

14 August 2020

Dear [names of Uni Connect Chair and Lead]

Uni Connect programme: An update from the Office for Students

I am writing to update you on our expectations for the second year of phase two of the Uni Connect programme (2020-2021). In the letter that we sent to partnerships on 26 March 2020,¹ we set out our revised expectations for the programme for the remainder of the academic year 2019-20 in order to account for the impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. We also set out some further expectations and advice to partnerships on 12 June.²

We would like to thank partnerships for responding so rapidly to our guidance by developing digital and other remote information, advice and guidance (IAG) and outreach activities, and by continuing to engage with as many Uni Connect and other underrepresented learners as possible during this time. We have been pleased to be able to highlight this work through a number of OfS briefing notes and case studies,³ the sharing of practice on the community platform and our advice to government and Parliament.

We are aware that the pandemic has disrupted the delivery of the programme since March, and that it will affect activity for at least the first half of the programme in 2020-21, as schools and colleges focus their activity on supporting pupils to catch up with the curriculum.

Our update to accountable officers on 30 July⁴ set out our approach to re-introducing our regulatory requirements following the period of the coronavirus outbreak. We are engaging with providers, students and third sector organisations to understand the pandemic's impact on issues

¹ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/uni-connect-programme-an-update-from-the-office-for-students/.

² As above.

³ Our briefing note on outreach is at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/coronavirus-briefing-note-higher-education-outreach/. Case studies and resources are at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/coronavirus/case-studies/higher-education-outreach/.

⁴ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/update-on-the-office-for-students-approach-to-regulation-and-information-about-deadlines-for-data-returns/.

such as school attainment, student hardship and graduate employment, on the places across the country least represented in higher education, and on students who may have been particularly affected, such as those with disabilities, from black, Asian or minority ethnic groups, or without family support.

This letter sets out in detail our next steps for Uni Connect partnerships. To summarise:

- **Levels of engagement:** With the closure of schools for the duration of the pandemic to date and uncertainty about the ability of different schools and colleges to engage with the programme in the autumn term, programme activities will need to continue to be delivered in different ways.

We will maintain the 20 per cent engagement measure as a programme goal and ask that partnerships continue to take all reasonable steps to achieve this level of engagement. Where partnerships are unable to achieve this goal, we will be asking for evidence to demonstrate that they have taken all reasonable steps in light of the impact of the pandemic and we will expect that partnerships can demonstrate re-prioritisation of resources to the activities listed below.

- **Remote delivery models:** We expect partnerships to continue to deliver digital and other remote modes of IAG and outreach activity throughout the remainder of the programme. We will be capturing information through monitoring to ensure that this is achieved. In particular, we would like you to:
 - Continue supporting broader groups of underrepresented students with remote delivery, not just those in your target schools and wards
 - Particularly address the information, advice and guidance needs of students applying to early recruiters in 2020-21 and those in transition years (Years 9, 11 and 13).
- **Local progression pathways:** We would like partnerships to consider how they can support collaboration between further education and higher education providers in order to support local progression pathways between them.
- **Evaluation:**
 - CFE plans to run the final learner survey during the second half term before Christmas (November/December) extending into the first half term in 2021 (January/February).
 - The Ipsos Mori formative evaluation survey with schools and colleges will continue as planned in autumn 2020.
- **National Tutoring Programme (NTP):** The NTP will roll out in schools later in the autumn term to support disadvantaged pupils. Partnerships are encouraged to use their networks to raise awareness amongst schools of the tutoring and mentoring support available to them, and may also wish to direct relevant tutoring organisations to join the NTP. Uni Connect funding is not permitted to be used to subsidise or pay the school contribution for engaging in the NTP.

- **Raising attainment:** Where raising attainment activity forms part of a partnership's progression framework, this can be supported by Uni Connect. We would encourage partnerships to ensure that any raising attainment activity taken forward in 2020-21 complements any work the school or college is engaging with through the NTP.

Further detail on some of these issues is at Annex A.

Future of Uni Connect

We will be engaging with the OfS board on the future of the programme from the autumn onwards. We will draw on evidence from the programme evaluation, data from monitoring and existing case studies for this purpose, but we may identify some particular gaps in evidence where we require additional and rapid input from partnerships. We will be in touch in the next few weeks with details of any further information we would like to gather from you.

Further information

If you have any questions about the issues raised in this letter or other Uni Connect issues, please email uniconnect@officeforstudents.org.uk. For queries on evaluation and evidence review submissions, please email the CFE evaluation team at ncop@cfef.org.uk.

Yours sincerely

Chris Millward

Director of Fair Access and Participation

Annex A

Remote models of delivery

We are aware that all partnerships have rapidly adapted information, advice and guidance (IAG) and activity to be delivered remotely since March 2020, including by working with partner organisations with the track record, expertise and capability to support you with this. It is likely that outreach delivery will need to take a blended approach in 2020-21 as schools and colleges adapt to working in line with the government's coronavirus and social distancing guidelines.

For academic year 2020-21 we expect partnerships to continue offering and supporting remote IAG and activity to students from groups identified as underrepresented in higher education in our access and participation guidance⁵ – not just those in your Uni Connect target schools and wards. More high-intensity activity that forms part of your progression framework should still be targeted at Uni Connect learners. We would also like you to pay particular attention to the needs of students applying to courses with early UCAS deadlines for 2021 entry and those in transition years (Years 9, 11 and 13). Through the programme monitoring and evaluation, we will be capturing data and information to monitor engagement and progress on this.

Local progression pathways

We are aware that more students may be considering local options for further and higher education due to the pandemic. The government is taking steps to strengthen provision at Levels 4 and 5, with the aim that more students will choose to study at this level. With this in mind, we would like partnerships to consider how they can support collaboration between further education and higher education providers in order to support local progression pathways between them.

Evaluation

CFE programme impact evaluation – Wave 3 learner survey

CFE will now run the learner survey from when schools return after the October half term break in early November 2020, until the end of the first half term in February 2021. After our consultation with partnerships, CFE plans to run the final wave 3 learner survey but delay the timing and extend the survey window, so we can be flexible whilst maximising response rates. We encourage partnerships to delay their learner surveys until early 2021 to focus support on curriculum catch-up and outreach delivery. However, we appreciate partnerships will need to consider local arrangements when deciding the timing that works best for their own schools and colleges.

In the case of significant local lockdowns or a national lockdown in the autumn first half term, we would advise that all learner surveys are postponed until 2021. Either way, given the uncertainty coronavirus brings to running the learner survey (and your outreach activity), it would be advisable for all partnerships to ensure that processes are in place with schools and colleges to enable direct or indirect electronic access to learners.

⁵ See www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/regulatory-notice-1-access-and-participation-plan-guidance/.

Some other changes we are planning to make in the next survey round:

- You are encouraged to run the survey electronically wherever possible.
- We aim to provide a video to support electronic participation and remote informed consent.
- The number of survey questions should be kept to the minimum possible. CFE will review the core national evaluation questions and also ask you to review your additional questions.
- We must try to get the highest possible number of learners who completed the baseline survey to help us to demonstrate the impact of the Uni Connect programme; you should work with CFE to target these specific learners.
- We expect to seek your views via specific questions to support understanding the effects of coronavirus on learners and accounting for these in our evaluations.

Ipsos Mori formative evaluation

We are pleased to have appointed Ipsos Mori to run our formative evaluation in phase two. At the last Chairs and Leads meeting, the team introduced themselves and their plans over the next year, which will be focusing on outreach hubs and gathering the voice of schools and colleges to understand their experience of Uni Connect.

Ipsos is currently working on a desk review of programme information and aims to conduct stakeholder interviews along with a school and college staff survey in the autumn, based on an updated evaluation framework. In 2021, the team will focus on developing effective practice case studies and generating action learning to ensure we make the most of Uni Connect evaluation findings. If you would like to find out more please contact Susan.Mackay@ipsos.com.

National Tutoring Programme

On 19 June 2020 the Department for Education announced that a £350 million National Tutoring Programme (NTP)⁶ will be rolled out over the 2020-21 academic year. The aim is to increase access to high-quality tuition for the most disadvantaged young people between the ages of 5 to 16, given the impact of lost teaching time due to the coronavirus pandemic and the disproportionate impact on disadvantaged learners.

The NTP is being designed and initially delivered in collaboration the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), Sutton Trust, Impetus and Nesta. There are two elements to the programme:

- **Tuition partners:** Schools will be able to access subsidised tuition from an approved list of tuition partners. These organisations – which will all be subject to quality, safeguarding and evaluation standards – will be given support and funding to reach as many disadvantaged pupils as possible. Tuition partners are expected to begin delivery in the second half of the autumn term 2020.

⁶ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/billion-pound-covid-catch-up-plan-to-tackle-impact-of-lost-teaching-time>.

- **Academic mentors:** Schools in the most disadvantaged areas will be supported to employ in-house academic mentors to provide intensive catch-up support to their pupils. Teach First will be supporting the recruitment, training and placement of the first cohort of academic mentors who hope to be placed in schools by October half term 2020.

The government has announced a separate initiative (using £96 million of funding from the £350 million) that will target disadvantaged students aged 16-19 with small-group tutoring.

The NTP will roll out in schools later in the autumn term to support disadvantaged pupils. Partnerships are encouraged to use their networks to raise awareness among schools of the tutoring and mentoring support available to them, and may also wish to direct relevant tutoring organisations to join the NTP. For further information or to register interest please go to the NTP website.⁷

Our phase two guidance⁸ (page 13, paragraph 47) states 'Uni Connect funding should not be used in place of other government funding, including OfS grant funding, or funding which would ordinarily be expected to be provided by another organisation'. In line with this guidance, Uni Connect funding should not be used to subsidise or pay for the school contribution for engaging in the NTP.

Raising attainment

We are aware that some partnerships offer subject-specific activities that assist with raising attainment where there is a need identified by the school or college. Where this activity forms part of a partnership's progression framework and is identified as a particular need from a target school or college, this can continue to be supported by Uni Connect in 2020-21. We would encourage partnerships to ensure that any raising attainment activity taken forward this year complements any raising attainment work the school or college is engaging with through the NTP to avoid duplication.

⁷ See <https://nationaltutoring.org.uk/faqs>.

⁸ Available at www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/national-collaborative-outreach-programme-phase-two-guidance/.