

Exploring experiences of outreach during the pandemic

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

About the research

The research was designed to find out about school and college students' post-16/18 choices, assess the influence of Uni Connect outreach and other factors especially the effect of COVID-19 on attitudes to progression in education, and to consider what support target students in Year 10 and Year 12/13 need to support their progress in education. Qualitative research was undertaken through a series of focus groups which took place between July and November 2021 exploring students' attitudes to their future education prospects and their experience of higher education outreach since 2020. Transcripts of the focus groups were analysed centrally local with researchers having the opportunity to refine and further develop the findings and recommendations. The report was presented and discussed at a virtual meeting for Uni Connect outreach practitioners hosted by NERUPI (Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Intervention) in January 2022.

Uni Connect was set up to develop local approaches which target local participation gaps with a focus on delivering a range of activities in partnership with education providers and other stakeholders. Uni Connect supports progression to further and higher education, especially through progressive and sustained activities with target students who have the potential for higher education but are at risk of not progressing. A number of consortia have used NERUPI aims as the basis for planning and evaluating their programmes. While the link to subject knowledge and study skills aspects of the Framework remain important, Uni Connect programmes tend to focus mainly on three of the NERUPI aims related to social and academic capital and habitus/student identities. Objectives include: developing students' knowledge and awareness of the benefits of higher education and graduate employment; developing students' capacity to navigate higher education and graduate employment sectors and make informed choices; and developing student confidence and resilience to negotiate the challenge of university life and graduate progression.

Schools and colleges in England were closed in response to the pandemic in March 2020. With most children remaining at home, teaching took place online. GCSE and A Level exams were cancelled, and the government announced that grades were to be based on predicted grades and teacher assessment. Partial reopening of schools for Years 10 and 12 from June 2020 stalled at the beginning of 2021 and social distancing measures were enforced such as year and class group 'bubbles' along with weekly testing and other protective measures including restrictions on external visitors to schools. Although measures were relaxed from July 2021 schools could decide to continue with restrictions until the end of term if they wished. These measures had a significant effect on the delivery of UniConnect activities and their evaluation.

The report is mainly based on fifteen focus groups involving 71 students which were undertaken in May to July 2021 across three Uni Connect partnership areas: LiNCHigher (Lincolnshire), FutureHY (York and North Yorkshire) and Wessex Inspiration Network (WIN) (Bath and North East Somerset, North Somerset and parts of Wiltshire). Seven groups were with post-16 learners and eight groups were with learners in Year 10. Two further focus groups involving seven Year 10 and seven Year 12 students were held in November 2021 in an additional Uni Connect partnership area: Make Happen (Essex). A pragmatic approach was taken to setting up the groups, and there was a mix of remote and in-person participation.

As part of the discussion participants were asked to rate where they were on a five point scale in terms of how sure they were about what they will do in the future, their level of knowledge about education and training options

that would help their future careers, their understanding of the benefits of higher education, how confident they felt about getting into higher education, and how difficult it would be for them personally to enter and succeed in higher education.

The comments suggest that most participants found participation in the focus group to be a positive experience, which may in itself be considered an outreach intervention as well as helping us to capture the 'voice' of students.

Future Perspectives and Levels of Understanding

The focus groups sought perspectives on what students want to do after school/college, and how sure they felt about their future choices using a five-point scale (where 5 is high). On average the largest group of focus groups participants were unsure of what they would do in the future: the comments suggest that even though most participants have an idea of which option or options they are interested in, this is open to change. There was a significant minority at both the top and bottom end in terms of being sure about what they will do in the future (i.e. very sure or completely unsure). Amongst those in post-16 education most rated themselves fairly sure of that they want to do in the future, particularly if this involved continuing in education which appears to give students a sense of security about the path they will follow even if they are unsure of the field. Many of those that were clear on what they want to do in the future were able to talk about this in more detail, discussing the pathway and subject/profession. A few post-16 participants spoke about not wanting to continue in education, and in some cases this was an issue in terms of career choices in the future because the careers they were interested in required higher education. Not feeling engaged in current subjects, or not enjoying the subject, seems to contribute to feeling less sure about what to do in the future. Some students were unsure because they were not able to settle on an option (perceiving a wide range of options can contribute to this).

Lockdown seems to have provided time to consider the future and has been a time when many students have re-evaluated their positions and are seeking to counterbalance the limited life experience available during lockdown with more active lifestyle choices in the future. Some had developed interests or aspirations which could influence their future career (e.g. fitness, working with people, travel related). Comments from some students planning to continue in education suggested it could be that the experience of education during lockdown was affecting their views about the type of educational experience (as well as employment situation) they would like in the future. That is, focus group participants said they were in favour of practical and group-based ways of learning.

A few participants were concerned that the pandemic has affected future job prospects (e.g. in hospitality careers). This was leading to indecision and some were debating which route would be best to follow given future uncertainty.

Knowledge of courses or training that will help with future career (rating out of 5 where 5 is high)

Overall most participants put their level of knowledge of courses in the mid-range, although over a third rated themselves only a two or below out of five. Many of those most recently entering post-16 education expressed relatively low levels of knowledge of the next steps in their education, although the comments indicate that outreach is playing a part in helping participants to enhance their knowledge of courses or training that will help their future career.

The sense emerges that in general participants have only partial knowledge of courses or training. Amongst post-16 participants, several participants who had fixed on an aspiration to go to university were seeing this as a general ambition rather than specific to a particular career pathway. Others had a sense of the field they wanted but were struggling with which specialism to take. A few participants were specific about the fields they were interested in, but still rated their knowledge of options quite low - indicating that they were aiming to get more information at a future time. Other post-16 students had an understanding of courses related to their primary career choice, but said they had not looked into any options more broadly than this.

Knowledge of courses or training to help with careers was lower on average across the Year 10 focus group cohorts compared to older students. Some participants indicated that low scoring reflected knowing what career they want to do but not how to get there, or which way to go. Not knowing what they want to do in the future was also an obstacle when it comes to finding out about relevant courses or training that may be of benefit.

In relation to focus group participants who were aiming for higher education, the responses to questions about the impact of COVID-19 suggested that it had not necessarily changed learner's minds when it came to planning next steps, but lockdown had affected their ability to plan and access information and resources (e.g. attending open days etc). Some focus group participants had used time at home to research their future options, but many said they were missing out on having the opportunity to discuss and grow their knowledge of their future options because they were out of the school/college environment. Comments from some Year 10 students implied that COVID-19 related restrictions and the experience of education during lockdown had limited the extent to which younger learners' could think about and plan their futures in terms of courses and training - because missing out on education meant they had been held back from making any decisions about the future.

Knowledge and awareness of the benefits of studying in higher education (rating out of 5 where 5 is high)

Overall, well over half of focus group participants rated their level of knowledge of the benefits of higher education at least four out of five (and almost eight out of ten of post-16 students did so). Those who identified benefits from higher education study highlighted three aspects in particular: the financial benefits; the breadth of career opportunities; and the personal benefits in terms of life skills. Other benefits mentioned by participants included: studying/learning more about something that you are passionate about; and proving to yourself that you can set a goal and achieve it (i.e. finish the course) which builds confidence. Participants who had researched higher education options were most likely to identify benefits from higher education. It was interesting to note that in terms of finding out about the personal benefits of higher education, for some students contact with others who have progressed to higher education was the main source of information.

Some participants focused attention on the disadvantages of going to university, with the primary focus being debt and the reduced opportunity to earn money whilst studying.

Many Year 10 students said they did not know about the benefits of going to study further, although where Year 10 participants could identify benefits, financial benefits, were at the forefront. Leaving home was mentioned as an issue by several students in both Year 10 and Year 12/13, and some participants said they were only considering local providers.

The comments suggest that views of higher education had been influenced by the pandemic. Concern about the student experience going forward in a post-pandemic world, coupled with reassessment of what some students want to do in the future, had perhaps caused some students to reject progression to university from post-16 training as an immediate option for them. It is perhaps also fair to say that in a situation of general uncertainty some participants were questioning whether the benefits of higher education would be realised. There was also an element in a few of the discussions regarding the extent to which the financial implications of higher education were being viewed differently. However, worries about the balance of the costs and benefits of higher education are probably a general rather than a COVID-19 specific aspect since spending resources and time at university and not gaining any benefit from it came up independently of the discussions around the impact of COVID-19.

Rating of their confidence in achieving the grades to enter higher education (rating out of 5 where 5 is high)

When asked how confident they were about achieving the grades to enter higher education if that is what students decided to do, the largest group sat in the middle (although there were more positive than negative feelings about getting into higher education). Some of the post-16 learners in the focus groups held towards the end of the Summer term had already achieved the grades necessary for their chosen option, which obviously skewed the results towards the confident end of the scale. Some students were confident because of a feeling that there would be higher education options available to them at different levels depending on the grades achieved. For example, students said they were confident of getting a higher education place regardless of doing well in their exams. A student who was less confident about achieving the grades required for higher education put this down to the fact that universities could change the entry criteria year on year. Other students expressed general uncertainty about what will happen in the future and a few were pessimistic about getting the grades required for higher education - not being able to achieve the required standard, and suffering from stress or poor exam performance issues were mentioned. Self-belief stands out as a factor in helping to boost students' confidence in their ability to get the grades required to get into higher education.

There tended to be quite lively discussion in the focus groups about how gaps in education and changes to educational delivery due to COVID-19 had affected participants' confidence in obtaining the grades they require for entry to higher education. Comments from some participants do suggest that changes in education associated with the pandemic have implications for how confident students feel about getting their grades – e.g. poor performance because of not having enough time to learn because of lockdown. Focus group members were vocal about the negative implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for young people's student experience and exam prospects.

The changes to higher education entry to take account of predicted rather than actual grades because of students missing exams was a positive thing for students in Year 12 (described by one student in the second year of post-16 education as taking the pressure off workload). However other students saw this in a negative light because it would mean they are going to be unprepared for exams in the future.

Year 10 students expressed concerns about the longer-term effects of COVID-19 on their educational attainment. For example, there was consensus across one of the groups that they know that they want to go to college in the future but are unsure if they will achieve the grades because of missing school-work and having only a limited educational experience. Lack of support came up as an issue, along with feeling that they are not as engaged in their studies as they would be if learning was in-school or college. Several comments highlight the danger to studying from distractions in the home environment (ranging from the temptation to go back to bed, to gaming or watching television, and pets). Self-belief stands out as a factor in helping to boost confidence in students' ability to get the grades required to get into higher education. Clearly, a key issue for many learners during lockdown was problems with concentrating on studying during lockdown, and lack of motivation.

Feelings about difficulty of entering and succeeding in higher education (rating out of 5 where 5 is very difficult)

Overall two-fifths of participants were undecided, about their prospects in higher education. A quarter perceived that it would be difficult for them personally and some said it would be very difficult to enter and succeed in higher education. Just over half of post-16 learners who were asked this question said it would be difficult or very difficult for them personally to enter and succeed in HE, and around two-fifths of Year 10 participants. Study at a higher level was the main issue, in that the academic demands of higher education stand out as the main area of difficulty. On the other hand, a student who felt it would not be too hard to enter and succeed in higher education put this down to a love of their chosen field. Challenges mentioned included: coping with stress, managing to meet the deadlines for coursework; problems with note taking; and getting distracted from studying. Moving away from home was a relatively commonly mentioned difficulty, and as noted above the discussions identified that entering a local university was very much a preferred option for many in the Uni Connect target group. Other potential challenges mentioned by participants in the post-16 focus groups were those around budgeting properly and good time management to keep on top of work. Some participants mentioned access to support networks, and in these cases having access to support appeared to be a factor in reassuring them about coping with going to higher education.

The impact of the pandemic was seen in comments relating to the level of difficulty participants perceived around going to university/gaining a higher education qualification – i.e. the perception is that COVID-19 has made going to university more difficult in terms of not having face to face teaching and the student experience being impacted. A few participants were worried about their ability to cope with the social aspects of higher education in terms of feeling comfortable around new people/or having difficulty socialising.

Role of Uni Connect outreach

The discussions focused attention on the students' recent experiences of Uni Connect higher education outreach provision, and views on the nature and benefits of this provision in the context of the pandemic.

Virtual sessions online appear to have been well received in the main - positive aspects mentioned included: being easy to take part in; being engaging in terms of content; and offering a change of focus from day-to-day school work. Participants who were actively thinking about their future options tended to say that the activities encouraged them to make better use of the time they had available during lockdown for researching their options.

It was notable that when asked to remember the Uni Connect activities they had taken part in, focus group participants often found it hard to recall the nature of the activities and detail of the content, even when they could

recall taking part. Some activities were better received than others, and to an extent an overall pattern emerged suggesting that in the main the bespoke and small-group or individualised activities were better received and more impactful than general and whole-group sessions. This is perhaps to be expected and it is a feature of the Uni Connect programme to combine light-touch information provision with a range of in-depth interventions which address particular needs, within the context of a sustained and progressive programme of ongoing support for target group learners.

The data suggests that arriving at careers and education decisions is a long-term process, and one which draws on a wide range of influences and factors specific to the individual, their context and how they see their future selves. It would be unrealistic to be able to attribute a person's decision to continue in education to any particular activity or experience. The types of learning outcomes from taking part in different types of outreach activities which were most commonly identified during the discussions included: finding out about different careers; identifying future education/training courses; helping with understanding the requirements; application support; and reassurance. Higher education outreach was clearly playing a role for many participants in terms of offering reassurance in relation to their fears and worries. This seems to be particularly the case around the financial aspects of higher education.

Year 10 focus group participants would like more trips to universities; an immersive experience of college/university; and more work experience opportunities.

Post-16 learners would like more university tours, and more bespoke and individualised support to help them make decisions about specific options in education or careers. It was suggested that tailored support is a must, given that every young person will be in a different place as regards their career decision making; and more website resources and more information on finance (how to fund what they are looking to do). Some Year 12 and 13 learners wanted more variety in terms of the industries and pathways available when attending careers fairs, or progression-related events. Many comments focused on the participants' current experience of education and how this might be improved – most of those consulted agreed that they wanted to be in school or college and not working remotely which they all found difficult as motivation to learn was negatively impacted.

Recommendations

▪ **Uni Connect consortia and partners**

- The research supports the case for ongoing and sustained interventions with the Uni Connect target groups. This is in line with conclusions from national and local evaluations of Uni Connect.
- As well as setting up activities within a progression framework, consortia should work with teachers in schools and colleges to ensure programmes are directed at those who can benefit most and to implement tracking mechanisms which ensure longitudinal support can be put in place.
- Tailored and targeted forms of support should be prioritised, especially for post-16 learners. Uni Connect consortia partners delivering outreach should review their offer to make sure that targeted and tailored approaches are prioritised.
- Learner voice activities should underpin the development and delivery of targeted and tailored provision.
- Outreach activities with students should include time for reflective practices in order to help students to arrive at well-considered career decisions. Activities which build appreciation of, and skills for, reflexive practice should be prioritised.
- Resources and materials are needed which improve students' knowledge of the labour market and the future predicted trends to help students to make more informed choices about learning and jobs. Uni Connect partners and careers information, advice and guidance practitioners should work together to develop practical guidance for an activity or resource to support students in making better informed careers choices, including how to use national and local labour market trend data.

- **Senior leadership teams in schools and colleges**
 - Support for career decision-making should be embedded throughout the culture rather than an add on. The curriculum should allow space for discussion and reflection of students' future options.
 - Schools should seek to collaborate with Uni Connect partners to design activities for those students who missed examinations in Year 9 and 11 which will build study and revision skills in order to address the heightened anxiety which these students have around future examinations. Subject specific activities delivered in schools could be most beneficial to reinforce support from teachers.
 - Students should have opportunities to take part in campus visits in order to gain first-hand experience of an higher education environment.
- **Policy makers and funders locally and nationally (i.e. Uni Connect consortia and OfS)**
 - Systematic research and evaluation is needed to test the strengths and weaknesses of a blended approach to outreach delivery which synthesises online and face to face interventions. This work should inform recommendations to the sector regarding blended models of delivery of sustained and progressive outreach.
 - Strengthen the capacity of Uni Connect partnerships to place staff in schools and colleges on a long-term basis

The recommendations were discussed, and gained the support of, Uni Connect outreach practitioners as part of a virtual dissemination event. Practitioners identified challenges to be overcome in taking the recommendations forward, which included working within diverse school and college contexts and engaging with senior leadership teams who have multiple competing priorities. Strengthening the capacity of Uni Connect partnerships to place staff in schools and colleges on a long-term basis came out as a recommendation from the group.

Colleagues said that bespoke and tailored outreach is becoming more common and it can be challenging to deliver more frequent individual support, so an agile, flexible approach is needed. There was strong support for building reflexive practice activities into outreach delivery, and suggestions included using prompts for reflection, visualisation techniques, use of reflexive logs/journals, and combining reflection with evaluation.

The working groups identified that practitioners would like to see more research focusing on the best way to effectively manage dual/blended outreach delivery. The opportunity was identified by practitioners to review the effectiveness of interventions using the approaches of different collaborative partnerships

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