

End of Phase 2 Uni Connect impact evaluation report to LiNCHigher

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Executive Summary

Programme overview

This report presents the findings for Phase 2 of the local evaluation of the Lincolnshire Uni Connect raising Higher Education aspirations project. Funded by the Office for Students, this national initiative is managed locally by the LiNCHigher partnership. Phase 2 ran from August 2019 to July 2021. Delivery of the programme, and therefore the evaluation, encountered much disruption due to the global Covid-19 pandemic which began in the UK in March 2020. The evaluation assessed the impact of the Uni Connect programme on school and college students in Lincolnshire.

The evaluation team, based in the Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute (LHERI) at the University of Lincoln, produced an interim report at the end of the first year of Phase 2 that presented key findings and made recommendations for the second year of the Uni Connect programme (Rose and Mallinson, 2020a). The full report is available on the LHERI website whilst a condensed version was published in the online journal, *New Directions in the Teaching of Physical Sciences* (Rose and Mallinson, 2021). A literature review outlining the programme's theoretical underpinnings has also been published (Rose and Mallinson, 2020b).

Methodology: evaluation approach

The evaluation took a mixed methods approach consisting of both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. This final report is based on data collected during the second year of Phase 2 (August 2020 to July 2021) through the following evaluation activities:

- An end of year student outcome survey
- Student activity surveys
- Student focus groups
- Semi-structured interviews with programme leads in schools and colleges.

The surveys were available to all LiNCHigher schools to use. The student focus groups were carried out in five schools and one college. The programme lead interviews were conducted in six schools and the three main colleges that LiNCHigher work in partnership with.

All questions, for both of the surveys and the focus groups, were mapped onto the LiNCHigher progression framework (Progressive Framework (thefuturefocus.co.uk)), which is based on the Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions (NERUPI) outcomes. Survey and focus group questions were based on the NERUPI question bank. The NERUPI framework was subsequently used to measure impact across all datasets.

The following table summarises the NERUPI framework and associated categories:

NERUPI Framework Five Overarching Aims (www.nerupi.co.uk)	
NERUPI Category A: Know	Develop students' knowledge and awareness of the benefits of Higher Education and graduate employment
NERUPI Category B: Choose	Develop students' capacity to navigate Higher Education and graduate employment
NERUPI Category C: Become	Develop students' confidence and resilience in Higher Education and graduate employment
NERUPI Category D: Practice	Develop students' skills and capacity for student and career success
NERUPI Category E: Understand	Develop understanding through contextualised subject knowledge and attainment raising

End of year student outcome survey

The outcome survey, which was not activity specific, was available to all LiNCHigher schools and ran from May to July 2021. The survey consisted of five questions based on the NERUPI framework outcomes stated above, one per outcome. A total of 757 valid responses from 15 schools were received: 223 (29.5%) from Uni Connect students; 404 (53.4%) from non-Uni Connect students and 130 (17.2%) with no or invalid postcodes. Postcodes are the measure on which a Uni Connect student is identified, therefore for those students where the data were missing it was not possible to positively identify which category the response belonged. The proportion of responses by gender were: 451 (60.8%) female, 255 (32.9%) male, 18 (2.4%) other and 29 (3.9%) preferred not to say.

Student activity surveys

A student activity survey was designed for each of the outreach activities delivered by LiNCHigher under the Uni Connect programme. Surveys were available to all LiNCHigher schools throughout the year to use with their students. Responses were received for 13 different types of activities e.g. Motivational Speakers, Study Skills / Revision workshops and Marginal Gains. A total of 4,029 responses were received from students of which: 681 (16.9%) were from Uni Connect students; 2,183 (54.2%) non-Uni Connect students and 1,165 (28.9%) responses with missing or invalid postcodes. In terms of gender breakdown, of the 97.3% students who answered this question; 1618 (41.3%) were male; 2107 (53.7%) were female; 92 (2.3%) were other and 104 (2.7%) preferred not to say. Data were only reported for activities that received 50 or more responses.

The surveys asked pre- and post-activity questions that directly related to the main intended NERUPI outcome. Whilst all NERUPI outcomes were covered by the 13 surveys, some were more prevalent than others; NERUPI A was covered by one activity, NERUPI B by seven, NERUPI C by three, NERUPI D by two and NERUPI E by one activity. One activity (Personal Statements) covered two NERUPI outcomes (B and D).

Student focus groups

Student focus groups took place with Years 9 to 13 in five schools across the county and AS level students in one college during the summer term (May to July 2021). A total of 32 focus groups were conducted, 15 with Uni Connect students, 15 with non-Uni Connect students and two that were a mix of both. Six focus groups were carried out at each of the five schools and two at the college. The focus groups varied in size from four to eight students. In total, 164 students took part in the focus groups; 85 were male and 79 female (51.8% and 48.2% respectively). Eight of the focus groups were carried out online using Microsoft Teams and 24 were conducted in person, the method was dependent on the school's preference and the Covid-19 situation in each school at the time.

Programme lead interviews

Interviews with school and college leads took place either in person or online using Microsoft Teams, during June and July 2021. The aim of the interviews was to capture their views on how Phase 2 had gone, what they had learnt and what they would take forward from engaging with the programme, as well as how they felt about Phase 3.

Ethics

The evaluation received full ethical approval through the University of Lincoln.

Limitations of the evaluation

The evaluation team were unable to collect data of all types from any one school to use in order to triangulate datasets. The survey responses were lower and less distributed than anticipated, despite numerous efforts to boost the response rate. There was a large percentage of missing or invalid postcodes, especially amongst the student activity survey responses. Missing postcodes ranged from 17.0% to 56.3% depending on the activity. As noted previously, without a postcode it is not possible to identify if students are Uni Connect or non-Uni Connect. Covid-19 restrictions and disruption meant the evaluation team were unable to carry out focus groups in one of the schools as planned due to a last minute cancellation. Focus group participants were not always the students identified at the outset of focus group preparations due to the Covid-19 situation at the school on the day.

Uni Connect outreach activity was mainly delivered in the summer term due to the pandemic and the subsequent closure of schools to most students between January and March 2021. This followed disrupted delivery in the autumn term (September to December 2020) when most of the activity that did take place was delivered virtually. Consequently, there was little opportunity to assess the medium or long-term impact of outreach activity.

Key findings

The key findings from the evaluation are divided into three sections: those relating to the NERUPI outcomes, general findings and those that are Covid-19 specific.

NERUPI A - Develop students' knowledge and awareness of the benefits of Higher Education and graduate employment:

- The NatWest Challenge had a positive impact on students' understanding of different careers that different Higher Education courses might lead to, whilst the AirProducts Challenge did not achieve its desired outcome in terms of NERUPI A.
- The focus groups found that students in the older year groups (i.e. Years 11 to 13) were more likely to be aware of the benefits of further study. In addition, Uni Connect students were least likely to be aware of the benefits of Higher Education and graduate employment. However, students in the focus groups found campus visits – some of which would have been under the banner of First Steps – beneficial.

NERUPI B - Develop students' capacity to navigate Higher Education and graduate employment:

- More student activity surveys addressed this outcome than any other. Whilst Personal Statements had the most impact on all students in terms of how to write one successfully, both Uni Connect and non-Uni Connect pupils, the data is predominantly for Year 9 students who would have had no previous experience of writing, or knowledge of, personal statements. It was therefore not possible to assess the impact on older year groups.
- Most focus group students had given serious consideration to their future career paths, even in Year 9. However, issues of transition, from both GCSE to college or sixth form and then into university or the workplace, were key concerns for many focus group participants, both Uni Connect and non-Uni Connect alike. Overall, students would like more information, advice and guidance on their next steps as well as more opportunities to hear from those on college courses and from a wider range of careers.

NERUPI C - Develop students' confidence and resilience in Higher Education and graduate employment:

- Motivational Speakers and Marginal Gains both proved effective at addressing NERUPI C as evidenced in both the survey and focus group data. Marginal Gains had the biggest overall impact on self-motivation and recorded the highest score for student engagement of all activities surveyed.
- Focus group students, especially Uni Connect and those in the younger year groups (i.e. Years 9 and 10), reported a lack of confidence in their ability to pass exams and to make up the learning they had lost as a result of the disruption caused by the pandemic, as the two biggest challenges they faced to obtaining the grades required to be accepted onto their chosen course on leaving school.

NERUPI D - Develop students' skills and capacity for student and career success:

- Evidence from both the survey and focus group data shows that participating in category D activities helps students develop the skills they need to succeed. Study Skills / Revision workshops were particularly effective.
- Academic achievement, rather than family, financial or social considerations, was cited as the main difficulty focus group students faced to being able to study further and gain a Higher Education qualification.

NERUPI E - Develop understanding through contextualised subject knowledge and attainment raising:

- There is limited and conflicting survey data in relation to the impact of NERUPI E activities on students understanding through contextualised subject knowledge. However, to have meaningful impact, the timing of when these activities are delivered appears to be crucial and needs to be ahead of any subject-specific decision making, as evidenced in the focus group data.
- Older, non-Uni Connect students were the most informed about the training and courses they needed to take for them to pursue their chosen career.

General findings

- In general, whilst drawn from different student pools, the focus group data (qualitative) supported the survey data (quantitative).
- Evidence from the outcome survey suggests that students that had participated in more activities were more likely to agree with the relevant outcome question.
- There were differences at a school level in the responses to the outcome survey, with students at one or two schools consistently being most likely to agree with the outcome question. Similarly, at the other end of the scale, students from the same two or three schools were the least likely to agree, across all outcome questions.
- Students were more likely to feel they had improved in each of the six skills presented to them in the outcome survey (which included teamwork, communication and revision skills) if they had taken part in one or more activity. The exception was problem solving for non-Uni Connect students.
- Some activity surveys had a high proportion of postcodes either missing or invalid meaning that comparisons between Uni Connect and non-Uni Connect participants need to be treated with caution.
- It is not possible to draw conclusions in relation to impact and the different areas across Lincolnshire due to an uneven distribution of survey responses, for example, there were very few survey responses from schools in the city of Lincoln, even to Motivational Speakers, for which the most responses were received.
- For Uni Connect students, six activities had particular impact - Motivational Speakers, Study Skills / Revision workshops, Marginal Gains, Preparation for Further Education, Personal Statement workshops, and University of... In general, of the students that took part in the focus groups, across all year groups, Uni Connect students were less aspirational and less confident than their non-Uni Connect peers regardless of the outreach activities they had participated in.
- Generally, where an activity had a positive impact it was greater for female students than male students. Conversely when a negative impact was observed it was greater for male students than female students.
- As might be expected, students in the older year groups were more confident, aware and knowledgeable about further study and graduate employment opportunities, regardless of whether they were a Uni Connect or a non-Uni Connect student, than younger year groups. The school they attended was a bigger influencing factor than student type.
- Focus group students were largely unaware that the activities they had taken part in were delivered by LiNCHigher as part of the Uni Connect programme; impact was more indirect and relational to leadership and the Higher Education and aspirational culture that exists within a school or college.
- Some of the non-Uni Connect student focus group participants exhibited the characteristics of Uni Connect students, i.e. they were the first in their family to consider going to university.

This reflects the crude measure of using postcodes to identify students eligible for funding through the Uni Connect programme.

- The Uni Connect programme is most effectively delivered where there is a designated, full-time qualified member of staff, assigned to career development and aspiration raising, as evidenced by both the focus group and outcome survey data. Schools could learn much from the model used at one of the schools where they had a full-time member of staff responsible for careers and the Uni Connect programme with a job title that was more inspiring than simply careers advisor. The data showed that schools without sixth forms were more likely to focus on Years 9 to 11 students, opposed to those with sixth forms where the focus appeared to be on Years 11 to 13.
- Students that were the least engaged, aspirational and informed were from the smallest school which was also the school that had seen the most disruption during Phase 2 of the Uni Connect programme. The school that had experienced at least two changes of identity in terms of academy chains and new Headteachers. It also has the lowest Ofsted rating – inadequate – of all the focus group schools. In addition, due to its size, members of staff take on multiple duties with responsibility for ensuring the delivery of the Uni Connect programme in school forming a small part of the school lead's overall role. It could therefore be argued that the school faced the biggest challenges in terms of raising student aspirations and that this may not be a priority for a school in a state of flux.
- Programme leads valued being part of the Uni Connect programme with most reporting a cultural shift at the school to how further and Higher Education is perceived by both students and staff.
- Although parents play a key role in influencing and encouraging their young people in terms of their future career plans, schools continue to struggle to engage parents in the further and Higher Education discussion. Whilst schools do provide parents with information, both in written form and through open evenings, few, if any, engage with parents in a meaningful way. This is an area that requires further development.
- The specific benefits for schools of engaging with LiNCHigher included the funding, the opportunities it provided for networking with external organisations and the expertise and knowledge of the Area Engagement Officers.
- For the colleges, having a designated officer in place for the last two terms of Phase 2 proved extremely valuable and productive. The logistics of delivering activities to target students was the main challenge cited by college leads.
- In schools, the impact of the Uni Connect programme was mainly measured in terms of positive destination data with all schools, except one, reporting an increase in the number of students applying to go on to study at further or Higher Education.

Covid-19 specific findings

- Students preferred it when outreach activities were delivered in person rather than virtually. In-person activities appeared to have the greatest impact on students in all aspects of the NERUPI framework.
- All students, but especially Uni Connect students, struggled to access lessons during lockdowns and periods of self-isolation whilst learning remotely from home.
- Most students found remote learning less than satisfactory, even when they were able to access lessons online without any difficulty. Many became demotivated and struggled with not being able to ask their teachers for help and clarification if and when they needed to.
- Students preferred to be in school having face-to-face interaction with both their teachers and their peers. They also missed the routine of the school day.
- Some students reported they had lost confidence in their ability to pass exams following lost learning and lack of exam experience.

- The pandemic had a specific impact on Year 9 students when it came to choosing their GCSE options. Many found the remote nature of options and parent evenings, along with a lack of information on what specific subjects would cover, unsatisfactory.
- Many students mentioned poor mental health as a result of the disruption the pandemic caused to their education.
- Some positives did emerge from the disruption caused by the pandemic with some students, especially those in the older year groups, taking the opportunity it gave them to stop, think, and assess whether or not their career choices were the right ones for them.
- Programme leads felt more progress would have been made had it not been for the pandemic.

Recommendations for Phase 3

For schools and colleges

- Members of the Senior Leadership Team and teachers should undertake continued professional development to better understand the needs of students from underrepresented groups.
- All schools should consider appointing a full-time qualified member of staff designated to careers development with an appropriate aspirational title.
- Schools with sixth forms should consider having two career leads: one for Years 9 and 10 and one for Years 11 to 13.
- It would be beneficial for schools to provide additional career resources, workshops and activities, specifically for identified underrepresented students or for students with low aspirations, from Year 9 onwards.
- Careers leads and Senior Leadership Teams would benefit from engaging with other schools, both locally and county-wide, to enable the sharing of best practice.
- Parent Engagement – Engagement with parents can be challenging, and schools and colleges should seek ways to more effectively engage with parents, particularly those of children identified as having low aspirations. For example, looking at ways to have parents engage in certain activities relating to jobs/skills/careers i.e., careers fairs, information events, University and College campus tours.
- In colleges, the Uni Connect programme lead should sit in career development rather than marketing or widening participation.

For Schools, Colleges and LiNCHigher

- Deliver more activities that address NERUPI E, to develop students understanding through contextualised subject specific knowledge and attainment raising. These should also be delivered earlier.
- Ensure Goal Mapping workshops are delivered to students before they make subject-specific decisions e.g. choosing their options at GCSE and A-Level.
- Run Study Skills / Revision workshops earlier in the school year, ideally before mock exams, so that students can improve both their grades and exam confidence.
- Consider delivering the Personal Statement sessions in two parts at two different times. Part 1: 'How to prepare for a Personal Statement' session to be delivered in Year 9 or 10 to ensure students have time to secure potential content. Part 2: 'How to write a Personal Statement' session to be delivered to older year groups, ideally late spring / early summer, Year 12.
- Encourage more campus visits (when permitted) as these are highly valued by students and were the only activity that showed longer-term impact.

- Consider additional activities to address student concerns around key transition points in their educational and career journey.

For LiNCHigher and the Governance Board

- Conduct a full evaluation of the First / Next Steps programme. There has not been an independent evaluation of this high intensity targeted programme and, due to the pandemic, there was little opportunity to evaluate it in full during Phase 2.
- Encourage schools to carefully consider the timetabling of when outreach activities and workshops are delivered in school to maximise impact.
- Work more intensely with schools that have multiple challenges to raise student aspirations, build confidence and ensure they are better informed about further and Higher Education opportunities.
- Work with schools and colleges to reinforce the importance of collecting postcode data when evaluating activities and make it clear the school postcode should not be used in place of home postcodes.
- Include at least one female motivational speaker in the activities programme.
- Help schools to engage parents in an active and meaningful way, opening up a dialogue between parents and the school.
- For colleges, produce literature that is specific and distinct to that of schools.

For policymakers / funders / the Office for Students

- The impact of the pandemic, specifically lost learning, reduced student confidence and the lack of exam experience, especially amongst the current Year 12 and 13s (academic year 2021-22) needs to be taken into consideration when comparing the progress and achievement of these students with other cohorts both now and for the foreseeable future.
- Schools that have a high proportion of Uni Connect students should be given additional support as their students are more likely to have been adversely affected by the pandemic.
- Fund activities for whole year groups, rather than students living in specific postcode areas, to ensure the programme reaches as many disadvantaged students as possible.
- Continue programme funding for Years 9 to 13 throughout Phase 3 and expand to the younger year groups, e.g. Year 8, especially in light of the disruption caused by the pandemic.

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