other sectors or jurisdictions</li> <li>• Stakeholders have clear ideas for alternative ways of structuring collaborative outreach</li> <li>• There is strong support for reducing or eliminating the OfS role in convening collaborative outreach</li> <li>• UC's workforce represent a capacity for facilitating partnership working that could be re-homed but not easily recreated</li> <li>• There is a compelling case for a non-regional approach to collaborative outreach</li> </ul>	
<b>D. Stakeholders Relationships</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uni Connect is a valued partner for HEIs</li> <li>• The local/regional collaborative element of UC is highly valued by all providers</li> <li>• Providers don't see UC as key to delivering their APP commitments or wider institutional objectives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How important is the local/regional collaborative element of UC [for your organisation]?</li> <li>• To what extent does UC deliver more value for some [providers/sub-sectors/schools/colleges] than others?</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UC is more valued by some providers/types of providers than others</li> <li>• There is an opportunity for OfS to be more directive in requiring collaborative engagement by providers</li> <li>• Providers would welcome more control over collaborative outreach arrangements</li> <li>• UC partnerships relationship to 'host' institutions would be relatively easy to disentangle in a transition</li> <li>• UC is a valued source of support for schools and colleges</li> <li>• Schools and colleges find UC to be responsive to their/students' need</li> <li>• Schools and colleges see engaging with UC as preferable to building bilateral relationships with HEIs</li> <li>• UC's 'local infrastructure' in terms of school/college relationships is existent but patchy</li> <li>• UC is perceived as delivering more value for some schools/colleges than others</li> <li>• School and colleges find UC to be bureaucratic and difficult to work with</li> <li>• UC has better and more extensive links into schools than anyone else (including providers)</li> <li>• UC is a valued partner by contractors and third-sector partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are the best things about working with UC? What are the worst things?</li> <li>• Are there any advantages to working with UC compared to engaging with HEIs directly?</li> <li>• How important is UC as a facilitator of inter-sector working between higher education, schools and colleges, and other partners in the region?</li> <li>• How successful is UC at engaging all the partners it needs to engage?</li> <li>• What would you change about the roles of different partners in any future model for collaborative outreach?</li> <li>• To what extent do UC partnerships exist as discrete organisations? [vs. feeling like subsidiaries of a host institution]</li> <li>• Who has the best links into schools? How do UC links compare to other orgs?</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Third-sector partners find UC easier to work with HEIs bilaterally</li> <li>• Third-sector find UC to be bureaucratic and difficult to work with</li> <li>• UC acts as 'connective tissue' between different partners</li> <li>• More meaningful, stable partnerships exist because of UC (e.g. between providers that don't otherwise collaborate)</li> <li>• UC brings in a wide range of stakeholders beyond OfS's regulatory reach (e.g. schools, colleges, local authorities, CEC hubs)</li> <li>• UC partnerships are well connected to regional economic priorities and economic development stakeholders</li> <li>• UC is a powerful convenor of multi-stakeholder support for underserved groups (e.g., care leavers)</li> <li>• Historic focus on student-facing outreach was at the expense of creating 'connective tissue' – UC partnerships still struggle to get buy-in from the range of partners they need for strategic outreach</li> <li>• Each UC partnership having its own branding creates confusion</li> </ul>	
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<p><b>E. Funding</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The current approach to funding Uni Connect is unsustainable</li> <li>• Annual funding cycle is resource intensive and prevents effective planning</li> <li>• Annual funding prevents providers from including UC in APPs</li> <li>• UC partnerships are generally dependent on OfS funding</li> <li>• UC partnerships have struggled (or not tried) to leverage funding from wider partners</li> <li>• There is an opportunity to use funding to incentivise collaboration</li> <li>• There is an opportunity to better target funding at regions where partner funding is less feasible</li> <li>• UC provides good value for money</li> <li>• UC is seen as relatively expensive for what it delivers</li> <li>• The short term nature of UC funding makes it hard to sustain organisational capacity, partner relationships and programmes</li> <li>• There is willingness to sustain collaborative outreach work in the absence of dedicated central government funding</li> <li>• Providers are hostile to the idea of funding collaborative outreach work per se</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What would you change about the way that collaborative outreach is funded?</li> <li>• Would you say that UC provides good value for taxpayer money?</li> <li>• If the OfS reduced its role who should take on the funding of collaborative outreach?</li> <li>• What conditions would be needed to make a sustainable funding arrangement happen?</li> <li>• If UC didn't continue in its current form, what do you think would/should happen to its most important functions?</li> <li>• Is there anything you worry would be underfunded in the absence of a model like UC?</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Providers would be prepared to contribute to funding collaborative outreach, but only on a shared basis with government</li><li>• Providers would be prepared to contribute to funding collaborative outreach, but only exchange for greater control over the model</li><li>• Providers would be prepared to contribute to wholly funds collaborative outreach, but would need transitional funding arrangements to get there</li><li>• Providers would favour a mandatory 'levy' (where everyone has to pay) to a voluntary approach</li><li>• Outside funders (business, philanthropy) have little appetite to fund collaborative outreach</li><li>• UC funds activities that would otherwise not happen</li><li>• There are specific types of activity that would be at risk if UC was not extended or replaced</li><li>• UC is a key source of investment in growing the overall pool of students (as opposed to competing for students within an existing pool)</li><li>• Everything UC does has a clear potential alternative 'home'</li></ul>	
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## Appendix B – Lessons from desk-based research

### Lessons from the wider literature on school-university partnership working

Collaborative outreach work has a twenty-year history. School-university partnerships, however, have existed in forms beyond collaborative outreach, such as ITT, CPD, and educational research, all of which have longer formal histories than access and participation. From the existing literature across these different areas of partnership working, we can better understand the characteristics of good collaborative working.

#### What constitutes school-university collaboration?

School-university partnership literature has spawned a multitude of definitions and characteristics for collaborative work in access and participation, as well as more broadly. Much of the literature frames collaborative working as a universal positive. Although they demonstrate the theoretical benefits of partnership working, such descriptions often fail to acknowledge the difficulties encountered during implementation.

#### Definitions of school-university relationships:

John Goodlad, who undertook some of the earliest work on the topic, conceives of partnership working as ‘a deliberately designed, collaborative arrangement between different institutions, working together to advance self-interest and solve common problems’ (1988, p. 13).

Writing more recently, and specifically on the topic of access and participation collaboration, Wiggans suggests that ‘partnership working requires a structured approach in which institutions plan a common approach and deliver a programme of work to meet agreed objectives’ (2012, p. 3).

In addition to definitions of partnership, across the literature there are several similar characteristics of successful collaborative working between schools and universities. Klein and Dunlap draw heavily upon Goodlad’s work to suggest four criteria for partnership: (a) mutuality of concern, (b) reciprocity of services, (c) an ongoingness, and (d) a belief in partnership parity (1993, p. 56). Thorkildsen and Stein identify ‘leadership, clearly defined objectives and goals,

specific deliverables and sufficient resources' (1996, p. 82). Shive identifies the key criteria as 'clearly defined and specific goals, systems of rewards and benefits for both parties, resources, ownership, fixed responsibility and times' (1984, p. 121).

More recently, these partnership criteria have been applied to work specifically within access and participation. Handscomb and colleagues suggested four key conditions for successful partnerships within progression to higher education: material resources (time, energy and materials); strategic fitness and relevance (a joined-up approach that supports the missions of those involved in a targeted way); ownership, power and control (ensuring all voices are heard and differences are valued); and monitoring and evaluation (understanding what works and how this is understood in local contexts) (2014).

### **Living up to the hype?**

A key challenge in school-university partnership work in access and participation is a sense that collaborative outreach has consistently over-promised and under-delivered over the last two decades. As Wiggins describes it, 'over the years there has been much expected of school-university partnerships, which in turn has increased the sense of frustration and disappointment when they are perceived not to have delivered' (2012, p. 12). Considering school-university partnership working more broadly, Bartholomew and Sandholtz suggest that although school-university partnerships could theoretically 'offer significant benefits, the task of establishing and sustaining successful partnerships is challenging' (2009, p. 156).

Frequently, school-university partnership work is theorised in a vacuum, ignoring the wider (and often changing) policy and material contexts in which they operate. Gorard and colleagues' review of research related to progression to higher education explicitly warns of the gap between theory and practice, stating that: 'partnerships are a key strategy to both promote access to higher education and to change the structure and contents of higher education provision, but collaboration poses practical, organisational and cultural challenges.' (Gorard et al., 2006, p. 85).

### **The Power in Partnerships**

Power – and its unequal distribution – is a key dynamic underpinning all collaborative work between schools and universities. The complex reality of the power dynamics between schools and universities in access and participation contrasts with one of the often-quoted criteria for successful partnerships: ‘parity’ between partners. In access and participation, both school- and university-based participants still perceive these interactions to be defined by universities (Burtonshaw, 2022). There is a sense of universities working ‘on’ rather than ‘with’ schools, something explicitly cautioned against within the literature (Trubowitz et al., 1984).

Power manifests itself in three key ways in school–university relationships within access and participation:

1. The desire or motivation to engage in any sort collaboration or activity.
2. The definition of what an interaction or activity looks like.
3. The material resources each party brings to the relationship.

Koop suggests that ‘to believe in partnerships is one thing. To make them really happen takes time, great skill and above all great courage and generosity on the part of those who currently hold the power’ (1995, p. 9). This concern regarding the balance of power is also reflected in the aim for mutuality, for ‘all voices to be heard’ (Greany et al., 2014) and ‘valuing differences’ (Handscomb et al., 2014, p. 7).

### **Material Resources**

Partnership working must be built upon ‘sufficient resources’ (Shive, 1984) to fund and deliver meaningful collaboration. Material resources include funding, physical resources such as space, equipment and transportation, and staff time from both universities and schools. In addition to the resources for delivery, Handscomb and colleagues recognise ‘transaction costs’, which are required not only to build relationships, but also to sustain them, suggesting that ‘funding is a crucial contributor to partnership success... without sufficient funding, school–university partnerships struggle to survive’ (2014, p. 6). These costs need

to be seen as inherent to collaborative working and the benefits that collaborative working may bring.

Ongoing and stable funding is critical to collaborative working. That said, the way in which such resources are managed and distributed must produce 'partnership parity' (Klein & Dunlap, 1993) across the relationship. The fact that funding for collaborative work in access and participation has historically been overseen by the university regulator (first by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and more recently the OfS) has compounded the sense that universities are both responsible for, and the financial backers of, access and participation work. Set against the increasingly stretched financial situation of the school sector, funding for collaborative work is unlikely to come from schools in any kind of equal way. As a result, collaborative outreach is often seen by schools as less 'collaborative' and more as universities acting as a 'service provider' (Burtonshaw, 2022).

This imbalance in funding poses significant challenges to building relationships, as it undermines the key idea of equality within successful partnerships (Goodlad, 1988; Handscomb et al., 2014; Kruger et al., 2009). Clark contends that 'it is not just a question of whether there are adequate funds. If these funds are controlled by one of the parties in the collaboration rather than shared, adverse relationships may develop' (1988, p. 60).

This interaction between power and material resources plays a significant role in undermining the 'partnership parity' (Klein & Dunlap, 1993) in school-university relationships. It also manifests itself in other material factors, including logistical considerations such as transport and staff time to organise and support the collaboration.

### **Navigating Organisational Structures**

The challenges of navigating through different structures and the perception of schools and universities as 'chalk and cheese' (Handscomb et al., 2014, p. 20) is discussed extensively throughout the literature. Glaser and colleagues described it as 'a tendency to live in two different professional communities, or 'worlds'' (1983, p. 1), and this seems unchanged in research undertaken three decades later (Burtonshaw, 2022).

Richmond argues that it is therefore important for school-university partnerships to 'understand the cultures of the various players and to foster a sense of belonging, regardless of the cultures involved' (1996, p. 217). This is made more difficult by the lack of time and funding afforded to relationship building within school-university partnership work. Moreover, responsibility for this collaborative effort is unclear.

A significant challenge voiced by those working on both the school and university sides of partnerships is the ability to 'navigate' through the organisational structures, bureaucratic systems and, importantly, the other's culture (Burtonshaw, 2022). Both seem to find the other unreachable, while acknowledging that their own organisations pose similar problems for 'outsiders' attempting to navigate through.

Difficulties with navigation take several forms:

- Identifying staff within the organisation with responsibility and power to collaborate, compounded by high staff turnover in collaborative roles.
- Lack of consistency or coherence in structures within both schools and universities (e.g. the types of roles or structures in which access and participation work is delivered).
- Differing logistical cycles of school and university calendars and the differing pace of work across the two sectors.
- Competition within the two sectors (e.g. between different schools or universities for what is perceived to be a scarce resource, usually access to each other).

### **Monitoring and Evaluation**

A significant challenge in school-university relationships is the disparity between the 'often ambitious aims or desired outcomes' (Handscorn et al., 2014, p. 23) of such relationships and the complexities of understanding and measuring the impact of the work undertaken. Within access and participation, this is set in the context of Destinations Measures (Department for Education, 2018b) for schools and APPs (Office for Students, 2018a) for universities, which set the terms of the desired outcomes for both sectors. The success of

partnership working is often defined narrowly by these accountability measures.

Several studies, such as Day et al.'s report on partnership working, have identified a huge range of potential benefits for both schools and universities. Raising aspirations and achievement, access to external expertise, access to enrichment activities and learning resources, research collaborations, and professional and personal development are all mentioned as possible positive outcomes of such work (2010, p. X). However, in contrast to the performance measures set out by the DfE and OfS, Handscomb et al suggest that the gains associated with partnership working are frequently 'loosely characterised in terms of broad benefits, rather than specific outcomes' (2014, p. 23). Attempts to formally evaluate partnership working has often resulted in inconclusive evidence of impact: notably, Gorard and colleagues found a lack of evidence of successful partnership working, and criticised the causal conclusions drawn by some researchers in the past regarding partnership-based interventions (2006).

It could be argued that the benefits of partnership working are not measured within the constraints of the current success criteria set out by the regulator. Both universities and schools, however, define the success of their collaborations by progression to higher education, suggesting that their own measure of success is mapped against the regulatory requirements, rather than being external or additional to them (Burtonshaw, 2022).

Although regulatory focus on monitoring and evaluation is increasing, there is a lack of confidence from schools that what is being offered by universities 'works' (Burtonshaw, 2022), although this is often poorly defined. Many schools question the value of the activities undertaken within collaborative outreach, such as online mentoring, one-off introductions to specific subjects or visits to university campuses. In their definition of partnership working, Coles and Smith define 'results-orientated procedures' as one of three factors critical for the success of partnerships (1999), a suggestion that appears to strongly endorse a greater focus on a 'what works' approach.



The lack of definition and consistency around the purpose of collaborative outreach contributes to the confusion and lack of clear aims surrounding this work. Hargreaves observes that without sharp focus, 'partnership can easily become a soft, warm and cuddly process of unchallenging relationships between professionals to achieve some modest outcome' (2011, p. 6). Such 'modest outcomes' sit in contrast with the increasing demands from the OfS to demonstrate rapid change in access and participation.

### **Conclusion: Principles for effective collaboration**

Based on the literature discussed above, there are six key characteristics of successful school-university collaboration:

1. **An equal or shared power balance between schools and universities** – it may be unrealistic for this to be equal, but partnership working should not be an entirely one-sided or 'service provision' relationship.
2. **Shared sense of the challenge that needs addressing** – schools and universities should share a sense of what is trying to be achieved, rather than serving the aims and metrics of one sector.
3. **Clear and consistent aims** – these aims should be constant across multiple years and have clarity of what success looks like for both sides.
4. **Sufficient, ongoing funding** – collaboration needs to be funded in an appropriate and long-term manner to get buy in from both schools and universities.
5. **Commitment and resource to navigate organisations** – there needs to be a shared commitment to understanding the needs, capacity, calendars and key milestones that define each sector, and a will to navigate across the partnership.
6. **Ongoing evaluation** – activity delivered through partnership working should be regularly evaluated to demonstrate impact and provide assurance to all partners that this is a commitment worth making.

These characteristics are important for us to bear in mind as we consider the evidence on the effectiveness of collaborative outreach programmes, specifically, as examples of school-university collaboration. This is the focus of the next section.

## Lessons from research and evaluation of collaborative outreach programmes

Depending on how one defines collaborative outreach – and the ways successive programmes were delineated – there have been five or six collaborative outreach programmes in the English higher education landscape over the last twenty years. These are summarised in the table below.

Programme	Duration
Excellence Challenge (EC)	2001-2004
Partnerships for Progression (PfP)	2003-2004
Aimhigher*	2004-2011
National Network of Collaborative Outreach (NNCO)	2014-2016
National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP)	2017-2019
Uni Connect	2019- Present

*\*Aimhigher amounted to a combination of the functions of EC and PfP into one body.*

The following pages summarise the functions, impact, evaluations and recurring debates within collaborative outreach during that period.

### Phase 1 – EC, PfP and Aimhigher

#### Overview:

In response to the Dearing Report's suggestions that a greater proportion of young people, particularly from underrepresented groups, should go to university and that schools had an active role to play in facilitating this (Chalkley, 1998), New Labour established the Excellence Challenge (EC) in 2001. This took the form of £150m over three years dedicated to pursuing four aims:

- Helping HEIs to support more young people in schools with the capacity to enter higher education;
- Increasing funding to support HEIs to reach out, through staff and schemes, to young people from underrepresented backgrounds;
- Improving the marketing and messaging around routes to higher education for young people; and pilot financial-aid schemes for disadvantaged applicants (Judkins *et al.*, 2005).

In 2003, this was supplemented by Partnerships for Progression (PfP), a smaller-scale initiative with congruent aims but targeting collaboration between the higher education and further education sectors. It emerged as part of a wider plan to roll both EC and PfP into the umbrella brand of Aimhigher, which incorporated the functions of both EC and PfP from 2004–2011. Tangentially, Aimhigher emerged alongside the Higher Education Act 2004, which saw the introduction of OFFA and top-up tuition fees as part of a larger widening-participation push from the Blair government.

Eventually, Aimhigher amounted to 42 partnerships between HEIs, further education institutions, schools and the government's 'Connexions' careers and guidance service in various combinations at regional or sub-regional levels. Each partnership had a mandate to pursue localised interventions in response to differing regional needs (Doyle and Griffin, 2012).

Alongside legislative shifts regarding fair access and widening participation, the Schwartz Report looked at the fairness of university admissions. While it acknowledged that admissions were fair on the whole, it recommended five 'common sense' principles of fair university admission, namely: transparency; selection by achievements and potential; reliability and validity; minimising barriers; and professionalism of approach (Schwartz, 2004). This was notable in its omission of allowances for contextualisation of students' backgrounds, arguably placing greater pressure on widening participation measures to succeed to permit both universities and students to 'compete' for one another in a marketised system with minimal barriers.

#### **Impact:**

- **Communication between institutions** – A case study of 10 Aimhigher Excellence Challenge partnerships found that the partnerships had added value to widening participation relationships within and across institutions, and that there was particular scope for success where there was strong buy-in from senior managers and clear communication at all levels (Judkins *et al.*, 2005).
- **Attainment** – An evaluation of EC using data collected between 2001 and 2003 found that Year 9 and Year 11 pupils designated as targets for widening participation or gifted and talented initiatives, as well as those who participated in EC summer schools, reported higher-than-expected levels of attainment (Morris, Rutt and Yeshanew, 2005). Among Year 11 students only,

conversations with family and friends about attending university and university visits also correlated with more positive attainment outcomes (ibid.).

- **Aspiration** – As well as the positive attainment outcomes outlined in point 2, the same EC activities correlated with higher self-reported levels of aspiration to higher education among Year 9 and Year 11 students. Further evaluation in 2005 of the expanded Aimhigher programme found that visits, residential schools and application advice were rated as most impactful by programme coordinators, whereas roadshows and links with employers were among the least helpful Aimhigher projects (Bowers-Brown et al., 2006).

### **Challenges:**

- **Divergent aims** – Aimhigher interventions were implemented on a regional basis, with different networks undertaking different activities based on regional needs and priorities. This made it difficult to draw robust conclusions regarding what worked best overall, with most case studies only able to produce recommendations as to what worked well in a regional context.
- **Wide array of activities** – Although there was widespread approval for Aimhigher's work, there was little consensus on a 'silver bullet'-type intervention. This exposed the shallow research base purporting to demonstrate the impact of Aimhigher activities (Gorard *et al.*, 2006), and left policymakers without a robust steer as to what activities to prioritise in the future.

## **Phase 2 – post-Browne Review: the National Network for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO) and the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP)**

### **Overview:**

The Browne Review was commissioned by the Brown government in 2009 in response to continued questions over participation rates, the financial sustainability of the top-up fee structure and the fee repayment threshold (Browne, 2010). Its recommendation (taken up in the 2011 White Paper 'Higher Education: students at the heart of the system') that fees should be increased, combined with an austerity-induced end to the Aimhigher programme in 2011, were seen by some as retrograde steps for widening participation (Moore, McNeill and Halliday, 2012; Sellar and Storan, 2013). Although several Aimhigher centres continued to administrate widening participation initiatives after the programme's official end,

there was a period of no nationally-funded collaborative outreach programme. 2014 saw the introduction of a new initiative in collaborative widening participation, namely the National Network for Collaborative Outreach (NNCO).

The late 2010s also saw a shift in the way that widening participation was regulated, with OFFA and Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) being merged and replaced by the Office for Students (OfS). OFFA's two aims were to improve the proportion of students from underrepresented and disadvantaged groups reaching, succeeding in and progressing on from undergraduate study, and to accelerate the growth in the proportion of such students entering the most selective institutions (Office for Fair Access, 2015) – in other words, they were targeting both the breadth and the 'depth' of access for the most disadvantaged. This took place through Annual Access Agreements between OFFA and individual HEIs.

Since its inception, the OfS has taken a bolder stance on widening access and participation, advocating a move from 'incremental' to 'transformational' change in access (Millward, 2020). The OfS has adopted a student lifecycle-based model of student access, and as part of this replaced Annual Access Agreements for a longer term APP model (Office for Students, 2018a). APPs have made more stringent demands of HEIs' efforts to meet their own and national access targets, as well as replacing minimum spend requirements with outcomes-based assessments of success and expanding the definition of underrepresentation (Office for Students, 2018b).

### **Impact:**

- **Single point of contact** – One of NNCO's key aims was to provide schools with a single point of contact within each network. This aim was a key and successful area of focus for NNCO after the end of Aimhigher, as it emerged that, in the latter's absence, many clusters of schools were left without any links to university outreach efforts (Whitty, Hayton and Tang, 2015). The single point of contact also helped HEIs, further education colleges, schools and other stakeholders to build more effective, well-linked networks despite power imbalances, inter-institutional competition and initial lack of clarity surrounding mission (Stevenson, McCaig and Madriaga, 2017).
- **Targeted and linked activities** – The dramatic reduction in expenditure following the end of Aimhigher resulted in various efforts, including collaborations with local enterprise partnerships (LEPs), to consolidate work.

It also increased the targeting of higher education 'cold spots' with a more progressed and intensive range of activities (HEFCE, 2017). These helped to reduce the duplication of some of the activities that had been taking place under Aimhigher.

- **Learning and engagement** – schools reported both institutional and pupil-level impacts, with outreach activities having an impact on student learning and encouraging schools to reconfigure their structures to continue to take advantage of widening participation activities (Stevenson, McCaig and Madriaga, 2017). Younger pupils benefited from activities to a greater extent than previously, and single points of contact reported greater perceived awareness of HEIs acting collaboratively rather than in competition with one another (ibid.).

### **Challenges:**

- **Engagement limitations** – LEPs, as a nascent project, saw limited engagement under the NNCO, and although the initiative saw ninety eight per cent of state-funded schools and colleges connected to a network, engagement was variable and the number of outreach activities taking place shrank, partly as a reflection of the project's smaller operating budget than its predecessor (Stevenson, McCaig and Madriaga, 2017).
- **Evaluation challenges** – the official evaluation of the NNCO highlighted the breadth of research questions as a challenge to the robustness of its findings. Several of the evaluation's recommendations pertained to HEIs, funders, schools and others involved in collaborative outreach pursuing a narrower, more well-defined set of outcomes against which outcomes could be measured more effectively (Stevenson, McCaig and Madriaga, 2017).

Following two years of the NNCO, the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP) was established in early 2017. Phase 1 ran from January 2017 to July 2019, with Phase 2 running from July 2019 to July 2021, at which point the scheme was rebranded as Uni Connect. The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic part-way through Phase Two hampered Uni Connect's work, both by limiting options for available outreach activities and by causing funding to be stretched. Uni Connect continues to operate with 29 partnerships of HEIs, further education colleges and other stakeholders to support, guide, and facilitate greater university participation.

### **Impact:**

- **Refinement of effective strategies** – NCOP saw refinements of pre-existing understandings of effective outreach strategies. For example, the Phase 1 evaluation concluded that summer schools and campus visits – understood for a long time to have potential as outreach activities – worked best when tailored to learners’ interests, and mentoring was found to be most effective when directed towards a specific group (such as disadvantaged males).
- **Greater range of strategies** – The emergence of the pandemic forced Uni Connect to pivot online in its approach to activities. The Make Happen evaluation found that webinars for parents and carers (which could fit around working from home or other commitments) had considerably greater reach than they had done before the pandemic (Uni Connect, 2021), and the series of career information and guidance videos that Make Happen produced for pupils received overwhelmingly positive feedback from a viewer base reaching into the hundreds (Uni Connect, 2021).

### Challenges:

- **‘What works’** – Previous collaborative outreach programmes had alluded to the challenge of identifying the most effective interventions. Although improvements took place during Phase 1 in this regard (Bowes et al., 2019), there were still doubts surrounding the relative effectiveness of different programmes, particularly given the nearly £900m being spent annually on outreach (Shukla, 2018). The Phase 1 evaluation highlighted the difficulties securing support from schools and further education colleges to evaluate activities’ success (Bowes et al., 2019). Consequently, alongside the familiar aims of increasing higher education participation among underrepresented groups, disseminating information about higher education, dismantling barriers and supporting network development between HEIs, Phase Two saw a greater focus on securing an evidence base of ‘what works’ in outreach practice (Uni Connect, 2021).
- **Stability** – When Uni Connect appeared in 2021, it was the third framing of collaborative outreach in four years. Constant shifting between short-lived initiatives with their own funding arrangements was seen as a barrier to effective and long-lasting outreach (Shukla, 2018), with HEI professionals frustrated by the lack of continuity and utilisation of existing resources (Beech, Boffey and Atherton, 2020). The substantial cut to funding that Uni Connect received in 2021 (Williamson, 2021) did little to assuage these fears.

### Conclusion: To what extent have collaborative outreach programmes delivered?

Collaborative outreach has been seen as a solution to a 'collective action problem' – a means to correct various market failures that could arise from the high degree of choice and competition that characterises the English higher education system (McCaig and Squire, 2022). In particular, collaborative outreach mitigates the risk that without some vehicle for collaborative action:

- Providers would be incentivised to focus their outreach activity on recruiting students to their institution, rather than promoting participation in higher education generally or giving enough unbiased information about the full range of choices available to students.
- There would be underprovision of outreach activities that are likely to be higher impact, but less likely to present institutional value for money as recruitment strategies (for example, outreach to younger age groups, sustained outreach activities and tailored interventions for students with specific needs).
- Schools and colleges with historically low rates of progression to higher education, and those that are geographically distant from providers, would be neglected.
- Outreach efforts would be duplicative and inefficient, due to a lack of coordination between providers, with schools, colleges and other regional stakeholders having always to form relationships bilaterally with each provider.
- Learning and good practice about effective outreach would be isolated within institutions, not shared across the sector.

As we have seen, evidence for the benefits of Uni Connect and its predecessors has been broadly positive. These collaborative arrangements have played an important role in connecting schools with HEIs in a more systematic, consistent and uniform way compared both to the situation before 2001 and the situation that emerged during the hiatus between Aimhigher and NNCO/NCOP (2011–2014). In this sense, it seems that Uni Connect and its predecessors have at least somewhat addressed the collective action problem they were designed to tackle.

That said, there has been limited conclusive evidence of the impact and value for money of collaborative outreach programmes, partly due to challenges in evaluating the range of activities undertaken. Lack of stability in collaborative outreach arrangements has also been cited as a barrier to fully engaging partners and sustaining longer-term (and thus potentially more impactful) activities.



Given the challenges reported in successive evaluations of collaborative outreach programmes it is possible that a reformed or alternative model would be more effective and/or provide better value for public money. To help us think expansively about what alternative models might be available, the next two sections provide a comparative picture from other jurisdictions internationally and other sectors.

## **Lessons from other jurisdictions internationally**

### **Key messages:**

- International evidence has relatively little to say about which models of collaborative outreach are most effective – collaborative outreach is not a major feature of many education systems.
- England's nearest neighbours in Scotland and Wales operate similar (though not identical) models to Uni Connect, but both systems supplement regional collaborative outreach with thematic programmes commissioned at the national level.
- Examples from the USA and Australia provide a wide range of alternative models for facilitating intra- and inter-sector collaborative access (and student success) efforts, and for incentivising collaboration through government and philanthropic funding.

The role of collaborative outreach in widening participation is an under-researched topic and there is a relative dearth of comparative studies in the international literature. Direct comparisons are also difficult because of the contextual variations between different countries' education systems. One analysis of equity policies in higher education found that outreach programmes – as opposed to other policies for promoting equity – were a feature in a minority of countries, with England ranked as one of only six jurisdictions considered to be 'advanced' in promoting equity (along with Australia, Cuba, Ireland, New Zealand and Scotland) (Salmi, 2018). Other countries' approaches to promoting equity focused on more foundational policy enablers of fair access, such as student finance provision and admissions practices, including 'affirmative action' approaches.

Nevertheless, we have been able to identify examples of the approaches taken in jurisdictions that are sufficiently comparable to England to yield potential insights and lessons.

### **Wales and Scotland: a mix of regional and thematic approaches**

## *Wales*

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales's (HEFCW) Reaching Wider programme is a 'Wales-wide, regionally focused, collaborative, long-term programme to widen access to higher education and higher-level skills' (HEFCW, 2021). Established in 2002, Reaching Wider operates through three regional partnerships (North and Mid-Wales, South West Wales and South East Wales). All HEIs in Wales are required to be part of a regional partnership, with national providers (Open University in Wales and Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol) being members of all three partnerships. Each partnership receives a weighted funding allocation from HEFCW, contingent on producing a strategy that sets out how the partnership's widening access and outreach provision will support priority groups of learners, notably young people and adults in the bottom two quintiles of the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation and without a Level 4 qualification (HEFCW, 2022). HEFCW also mandates the level of funding which each regulated provider must contribute to their Reaching Wider partnership.

The Seren Network is a Welsh Government initiative with a mission to help 'Wales' brightest state-educated learners achieve their full academic potential and support their education pathway into leading universities in Wales, the UK, and overseas' (Welsh Government, 2023). Running since 2015 and managed directly by the Welsh Government, Seren brings together over 20 HEIs and over 10 professional and education organisations to offer a fully-funded programme of outreach activities for learners in school years 8 to 13 (Welsh Government, 2022). Activities organised at the national level include subject taster sessions and masterclasses, an annual learner conference, summer schools, an academic award scheme, mentoring and connections to specific career pathways and the Fulbright/Sutton Trust US programme. Liaison with schools and colleges (including the identification of a cohort of students to participate in the programme) is managed by 12 regional hub coordinators, who also work with Seren's national partners to facilitate outreach activities in each region of Wales.

## *Scotland*

The Scottish Funding Council (SCF) and its predecessors have maintained collaborative outreach arrangements (Hunter Blackburn et al, 2016). In response to recommendations in the report in 2016 and the SCF's own Review of Coherent Provision and Sustainability in 2021 (Scottish Government, 2016; Scottish Funding Council, 2021), the SFC consolidated its access programming for 15-18-year-olds (Scottish Funding Council, 2022). The programme supports activities in four foundational pillars: impartial IAG; campus visits and residential; recognised

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courses to develop key skills and accredited learning to support transition; and specialist support regarding access to the high-demand professions. Provision is organised under:

- The Schools for Higher Education Programme (SHEP) – four regional collaborations between HEIs and groups of targeted schools, focused on supporting pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- The Access to High Demand Professions (AHDP) programme, which focuses on supporting disadvantaged pupils to access degrees in:
  - Law, Medicine, Veterinary Medicine, Dentistry and Economics via the Reach initiative, run in partnership with six highly selective universities.
  - Art, Design and Architecture via the Access to Creative Education Scotland (ACES) initiative, run in partnership with four specialist art and design providers.
  - The Transitions Programme for disadvantaged pupils interested in performing or production arts, run in partnership with the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland.
  - The Advanced Higher Hub, based at Glasgow Caledonian University, which enables pupils to study Advanced Higher Subjects that are not available at their own schools.

Research suggests that initiatives such as SHEP had positive impact for participating pupils, while noting – as the Commission on Widening Access did – challenges in effectively targeting support given the limitations of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) (Sosu et al, 2016). The SFC also works with HEIs to deliver the Scottish Wider Access Programme to provide routes into higher education for adults with few or no qualifications (Scottish Funding Council, 2023)

### **United States of America: multi-layered collaboration as driver of both access and student success**

Higher education in the USA is primarily regulated at the state level, although the federal government’s interventions on student finance and prohibiting unlawful discrimination form an important part of the policy context for widening participation. Student outreach and recruitment are undertaken by individual providers, with many publicly-funded providers being organised into state-wide ‘systems’ with a central governance structure.

The US Government’s major initiative to promote collaborative outreach since 1998 is the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate (GEAR UP)

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Program, which focuses on helping low-income students prepare for college (US Dept. of Education, 2023). Competitive grants of around US\$1 million to US\$5 million per year are made for a period of up to seven years, either to state governments or local partnerships (which must include a collaboration of HEIs, local schools and community or business organisations). States and partnerships who succeed in applying for a GEAR UP grant have autonomy to tailor their programming to the needs of their community, but services tend to include a mix of mentoring, tutoring and school-based academic interventions, scholarships, college and career planning support, and parental engagement, as well as professional development for teachers and school guidance counsellors. Gear UP currently supports over half a million students in over 2700 high schools across 43 states (NCCEP, 2018a). Several national bodies, including the National Council for Community and Education Partnerships (NCCEP), provide capacity-building support for GEAR UP grantees (NCCEP, 2018b). The funding basis of GEAR UP has allowed for the establishment of long-term partnerships. For example, Arizona GEAR UP has been running for over 20 years and is able to match its federal funding with contributions from local public sector, business and philanthropic partners (Northern Arizona University, 2019).

Evaluations of the GEAR UP programme have found a positive impact on participating students' attainment and persistence in both school and higher education.<sup>25</sup> Nationally commissioned research on the GEAR UP network has also managed to make robust comparisons between different regional partnerships and types of activity to inform future programming.<sup>26</sup>

A number of states (including Arizona, Kentucky, Minnesota, Illinois and North Carolina) have also made use of multi-stakeholder 'P-20 councils' to align school-to-college transition work at the state level, often by collaboratively commissioning outreach activity (Education Strategy Group, 2023a). Research has identified sustainable funding, sufficient staff capacity, use of data, and youth and community engagement as enabling conditions for success for these types of body.

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<sup>25</sup> Sanchez, J., Lowman, J. and Hill K. (2018) *Performance and Persistence Outcomes of GEAR UP Students: Leveling the Playing Field in Higher Education*. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice* 2018, Vol. 20(3) 328–349.

<sup>26</sup> Kim, S. et al (2021) *Promoting Educational Success: Which GEAR UP Services Lead to Postsecondary Enrollment and Persistence?* *Educational Policy* 2021, Vol. 35(1) 101–130.

Similarly, numerous collaborations to promote school-college transition exist at the local level – for example, in Tennessee (Bailey, 2022), Secondary Education & Workforce Collaborative in California (Hellman Foundation, 2022) and (Tafona, 2019) in the state of Washington. Notably, even when these collaborations are hosted or facilitated by HEIs, they tend to be framed as a partnership between different sectors (including school) rather than an act of ‘outreach’ from one sector to another.

Many HEIs have formed partnerships with local school districts and other partners to provide programmes (Mehl et al, 2020), whereby students start to accumulate higher education-level credit while still at high school, increasing the chances of them both enrolling in and completing a degree.

The USA sees relatively high rates of participation in higher education, albeit with significant differences between subgroups (Reber and Smith, 2023). However, due to the stark and longstanding inequalities that exist in rates of degree completion, outreach widening participation in the US tends to be conceived of as part of a wider ‘postsecondary success’ agenda rather than a discrete area of work. Philanthropic organisations, including the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Lumina Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York, play a major role in funding and influencing this agenda. For example, the Gates Foundation funds the Accelerate ED initiative, which provides grants and capacity building support for regional efforts to support underserved students into associates’ degrees that will connect them to careers (Education Strategy Group, 2023b).

A recent theme in the US literature is the importance of ‘intermediary organisations’ in facilitating students transition from school to higher education and onward to high-skill, in-demand careers (Duran et al., 2022). Put simply, this is a recognition that different sectors lack the capacity to understand how best to work together, and so equitable pathways into higher education and careers require someone to ‘act as the glue’ between partners, providing an honest brokerage function between potentially competing institutional interests and championing equity for students, especially the underserved (Hartung et al., 2020). One analysis of over 190 intermediary organisations identified successful models that included standalone organisations and coalitions of organisations operating at the local, regional or multi-state level, and housed within public or quasi-public and third sector bodies (Education First, 2022). Although the research does not point to a preferred model for intermediary organisations – and, indeed, flexibility to local context may be a strength (Equal Measure, 2023) – strong multi-sector relationship and credibility,

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diversified funding sources, investment in human capital (including the use of data and evidence) and ability to advocate for a shared vision were identified as key enablers of effectiveness and sustainability. A notable difference from the English context is that philanthropic organisations play the major role in funding intermediary organisations.

### **Australia: innovation to target geographical inequality**

Australia currently has a policy focus on increasing participation in higher education for students from 'low-socioeconomic status' groups, Indigenous Australians and students living outside major urban areas ('regional and remote students'). This builds on several decades of work to widen participation and increase equity in education.

As part of this effort, the Regional Partnerships Project Pool Program has been established (currently funded from 2022 to 2024) to promote collaborative outreach projects between universities and Regional Unity Centres, which provide facilities for students to access higher education courses without leaving their community (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023a; Australian Government Department of Education, 2023b). Funding was awarded in two phases, with six consortia awarded around AUS\$700,000 each to develop the concept for a tailored outreach project, and two of those awarded a total of AUS\$6.5 million in multi-year funding to roll out their projects. The Australian Government also directly awards funds to university-led research and trial projects aimed at improving participation from target groups through the National Priorities Pool Program (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023c).

Another key initiative is the Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program (HEPPP). HEPPP funding is allocated annually to all public universities based on the size of their student population, for activities that promote access and participation by target groups of students, with impact reporting (since 2021) against a shared evaluation framework (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023d; Australian Government Department of Education, 2023e). Previously, from 2011 to 2014, HEPPP had two separate components: a participation component, awarded to each eligible institution to spend in line with their HEPPP APPs; and a partnerships component, awarded for collaborative projects via a competitive application round, with grants ranging widely from AUS\$200,000 to over AUS\$21 million. It appears that the partnership component of HEPPP was discontinued after evaluators raised concerns that programming was not reaching

enough schools, and that funding was being diverted to institutional promotion or recruitment activities.

## Lessons from models for addressing collective action problems in other sectors

In addition to looking within the English sector and internationally, our desk-based research has also focused on the lessons we can learn from the collective action problem in other sectors. We have used this to consider how collective action problems crop up when it comes to outreach and widening participation, and to provide a theoretical framework for alternative approaches to solving such problems.

Other approaches are likely also available, and we do not claim that this is a comprehensive approach, but rather a series of models based on the lessons learned from our research. We stress that this framework exists only to illustrate one set of theoretical models of how to consider the problem, and to draw from examples in the private and public sector elsewhere, rather than a recommendation of one or more approaches to the OfS.

Firstly, we offer a brief summary of the problem, which is covered extensively in our main report. Collaborative outreach work, of which Uni Connect is the latest iteration, exists not just because people believe that widening participation is a public good. It exists, over and above regulatory requirements on universities individually (via APPs), for three reasons:

- Because absent any form of regulation, many universities would be incentivised to focus on students who a) would likely attend their own university, and b) would exhibit characteristics that are more likely to make them high performing throughout and beyond university, which correlates with certain socio-economic characteristics.
- Because individual regulatory targets to correct for this (i.e. a requirement in APPs that universities spend money on widening participation activity) are still likely to incentivise individual action by universities, and thus lead to duplication of activity, inefficiency of spend, and/or a focus on a small number of students from each university acting collectively sub optimally.
- That such collective action needs to be funded additionally (as opposed to being offered *voluntarily* or *compelled* via regulation), because it would not exist to the required level optionally, or would not bind in all participants, and

compulsion is likely to be seen as an unattractive facet by regulated universities.

The foundation of collaborative outreach at present, as seen through Uni Connect, is that:

- A regional infrastructure is funded on top of university activity.
- This infrastructure complements individual activity, and indeed 'crowds in' and helps direct further individual activity from participating universities.
- That the benefits of this, to universities and to society as a whole, outweigh the cost to taxpayers of funding this collaborative activity.

The problem, then, that we seek to solve is an under-supply of socially advantageous (and, in time, economically advantageous) collaborative outreach. The question is whether there might be other ways to address this than the theory of change outlined in the second set of bullets, namely collective additional funding supplied by the state.

We present below five theoretical options for solving the collective action problem identified above in a manner different from the current model. These are presented in an increasing order of regulatory power, covering voluntary compliance, local incentives, bilateral and regional multi-lateral agreements, compulsion on individual funds and finally greater prescription on individual and collective outputs. Again, we stress this is merely presented as a theoretical framework, rather than recommendations for action by the OfS.

### **Model 1: Social norms and community self-organisation**

Regulation exists in the first place to correct a market failure. As noted above, the fundamental premise of some form of both action on individual universities and further collective action (funded by the taxpayer) on a regional basis is because absent such regulation and funding, individual universities will under supply education to would-be students from particular backgrounds.

One alternative to thinking of different forms of regulation, is to change mindsets such that such market failures do not occur – either because the incentives to over-recruit some groups do not exist, or because of a recognition that such incentives do exist are trumped by a pro-social approach towards overcoming them. Collective individuals forming such agreements are known as community self-organisation approaches, and are often underpinned by social norms – that is, making it more collectively understood and valued as an approach.



Community self-organisation solutions exist in a wide number of areas in both the private and public sectors. The Maine lobster fisheries is a well-known example in the private sector, where fishers have voluntarily agreed a set of rules to collectively maximise the lobster harvest, without overfishing, even when individual gains might be maximised by breaking such an agreement (Wilson et al, 2007). Even though there has been an overarching architecture and regulatory system built, it operates on a voluntary basis (rather than regulatory basis).

It is generally understood that such a scheme, over time, also creates and sustains social norms. That is to say, the cost (reputationally) of breaking such a voluntary scheme becomes higher, and the benefit of pro-social activity (i.e. adhering to the scheme) also grows over time. When such social norms are strong enough, they are worth more than the direct financial benefits of breaking a voluntary arrangement. Social norms can operate without a voluntary collective arrangement, and drive individuals to acting in a pro social way even without formal collaboration. The extent of cycling (as opposed to car driving) in Denmark is often cited as a social norm that operates to collective benefit, even though there is no formal voluntary agreement whereby many individuals decide to cycle (Basaran et al, 2021). However, the state provides the underpinning infrastructure that makes it possible, and more detailed studies of similar cultural areas – for example, comparing Stockholm to Copenhagen – show that carefully designed state action (which can be supportive, as opposed to regulatory and punitive) is also an important part of many communities' self-organisation examples (Haustein et al, 2019).

In this example, one could imagine a scenario in which the highly pro collaborative default approach of many in universities, especially those who work in admissions and widening participation, might be harnessed to overcome the incentives towards individual action by universities (Burtonshaw, 2022). Universities might decide voluntarily to focus individual efforts on more pro-social approaches to widening participation. To the extent that some greater form of organisation is needed, a model of regional co-opetition might come into play, as discussed below.

### **Model 2: Selective incentives (individual or collective)**

Collective action problems exist because the costs of correcting them are more than the benefits received in doing so. Relatedly, the free rider problem exists, which is that individuals not participating in solving collective action nonetheless gain if that problem is solved.

In the context of higher education, the incentive not to recruit students that are typically the focus of widening participation work is that, all things being equal, such students are harder and more expensive to teach, and are less likely to proceed and succeed in higher education as measured by various accountability metrics. They are also, as some high-tariff institutions in particular argue, less likely to have the grades needed to enter the institution in the first place.

The literature on selective incentives normally focuses on financial reward for participation and within the private sector. Within the public sector, it can include financial reward for individuals (performance pay), but also operational autonomy as a reward, or reputational benefit (National Audit Office, 2008).

Selective incentives in higher education would work to reward universities who did participate in activity to help such students enter university (whether the institution's own or not), and to penalise those who did not. Such incentives could be targeted directly at universities who participated to avoid the free rider problem. For example, Uni Connect money could be paid directly to institutions for every activity they participated in (excluding those who didn't). Alternatively, universities could be fined or financially penalised for lack of activity. In a sense, this is how the APP system works now. The criticism of such action is that it incentivises individual action by universities, and risks duplicating activity. For example, often universities in a region say that they are directly chasing the same small number of students.

Selective incentives could therefore be designed to operate collectively. All universities who participated in a scheme might be rewarded, financially or non-financially (for example, by being publicly praised by Ministers). Those who didn't might be collectively penalised. In this way, Uni Connect funding (or similar) would still be needed, but as opposed to being spent collectively, it would be a reward for activity designed by (and initially paid for by) institutions. Unlike community self-organisation, there is an immediate extrinsic benefit to co-operation, and extrinsic cost to absence of co-operation.

### **Model 3: Regionally negotiated co-opetition**

Co-opetition exists when organisations (normally, but not necessarily, in the private sector) that are *competing* with each other in the same industry also *co-operate* in certain areas. This can be in the interests of creating shared collective outputs that benefit consumers – such as an agreement on safety standards in the car industry, or on reciprocal customer use of cashpoints among different banks, or on

sharing data as regards Covid infections between mobile phone companies – or in an area where joint working reduces cost, such as in R+D (Shvindina, 2019), or, increasingly, in areas where the two companies still compete, but where it makes sense for commercial reasons for the two to collaborate in some way over a product or a service offering (Brandenburger and Nalebuff, 2021).

What characterises co-opetition is a recognition that the participating organisations still compete, but that co-operation in this specific area either sits alongside competition, or in some fields actually increases the scope of competitive gain (where, for example, Apple and Samsung swapping elements of technology allows them both to compete more effectively against Nokia).

In the public sector, examples of co-opetition are rarer, but could include local schools sharing training around teacher effectiveness (even though, defined narrowly, School B's teachers becoming more effective via training from School A is likely to dampen any competitive edge School A has through achievement of better exam results), or informal and collective agreements either not to exclude challenging pupils, or to take a fair share of pupils who are excluded from other settings.

Co-opetition in a higher education widening participation context might take the form of a shared agreement among two or more participants to operate collectively in this field. This could be as simple as collective payment into a Uni Connect-style operation, or it could be adherence to a joint set of principles around widening participation activity and recruitment, or it could be a bilateral or multilateral agreement between universities who operate at different tariff levels to engage in and recruit on a different basis, for mutual gain. Unlike a purely community self-organising approach, it is likely that co-opetition models would require some form of formal agreement, potentially overseen by a neutral third party (especially when more than two institutions are involved). It is likely that co-opetition will work best in a smaller geographic region, and/or where there are a fixed number of participants in an agreement.

If co-opetition was not likely to emerge organically (as in model 1), and absent any form of direct incentives (as in model 2), then it would be possible and indeed pertinent for government or regulators to apply some soft pressure towards local forms of agreement. At the same time, though less likely to be an issue in a not-for-profit setting, regulators would need to ensure that ostensibly co-opetitive agreements were not in fact anti-competitive agreements (whereby, for instance,

universities in a local area agreed that none of them would take part in expensive widening participation programmes collectively).

#### **Model 4: An individual levy to fund collective action**

It is generally accepted with regards to employer training of individuals that all three parties – the individual, the firm, and the state – benefit, and so all should pay. But England has had a longstanding case of under investment by employers in individuals. This is for a number of reasons, but among them are a fear of poaching, imperfect information, and the proliferation of low-quality courses. In this instance, the collective action problem isn't so much a lack of action, which would benefit everyone collectively, as it is an under-supply of positive action.

In 2015, an Apprenticeship Levy was (re)introduced on large employers in England. Representing a tax on 0.5 per cent of the largest firm's budgets, the idea is that the levy supports 'free' apprenticeships for defined categories of staff from a list of approved apprenticeship standards. It also looks to promote apprenticeship uptake.

A levy on individual actors in this way serves to create a fund which is managed centrally and spent collectively, thus addressing under-supply by individual actors, as well as solving information asymmetries. Conceptually, a pure levy has no ownership by its levy payers – it is spent by the third party overseeing the scheme and any individual levy payers may receive back less, the same as, or more than they originally contributed. However, to gain employer support, the Apprenticeship Levy is nominally retained by its payers in a separate ring-fenced pot, which they can draw down upon for approved training. Any unspent pot is then allocated to non-levy payers. In this way, it is not a pure levy so much as a levy on a very small number of participants to redistribute benefits across a sector. However, the 'ownership' of the levy by its payers is often a mirage, and the entire system relies on significant and continued underspend by such levy payers. The other existing levy on skills, which is run only within the construction sector and managed by the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB), works on a more purist basis with no theoretical ownership by payers, and a levy that is paid by everyone within the sector (albeit weighted by size and income of payer), with more open redistribution across the sector (CITB, 2023).

Applying this same regulatory principle to widening participation in universities, one could see a scenario in which either just larger universities, or more selective ones, or all institutions (but likely weighted by size and selectivity), were levied to

pay for additional collective partnership work, which may or may not be regional Uni Connect partnership schemes. This could sit alongside existing access and participation schemes, or replace an element of them, or operate on top of APP ring-fenced funding (where the role of the APP is around individual university action, not collective action), just as a levy sits alongside individual taxation of firms.

### **Model 5: Collective regulatory action on outputs (as opposed to activity).**

Sometimes, regulators apply rules to the outputs which must be delivered by actors within a regulated sector, as well as (or instead of) regulations around activity.

In some senses, this hardest-edged approach is implicit within APPs. Not only do universities have to agree a set of activities that they will do with their funding, which are then signed off by the regulator, but they also set themselves agreed targets for the outputs of that activity. The regulator reserves the right to act, even if the *activities* have happened, if the subsequent planned *outputs* have not emerged (for instance, if a university spends the money that it says it will on the activities it plans to do, but the student make up in the future years is still not as forecast). However, in practice, the regulator has been unwilling to take action on failures of outputs, as opposed to failure of activity.

At the most interventionist end, therefore, a regulator might decide not to incentivise (as model 2), or promote co-opetition (as model 3), or require collective funding for activity which the regulated sector doesn't deliver itself (model 4). It could, individually or more likely collectively, regulate outputs.

There are two examples of regulated sectors where private institutions nevertheless have a social obligation, and therefore have conditions of outputs placed on them. The first is a Universal Service Obligation (USO). This requires private companies to guarantee that their product or service is available universally, at a capped price. Such USOs are typically seen in industries such as post, telecoms or banking. Even though it is much more expensive for a letter to be posted from the Outer Hebrides to London than it is for a letter to be posted within London, the price is the same and the delivery schedule is the same (Buchanan and Booth, 2023). This strongest form of a USO exists because the Royal Mail is still, de facto, a public service. A looser form of a postal USO allows private parcel carriers to charge a higher price for harder to reach areas. Similarly, telecoms USOs require every household to be able to access a 'minimum set of' phone and broadband services, at a reasonable price'

(Ofcom, 2023). This does not, however, require everyone to be able to access the same service levels – which is why broadband is faster in cities than in the countryside.

The second is a ‘balanced portfolio’ approach. This requires, within limits, regulated industries to hold a balance of customers that are more attractive, or less attractive. For example, in banking, banks are required offer financial products to those who are less credit worthy or less likely to be financially valuable to a bank (via the provision of basic banking accounts). School admission codes prohibit schools from gaming their intake, and instead require them to recruit students from across the local area. In a more informal way, Regional Directors within the DfE who are responsible for brokering schools between Multi Academy Trusts, are known to balance the allocating of ‘attractive schools’ (which tend to be larger schools, with no deficits or capital problems, with ‘less attractive schools’ (smaller, in deficit, or geographically less advantageous), in order that the ‘market’ of schools collectively is well served by the institutions supporting it.

Crucially, both of these types of intervention – to achieve a national or regional universal offer for any student who wished to attend university, or an element of a balanced student intake within an institution or a region – would run very strongly against universities that are, on the whole, selective (by tariff), and autonomous in terms of their decisions over who to admit. Indeed, any move in this direction would go well beyond correcting for collective action failure in terms of widening participation and participation among lower POLAR quintile students. It would effectively require universities to make provision for anyone who wanted to apply, or to balance their student intake between higher and lower prior attainment. Nevertheless, it is presented here as a logical extension of regulatory activity to address the problem covered above.