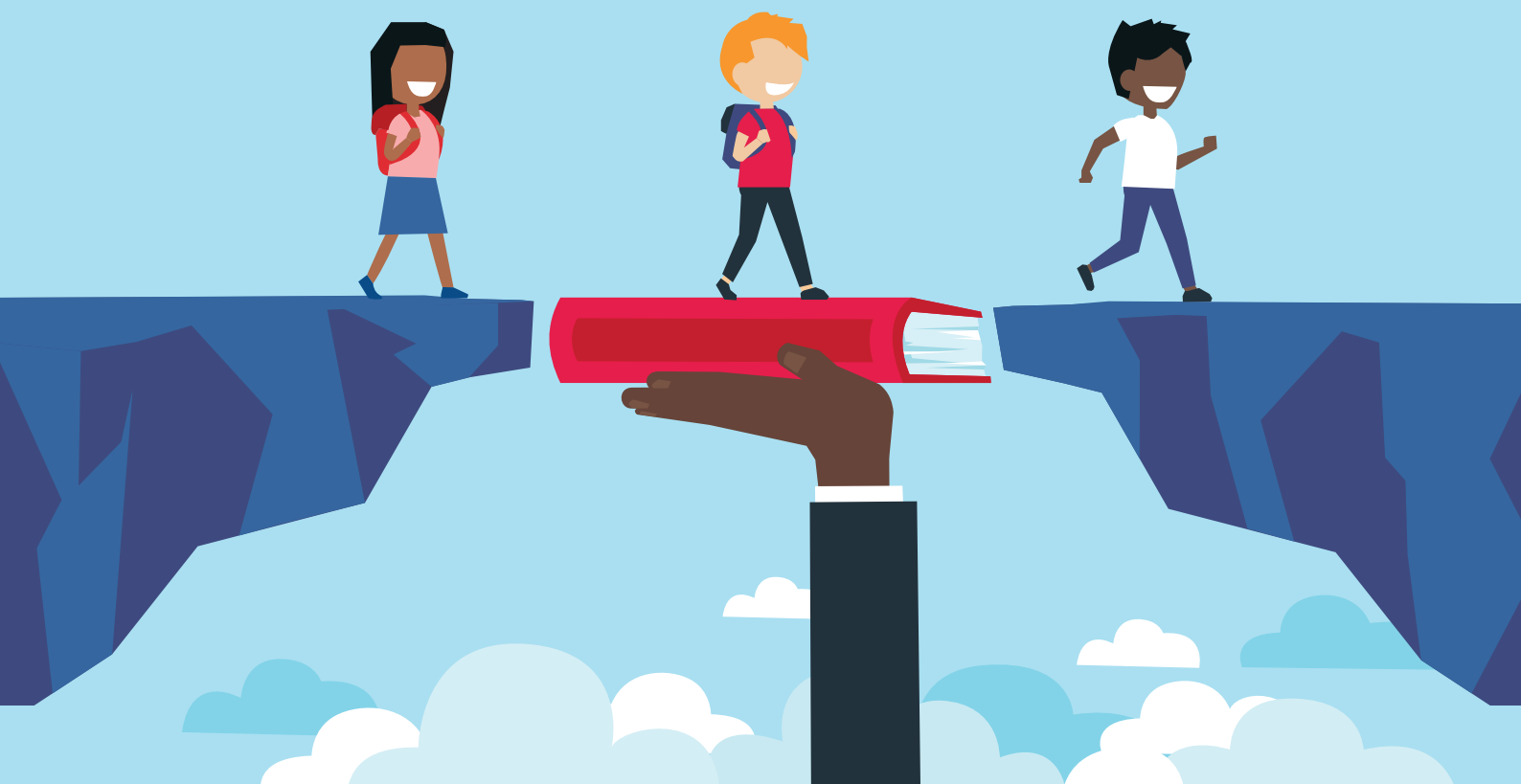


The outlook for Outreach

A survey of access and participation plans for 2020-21 to 2024-25

Dr Neil Raven



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Executive summary

Foreword from Professor Graeme Atherton, Director, National Education Opportunities Network (NEON)

The Access and Participation Plan system in England is genuinely world leading. I have undertaken research over the last 10 years looking at how policymakers across the world are addressing inequalities in access to higher education (HE) and few have anything as close to the rigour of APPs.

However, while they may be exemplary as a system of securing commitment to access and participation from HE providers this does not mean their existence alone is enough to widen access. This report shows that what the existing APPs contain may fall short of what is required.

It illustrates that alongside strategic commitment from HE providers, the resources to work with all groups of learners under-represented in HE from the earliest age possible are required. It also illustrates the crucial role that collaborative outreach initiatives play in the formation of a comprehensive policy approach to access and participation.

We are now in the 7th iteration of a national access to HE collaborative initiative in the last 20 years. It has been a continual fight for those who work close to learners, schools and colleges to convince policymakers of the value of collaborative mechanisms that enable outreach to happen.

A familiar pattern has emerged as resources are tapered down and then expertise thrown away before another initiative emerges tweaked to meet the priorities of the government of the time but whose fundamentals remain the same.

In the wake of the biggest shock to the education system since the second world war and a recognition of the importance of place in shaping life chances that is higher than for many years, there is an opportunity to avoid this wasteful cycle.

This report sits alongside the growing body of evidence pointing to the impact of the Uni Connect programme on progression to higher education. It illustrates that if the steady progress that has been made in widening access to HE over recent years is to be maintained then a national collaborative initiative and robust strategic plans from HE providers must co-exist.

As the national organisation for widening access to HE in the UK we at NEON know that one without the other risks jeopardising that progress. We welcome the opportunity to support this report.

Aims and objectives

This study explores how the higher education (HE) sector – and HE providers in particular – intend to address inequalities in access over the next five years. It does this by drawing on the evidence provided in access and participation plans (APPs). APPs are required to be submitted by all HE providers 'registered with the Office for Students' who intend to 'charge above the basic tuition fee cap (Office for Students [OfS], 2021a, n.p.).

However, individual institutional efforts to widen participation should be seen in the context of other government supported and regulator-monitored initiatives, noticeably the Uni Connect programme, previously known as NCOP. In this respect, the OfS's (2019, 27) guidance to those submitting APPs is to consider their engagement with collaborative activities, including their 'alignment with NCOP and outreach hubs'. Accordingly, this study pays particular attention to the coverage these plans give to the Uni Connect programme and the character of this coverage.

Methods and approach

Based on desk research, this study focuses on the access component of access and participation plans. In doing this, it adopts a two-staged approach:

- An initial survey of all approved plans (numbering 171) examines sector-wide spending intentions. This places access-associated expenditure in the context of all reported APP-related spending, and identifies trends in intended spending on access over the five years covered by these plans. It also examines spending allocations in relation to the principal reported components of access (pre 16, post-16, adult and the community, and other).
It should be noted that this element of the study draws on evidence provided by the OfS (2020a) in its analysis of spending plans.
- The second phase of the study involves a more detailed exploration of a representative sample of plans.
This encompasses institutions with approved APPs from each of England's nine regions. For each region, those sampled include a pre-92 and post-92 university, along with a Uni Connect lead institution and an FE college with HE provision. In total, the sample comprises 36 HE providers.
This more detailed, qualitative survey examines the student groups institutions intend to focus their outreach work on. To achieve this, it draws on the commentaries provided in each APP, with particular consideration given to discussion of the Uni Connect programme.

Key findings

1. Investment plans

Sector level

- An increase in all aspects of access spending is forecast over the period covered by the plans
- However, the rate of increased spending for all four elements of access flattens after 2022-23
- Should the Uni Connect programme not be renewed, this suggests access spending in its entirety (institutional and collaborative) will fall after 2022/23
- Total access spending is around two-thirds of that allocated to bursaries and scholarships
- Post-16 access spending exceeds that committed to pre-16 outreach activity. Spending on the former remains almost double that on the latter
- Post-16 access spending is set to grow faster than pre-16 spending, with the funding gap between the two opening up over the five years covered by the plans
- Comparatively small sums are assigned to 'adult and community' access, as well as 'other' access activities.

Survey sample

- The sector-level spending allocations and trends were replicated by the 36 surveyed providers
- However, differences in spending plans were evident between types of provider
- The post-92 universities sampled had committed a larger proportion of their access spending to pre-16 activities than the pre-92 institutions, and significantly more than the further education colleges (FECs) surveyed
- The FECs had allocated a larger proportion of funds to 'other', as well as 'adult and community access'.

2. Access targets

Overview

- The access target most frequently deployed across the sector and by the surveyed sample related to low participation neighbourhoods [LPNs]
- In both cases, other prominent targets included those concerning ethnicity and socio-economic background
- Some of the commentaries in the APPs from the surveyed sample discussed the alignment between LPNs and Uni Connect target wards
- However, evidence suggests that there are considerably fewer target wards than low participation neighbourhoods (often defined as POLAR quintile 1 and 2 wards)
- Whilst most target wards should be included in the outreach work of HE providers, it is possible that the loss of Uni Connect would not be compensated for by institutional provision, given Uni Connect's focus on a smaller number of districts which are likely to have been in receipt of a sustained programme of outreach from school year 9 onwards
- Amongst the surveyed sample, a larger number of access targets were set by pre-92 institutions than post-92 universities and FE colleges. This may reflect the greater priority – and identified need – to enhance access amongst pre-92 universities
- Whilst the OfS's review of APPs discusses the modest number of access targets for mature students, those with disabilities and from care backgrounds also appear to have attracted comparatively few access targets, both at sector level and amongst the surveyed sample.

Collaborative and pre-16 targets

- Collaborative targets accounted for 15.5 percent of all access targets across the sector
- A comparable figure was found amongst the surveyed sample
- However, only six of the 83 targets set by the surveyed sample involved Uni Connect collaborations. These were from four institutions
- Across the sector, comparatively few targets were set relating to pre-16 activity
- A similar pattern was evident amongst the surveyed sample, with only two targets addressing pre-16 attainment
- Yet, a number of the surveyed APPs acknowledged the importance of pre-16 outreach provision and highlighted their pre-16 work.

3. Qualitative survey of sampled APPs

Recognising and acknowledging NCOP

- All 36 surveyed APPs made some reference to Uni Connect
- A number described the outreach hubs that were being established at the time that plans were being prepared
- Some identified the agencies they would seek to work with via the new outreach hubs
- In a few instances, consideration was given to what these relationships could offer, including in supporting efforts to access the 'hardest to reach communities'.

The benefits for providers of engaging with NCOP

- A number of the surveyed APPs discussed the institutional benefits arising from engaging with their local Uni Connect partnership, including efficiency gains and knowledge sharing
- Some talked about drawing on Uni Connect evaluation expertise
- In a small number of instances commentaries went further than the OfS guidance. This included acknowledging the impact of Uni Connect on institutional practices, plans and strategies, and in drawing on Uni Connect evidence in formulating tactics for addressing institutional access targets.

Supporting NCOP

- Just over half of the surveyed sample discussed how they would support the delivery of collaborative activity
- In a number of cases, APPs outlined plans to build on current collaborative efforts
- In a few instances, references were made to supporting Uni Connect access objectives, whilst four providers identified collaborative Uni Connect-associated targets
- A small minority described how their activities complemented and supported those provided by the local Uni Connect partnership
- Two discussed using the Uni Connect infrastructure to share their 'evaluation methods, findings and insights' and 'what works' with the wider sector.

Sustaining NCOP

- Two of the surveyed APPs expressed an intention to sustain Uni Connect activities by incorporating them into their existing outreach offer
- Two other APPs pledged to maintain regional collaboration in widening access.

Summary

- Findings from the sample of surveyed APPs revealed considerable variations in the nature and extent of coverage given to the Uni Connect programme
- No obvious patterns to levels of coverage were discerned, either in terms of region or institutional type
- However, the findings suggest the potential to draw on instances of good practice in the coverage given to the programme, and for consortia to encourage HE partners to recognise and fully acknowledge the programme's institutional as well as regional contribution to addressing inequalities in HE access.

4. Reflections on the research design and future research

- Few insights are offered into the operational aspects of access and participation, which is perhaps where the contribution and impact of Uni Connect may be most readily witnessed
- The standardised structure and format of APPs may disadvantage some providers, including FECs, in what they are able to report
- As planning documents APPs are be unable to take account of unexpected events, such as the pandemic
- Yet, despite these limitations the findings from this study suggest the potential to learn more from this source. Notably, from the access targets and summary commentaries captured in Table 2a that is included in all plans
- A comprehensive survey of all approved APPs that draws on the evidence provided in Table 2a would either confirm (categorically) or qualify (with precision) this study's findings that comparatively few stated access targets relate to the Uni Connect programme, and that even fewer address pre-16, intermediate steps towards progression.

4.

Introduction

Arguably, the need to widen higher education access remains as pressing today as it has ever been. Indeed, recent trends, captured in data provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (Table 4.1), have been interpreted as representing 'modest' progress towards bridging the access gap (Office for Students, 2020b, n.p.). Given these challenges, this study seeks to explore how the HE sector – and HE providers in particular – intend to respond.

Table 4.1. Percentage of UK entrants to HE from low participation neighbourhoods, 2015-2019

Academic year	Percentage
2018/19	11.4
2017/18	11.3
2016/17	11.1
2015/16	11.1

Source: HESA, 2020.

Note: The figures are based on students who remain registered with an HE provider after the first 50 days of embarking on their studies.

To do this, analysis will be based on the data and commentaries contained in access and participation plans (APPs) addressing the academic years 2020-21 to 2024/25.

APPs are required to be submitted by all HE providers 'registered with the Office for Students' who intend to 'charge above the basic tuition fee cap'. They set out:

How higher education providers will improve equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups to access, succeed in and progress from higher education, and include a provider's ambition for change, what it plans to do to achieve that change, the targets it has set, [and] the investment it will make to deliver the plan (OfS, 2021a).

According to Chris Millward, the Director for Fair Access and Participation at the Office for Students (OfS, 2020b, n.p.), the current set of plans 'are more ambitious and credible than we have seen before' and, it is argued, 'will lead to a step change that will benefit students for years to come.'

In this study, particular attention will be directed towards the coverage these plans give to the Uni Connect programme and the character of this coverage.

5.

Methods and approach

This study will draw on evidence provided in APPs that address the academic years 2020-21 to 2024-25.

A higher education [HE] provider registered with the OfS – the independent regulator for higher education in England – who intends to charge undergraduate fees above the basic tuition fee cap is required to submit an APP. These detail how universities and colleges with higher education provision intend to support HE access, as well as progression and success, over the five years covered by the plan. Using desk research, the aim of this study is to conduct a systematic survey of APPs, which are available on the OfS's website (OfS, 2021a).

Whilst various studies have used APPs as a source of data, none have conducted a survey of the kind intended in this study for the most recently submitted plans. The OfS itself is not planning to produce a summary analysis for another year (correspondence with OfS, 12 October 2020). In particular, this study will focus on the access component of these documents. In doing so, it will adopt a two-staged approach:

- An initial survey of all approved plans (numbering 171 and based on those analysed by the OfS, 2020a) will examine sector-wide spending intentions.

This will place access-associated expenditure in the context of all reported APP-related spending, and identify any trends in intended spend on outreach over the five years covered by these plans. It will also examine spending allocations in relation to the principal reported components of access (pre-16, post-16, adult and community, and other).

- The second phase of this study will involve a more detailed exploration of a representative sample of plans.

This will encompass institutions with approved APPs from each of England's nine regions. For each region, those sampled will include a pre-92 and post-92 university, along with a Uni Connect lead institution and an FE college with HE provision. In total, the sample will comprise 36 HE providers.

This more detailed qualitative survey will examine the student groups institutions intend to focus their outreach work on. It will also draw on the commentaries provided in each APP, with particular consideration given to discussion of the Uni Connect programme.

Data sources and analysis

First phase of the study

For the initial quantitative component of the study, data will be used from the OfS (2020a) prepared 'workbook'. This was compiled in October 2019 and published in January 2020, and 'provides information about 2020-21 to 2024-25 investment in access, financial support and research and evaluation for providers with an approved access and participation plan.' The workbook contains a series of tables.

The principal one used for this study will be Table 1c. This provides a breakdown of total estimated 'access and participation investment' relating to the 171 providers with an approved APP at the time that the tables were compiled.

In presenting these figures by academic year, commencing with 2020-21 and running to 2024-25, it should be possible to consider spending trends and the comparative level of funding allocated to different aspects of access activity, as well as that associated with 'financial support'.

The quantitative section of this study will also draw upon data provided by the 36 surveyed institutions in their APPs. This will be from Table 4a, entitled 'Investment Summary', which details a provider's estimated access and participation' spending for the period covered by the plan, using the same format as that adopted by the OfS for its summary analysis.

Also utilised in this section will be information on each provider's access targets. This is contained in Table 2a, which identifies the target groups the provider has chosen to monitor its access activity against. In order to do this, Table 2a presents 'yearly milestones', having established a baseline figure with which to assess progress. It also provides a summary of its aims in relation to each target group, and identifies whether this is a collective or individual institutional target.

It should be noted that those target groups featured in Table 2a do not necessarily reflect all the under-represented groups providers will work with, or who they discuss in their APPs. Rather, they are the groups that their analysis of previous access performance has identified as requiring particular attention, potentially because they are especially under-represented or where less progress in closing the access gap has been made (OfS, 2020c).

An opening section in each APP describes the providers performance before identify the particular groups it will monitor its progress against. The findings from this part of the study will be compared with those presented in the OfS's (2020d) summary analysis of 2020-21 to 2024-25 access and participation plans.

Second phase of the study

The second phase of analysis will adopt a qualitative approach to examining the 36 sampled access and participation plans.

In particular, consideration will be given to the nature and extent of engagement with collaborative initiatives to enhance access, and especially to the Uni Connect scheme, which, at the time of their submission, was known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP).

In this respect, the OfS (2019 and 2020c) provides guidance for reporting on collaborative activity in APPs.

Based upon thematic analysis of the data, and informed by the OfS's guidance on addressing collaborative ventures, the analysis component for this section of the study draws upon a scale (comprising four levels) to determine the extent and nature of the collaborative activities being reported.

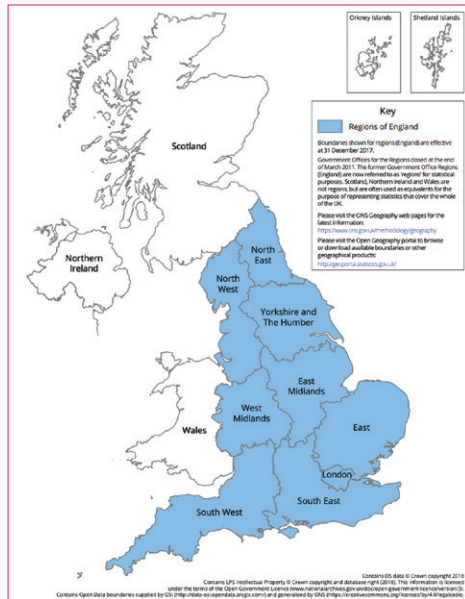
- The initial level concerns referencing Uni Connect and providing information on engagement (OfS, 2019, 45, and OfS, 2019, 29). This relates to the expectation expressed by the OfS (2019, 29) that 'information' will be included on a provider's engagement with OfS-funded programmes such as NCOP [and] outreach hubs'. It also aligns with the OfS's (2020d, 42) analysis that considered the percentage of APP plans that made reference to Uni Connect.
- The second level concerns recognising and reporting on the benefits arising from engagement. Whilst not an explicit recommendation, the OfS (2020c) guidance discusses gains likely to arise from cross-institutional cooperation in outreach.
- The third level relates to an institution's contribution to Uni Connect. In this respect, the OfS (2019, 50) encourages providers to outline how they 'support delivery of collaborative activity', 'use [the] local infrastructure of NCOP to deliver collaborative goals', and detail 'how [their] work [will] complement NCOP delivery', as well as how they will 'ensure under-represented groups not targeted through NCOP are not missed'.
- A fourth level of engagement concerns references to building on Uni Connect and commitments to sustaining regional collaborative ventures should this project finish.

6.

The sample

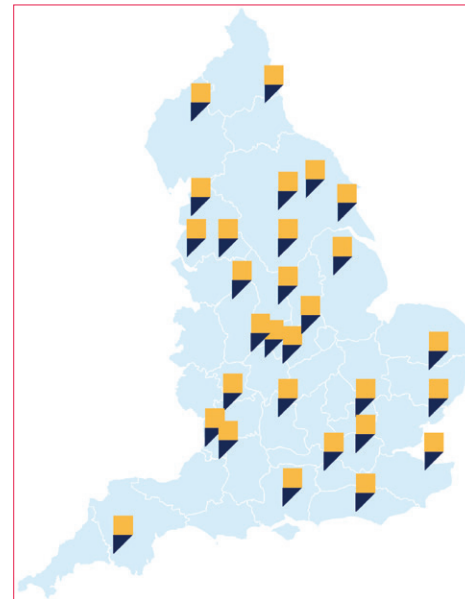
Having considered sector-wide trends in expected access and participation spending, as well as access targeting, the study will draw on a sample of the 171 HE providers who had approved APPs by the time of the OfS's study (2020d).

Figure 6.1. Regions of England



Source: Office for National Statistics. Regions of England 2017.

Figure 6.2. Uni Connect Partnerships



Source: OfS. 2021. How Uni Connect works.

To ensure a good level of geographical coverage, this sample will consist of institutions from each of the country's nine regions (Figure 6.1) and from nine different Uni Connect partnerships (Figure 6.2). For each of the nine regions and nine corresponding partnerships, the surveyed sample will comprise a pre-92 and post-92 university, along with a Uni Connect lead institution, and an FE college with HE provision.

To ensure their anonymity, the names of the providers in the surveyed sample have been replaced by a number, prefixed by a regional indicator, since it was considered useful to provide a sense of the study's geographical coverage.

The regional indicators comprise: SW for the South West, SE for the South East, LN for London, EN for Eastern England, WM and EM for the West and East Midlands respectively, YH for Yorkshire and Humberside, and NW and NE for the North West and North East.

Since four providers have been surveyed for each regions, the allocated numbers run from 1 to 4, with 1 assigned to consortium leads, 2 allocated to a pre-92 institution, 3 to a post-92 university, and 4 to an FE college.

However, it was not possible to apply this rule in the case of the East Midlands and Yorkshire and Humberside since the composition of partner HE providers did not enable the inclusion of either a pre-92 or a post-92 university, along with the lead HEI and an FE college.

Instead, for both regions two FE providers with HE provision were included (EM3 and 4, and YH 3 and 4).

7.

Investment plans

Overview

The OfS's (2020c, 34) guidance to providers on completing their APPs states that these 'must include an estimate of a provider's level of investment in addressing the gaps in access and participation for underrepresented groups.' 'This spend', it is added, 'must be disaggregated into access', which is to be 'categorised by pre-16 activity, post-16 activity, work with adults and communities' and, it can be added, 'other' access interventions, as well as 'financial support' and 'evaluation and research.'

It is also stipulated that 'the investment recorded must only relate to the work delivered to support underrepresented groups.'

More detailed guidance follows later in the same document (OfS, 2020c, 35). In terms of 'expenditure on access', it is noted that 'the OfS expects providers to include all expenditure on activities and measures that support the ambitions set out in an access and participation plan, where they relate to access to higher education.' However, the 'funding receive[d] from NCOP partnerships should', it is observed, 'not be counted in your access and participation plan investment' (OfS, 2019, 24).

Whilst limited guidance is offered on what constitutes 'adult and community' and 'other' access spending, reference in this regard is made to 'employers and employer groups, professional bodies and community groups' (OfS, 2020c, 30; OfS, 2019, 26).

Similar rules are described in terms of 'financial support for students' (OfS, 2020c, 36). 'Providers', it is stated, 'should only include investment on financial support directed at underrepresented and disadvantaged groups', and that is 'tightly targeted at these students and provided to address specific barriers known to exist for underrepresented groups.'

Providers were also requested to outline their 'estimated investment' in research and evaluation, which can 'include relevant staffing costs, the cost of gathering and analysing data, subscriptions to tracking services, and research projects.' These costings, it is noted, 'may record the cost of evaluating and researching all stages of the student lifecycle'.

Further information, including in relation to access spending, is provided in the OfS Regulatory Advice (2019, 22). 'Access investment', it is stated, 'specifically relates to work targeted to potential students, their families and communities before making choices about entry to higher education.' In particular, this includes 'outreach work with schools, young people, adults with no prior experience of higher education, communities and disabled people', as well as 'strategic relationships with schools'.

Sector wide plans

Table 7.1. reproduces Table 1c from the OfS's (2020a) workbook on 'investment information' from the 171 submitted and approved APPs. This includes the same access and financial support categories, as well as figures for 'research and evaluation', that appear in this workbook. Table 7.2. converts these totals into percentages, whilst adding a trend line that provides an indication of investment trends for each of these categories over the five year period covered by the projections.

Table 7.1. Estimated access and participation investment by type of spend (£m)

	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Total access activity investment	197.9	202.6	206.8	209.8	212.2
Access (pre-16)	60.5	61.9	63.1	63.8	64.5
Access (post-16)	107.8	110.5	113.0	115.0	116.3
Access (adults and the community)	19.2	19.5	19.9	20.1	20.2
Access (other)	10.4	10.6	10.8	11.0	11.1
Financial support	331.2	325.5	324.4	325.5	327.5
Bursaries and scholarships	287.6	281.7	280.1	281.3	283.0
Fee Waivers	11.7	11.2	11.3	10.8	10.9
Hardship funds	31.9	32.6	33.0	33.4	33.6
Research and evaluation	22.7	23.5	23.9	24.5	24.8
Total	551.8	551.6	555.1	559.8	564.5

Source: Based on OfS. 2020a. Table 1c: 2020-21 to 2024-25 access and participation plans, sector-level investment.

Table 7.2. Trends in estimated access and participation investment, by type of spend (percentage)

	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	Trend
Total access activity investment	35.86	36.73	37.25	37.48	37.59	
Access (pre-16)	10.96	11.22	11.37	11.40	11.43	
Access (post-16)	19.54	20.03	20.36	20.54	20.60	
Access (adults and the community)	3.48	3.54	3.58	3.59	3.58	
Access (other)	1.88	1.92	1.95	1.96	1.97	
Financial support	60.02	59.01	58.44	58.15	58.02	
Bursaries and scholarships	52.12	51.07	50.46	50.25	50.13	
Fee Waivers	2.12	2.03	2.04	1.93	1.93	
Hardship funds	5.78	5.91	5.94	5.97	5.95	
Research and evaluation	4.11	4.26	4.31	4.38	4.39	

Source: Based on OfS. 2020a. Table 1c: 2020-21 to 2024-25 access and participation plans, sector-level investment.

These figures, and the trend lines, depict a planned increase at sector-wide level in all aspects of access spending over the period covered by the plans. However, the rate of increased spending for all four elements of access flattens after 2022-23. Should the Uni Connect programme not be renewed, then this would suggest access spending in its entirety (institutional and collaborative) could fall after 2022/23.

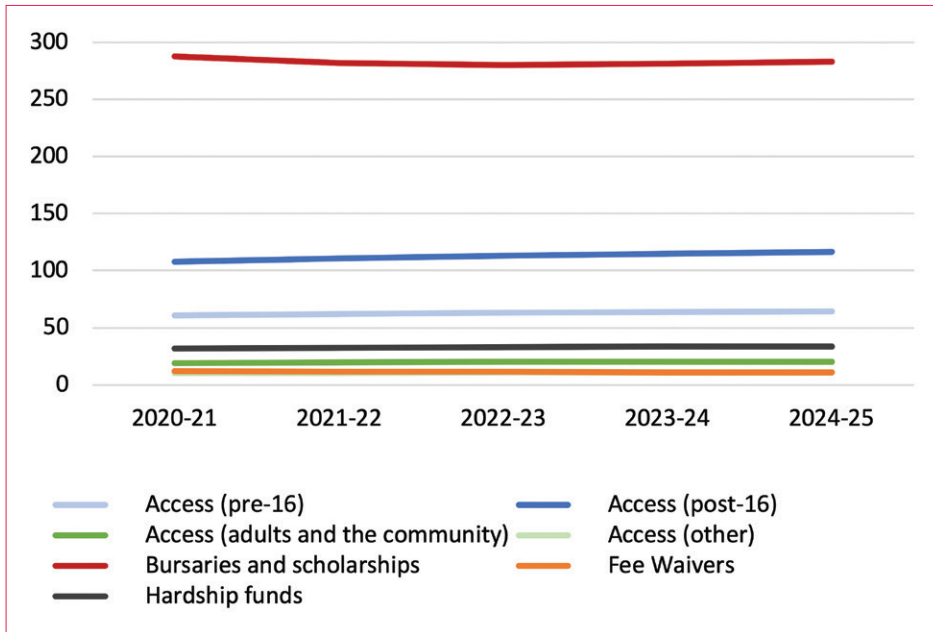
A number of the 36 APPs sampled express an awareness regarding uncertainty over the continuation of the Uni Connect programme. In this respect, the authors of one of the South West based providers remarks that 'this plan has been written at a time of uncertainty about the future of Uni Connect and the role of the outreach hub'.

Yet, projected access spending does not indicate an intention of providers to make up for the potential deficit and, with only a few exceptions, the accompanying commentaries do not address the possibility either.

The same investment projections suggest a reduction in overall financial support (relating to success), except for hardship funding, which, initially, increases before also plateauing from 2021-22.

Meanwhile, spending on research and evaluation is set to steadily increase throughout the period covered by the APPs.

Figure 7.1. Estimated investment in access and financial support (£m)



Source: Based on OfS. 2020a. Table 1c: 2020-21 to 2024-25 access and participation plans, sector-level investment.

Figure 7.1. presents the same investment data as a bar graph, with the aim of highlighting the comparative level of spending on each component of access and financial support. It also draws out the modest level of change in spending over the period covered by the APPs for each of these elements, with the relative positions remaining unchanged.

Looking in more detail, it can be seen that the proportion of estimated investment allocated to bursaries and scholarships far exceeds that assigned to access. Total access spending is around two-thirds that awarded to bursaries and scholarships. Moreover, post-16 access spending exceeds that committed to pre-16 outreach activity. Spending on the former remains almost double that on the latter.

Indeed, Figure 7.1, as well as Table 7.2, indicate that around 70 per cent of all APP planned investment is dedicated to post-16 access work, along with bursaries and scholarships.

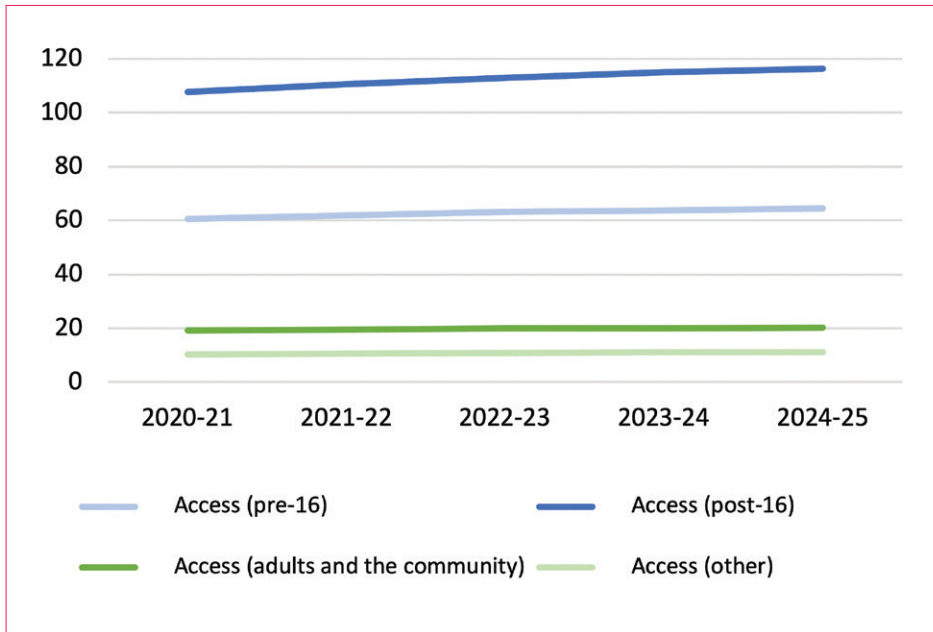
Figure 7.2. highlights the relative spending on each of the four reported components of access.

The significant proportion committed to post-16 activities is evident. It can be seen that this element is also set to grow more than pre-16 investment, with the spending gap between the two opening up over the five years covered by the plans (at the start of the period post-16 spending was 78 per cent more than that for pre-16 activity, at its close it was just over 80 per cent more).

Figure 7.2. also highlights the comparatively small sums assigned to 'adults and community' access, as well as 'other' access spending. Whilst post-16 access work can be of considerable significance in supporting HE progression from amongst traditionally under-represented groups, evidence suggests that, in many instances, decisions have already been made and trajectories set, and that pre-16 interventions can have a greater impact.

Indeed, this appears to be recognised in a number of the commentaries featured in the sample of surveyed APPs (see Chapter 9).

Figure 7.2. Estimated access investment by type of spend (£m)



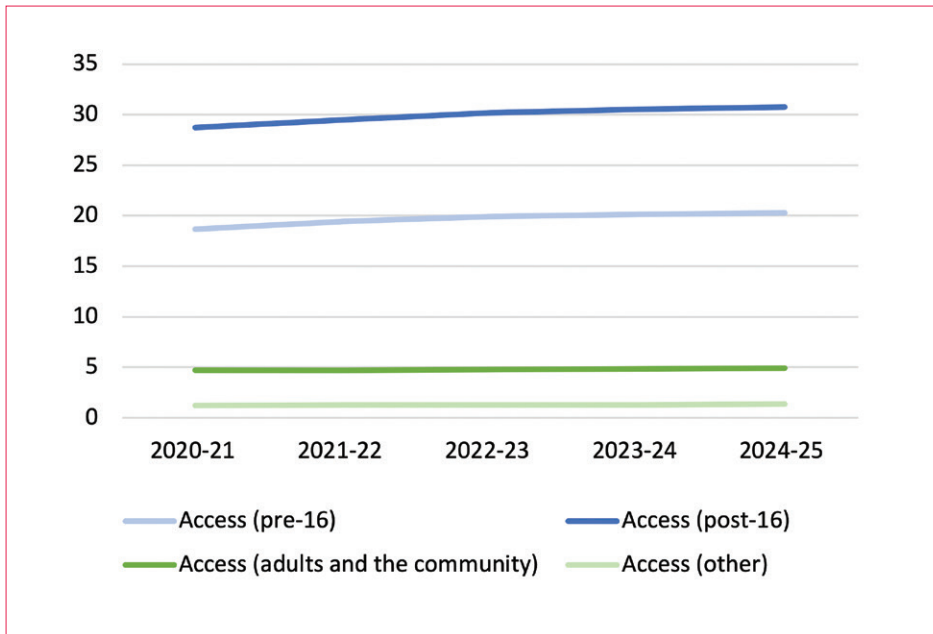
Source: OfS. 2020a. Table 1c: 2020-21 to 2024-25 access and participation plans, sector-level investment.

- An increase in all aspects of access spending is forecast over the period covered by the plans
- However, the rate of increased spending for all four elements of access flattens after 2022-23
- Should the Uni Connect programme not be renewed, this suggests access spending in its entirety (institutional and collaborative) will fall after 2022/23
- Total access spending is around two-thirds of that awarded to bursaries and scholarships
- Post-16 access spending exceeds that committed to pre-16 outreach activity. Spending on the former remains almost double that on the latter
- Post-16 access spending is set to grow faster than pre-16 spending, with the funding gap between the two opening up over the five years covered by the plans
- Comparatively small sums have been assigned to 'adult and community' access, as well as 'other' access spending.

Study sample

The same trends and comparative spending allocations were evident amongst the 36 surveyed providers, including in terms of anticipated access spending (see Figure 7.3).

Figure 7.3. Estimated access investment by type of spend (£m): survey sample



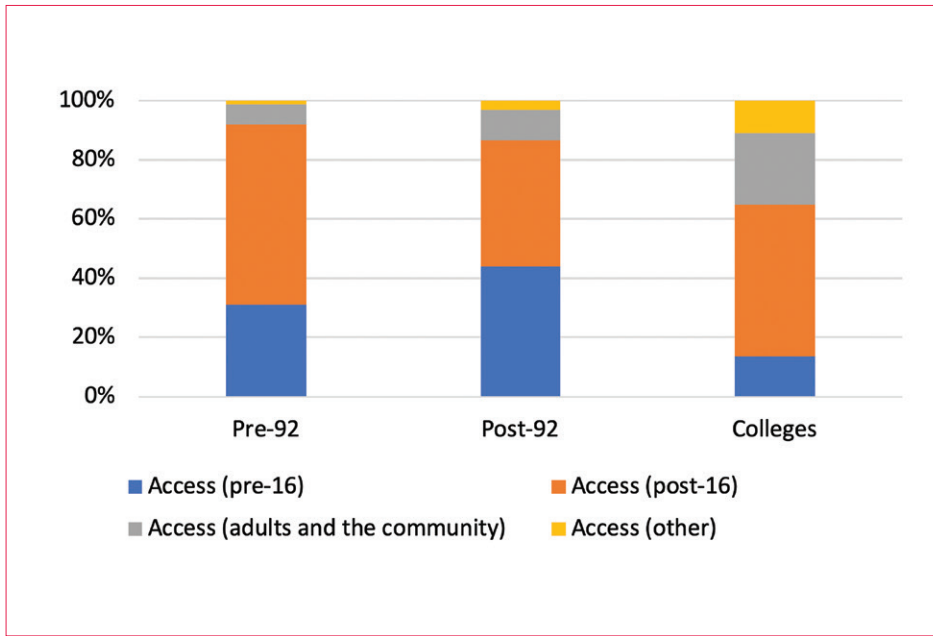
Source: OfS. 2021a, 'Table 4a - Investment summary', Access and Participation Plans.

Whilst not captured in Figure 7.3., financial support – comprising bursaries and, to a rather lesser extent, fee waivers and hardship funding – accounted for over 55 per cent of all estimated spending (including that allocated to research and evaluation). This pattern of expected spending was consistent with that found across the wider sector.

However, a more noticeable variation concerned the proportion assigned to pre-16 access amongst the surveyed sample. Whilst still significantly less, pre-16 spending was around two-thirds of that allocated to post-16 investment, compared with just over half for the wider sector.

The modest sample size may explain some of this variation. It would only require a small number of providers to adopt a distinct spending profile to influence the overall totals. A more detailed look at the APPs of the 36 institutions featured lends support to the explanation (see Figure 7.4).

Figure 7.4. Access investment by type of provider (percentage of estimated total spend, 2020/21-2024/25)



Source: OfS. 2021a, 'Table 4a - Investment summary', Access and Participation Plans.

Figure 7.4. also suggests a difference in spending plans between types of provider. As outlined in the discussion on the study's sampling strategy (Chapter 6), the 36 comprised three broad types of institution: pre-92 and post-92 universities, along FE colleges (FECs).

As illustrated in Figure 7.4., on average the 14 post-92 universities committed a larger proportion of their access spending to pre-16 activities than the 11 pre-92 institutions, and significantly more than the 11 FECs. A look at individual investment projections confirms this, with five of the six providers who were planning to spend 30 percent more on pre-16 access than post-16 being post-92 universities, with only one pre-92 institution adopting the same broad strategy.

Disaggregating access spending projections in this way also highlights the commitment amongst the FECs sampled to allocate a larger proportion of funds to 'other' as well as 'adult and community' access. This focus may reflect their greater orientation towards professional and employer associated provision.

In this respect, the commentary in the APP for one of the sampled colleges talks about an emphasis on 'up-skill[ing the] existing workforce', along with a pledge to 'continue to network with community groups'.

- The sector-level spending allocations and trends were replicated by the 36 surveyed providers
- However, differences in spending plans were evident between types of provider
- The post-92 universities sampled had committed a larger proportion of their access spending to pre-16 activities than the pre-92 institutions, and significantly more than the FECs surveyed
- The FECs had allocated a comparatively larger proportion of funds to 'other' as well as 'adult and community' access.

8.

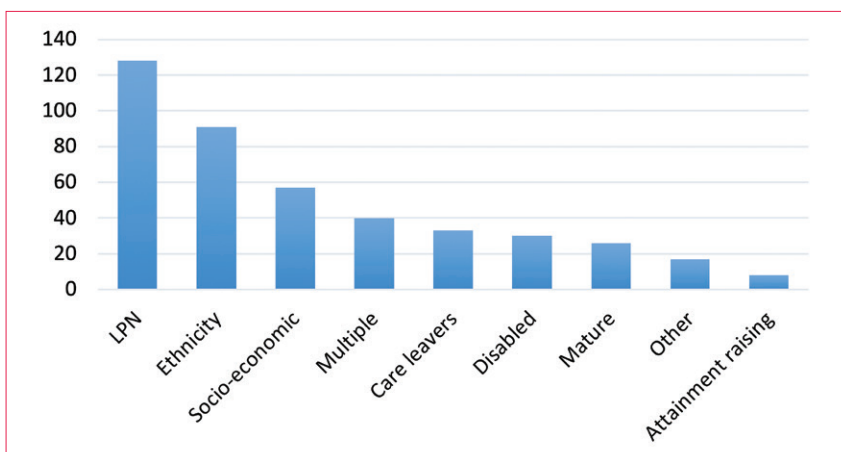
Access targets

Overview

This chapter considers the access targets that providers identified in their APPs. In this respect, the OfS's (2019, 6, 13) guidance states that an 'access and participation plan must clearly set out [a provider's] strategic aims and objectives for addressing the gaps in access and participation which reflect the areas for development identified [in the provider's] assessment of [their] performance'.

More specifically, the OfS's (2019, 14) expectation is that these 'aims and objectives [will] summarise [a provider's] target groups', and be 'reflected' in 'specific and measurable targets set over the five years of the plan. They should', it is added, 'cover those areas where [a provider has] identified the biggest gaps where [they] can have the greatest impact' (OfS, 2019, 14). Some initial sector-wide analysis of access and participation targets was conducted by the OfS (2020c, 20). This found that 'of the 1,389 targets included in plans, 430 were related to access'. The composition of these access targets by under-represented groups is presented in Figure 8.1.

Figure 8.1. Number of access targets by under-represented group: sector wide



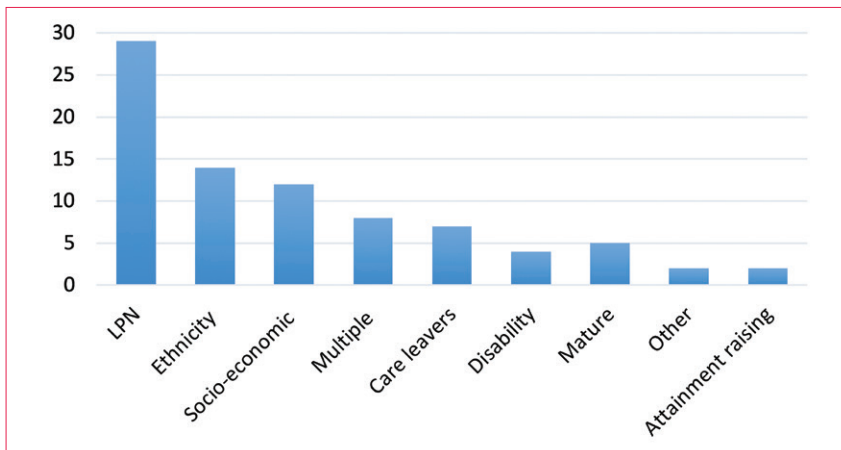
Source: Based on data from OfS (2020d, 20). Specifically, 'Figure 1. Number of numerical targets included in 2020-21 to 2024-25 access and participation plans, by underrepresented group and lifecycle stage.'

The most frequently deployed target (used 128 times) related to low participation neighbourhoods (LPNs). This measure accounted for almost 30 per cent of all stated access targets. Other prominent targets included those relating to ethnicity (91), socio-economic background (57), care leavers (33) and disability (30). In addition, 29 targets described multiple measures of under-representation (including white, economically disadvantaged males). A further 26 were concerned with mature learners, whilst eight were aimed raising attainment.

A very similar range and pattern of occurrence is found amongst the 36 surveyed providers, as illustrated in Figure 8.2. Here, LPNs also predominated, accounting for 29 of the 83 identified (34.9 per cent) targets, followed by ethnicity and socio-economic background – the latter linked to IMD quintile 1 areas and, in some instances, extending to encompass quintile 2 areas as well.

The more detailed analysis afforded by this surveyed sample reveals that those targets categorised as 'other' typically included measures associated with state schools, whilst 'multiple targets' included those relating to Realising Opportunities, as well as intersectional ones concerned with disability and ethnicity, and disability and part-time study, as well as males from low participation neighbourhoods (defined as POLAR4 quintile 1 areas).

Figure 8.2. Number of access targets by under-represented group: survey sample



Source: OfS, 2021a, 'Table 2a - Access', Access and Participation Plans.

The prevalence of LPN targets may, in part, be explained by the OfS's guidance (2019, 25), which 'strongly encourages providers to use POLAR4 when setting targets.' The rationale offered is that it constitutes 'a robust and widely used measure of underrepresentation in higher education.'

However, the same guidance also notes that 'where providers have clear evidence that POLAR4 does not reliably reflect disadvantage in their specific location or context, they may choose to use an additional measure of disadvantage, such as the English Index of Multiple Deprivation.'

Some of the commentaries in the APPs from the surveyed sample discuss the alignment between LPNs and Uni Connect target wards. All target wards feature amongst those neighbourhoods falling into POLAR quintile (Q) 1.

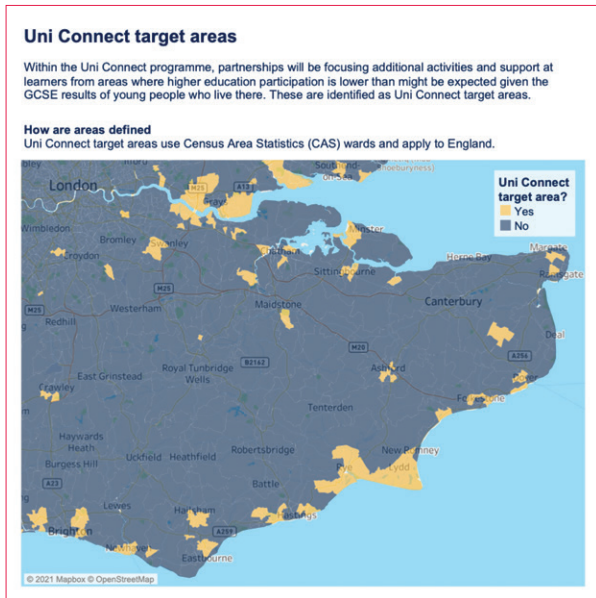
However, the Uni Connect programme uses the POLAR3 classification rather than the more recent iteration. Target wards are also required to meet a further criterion, which is of returning lower than expected levels of young participation, considering Key Stage 4 attainment (Q1 or Q2 of that area based measure of progression. OfS, 2021b). Consequently, there are considerably fewer target wards (at 997) than low participation neighbourhoods (OfS, 2021b), which in some of the case study APPs are identified as Q1 areas whilst in others Q2 districts are also counted.

Because of the use of different iterations of the POLAR scheme, coupled with POLAR being a UK-wide measure rather than one based on English districts, it is not possible to make any direct comparison between the relative numbers.

However, a calculation for this study, based on POLAR3 (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2012 and 2017) and an estimation on the number of local areas found in England, suggests that there are more than 1,100 POLAR Q1 neighbourhoods and more than 2,500 when Q2 areas are added.

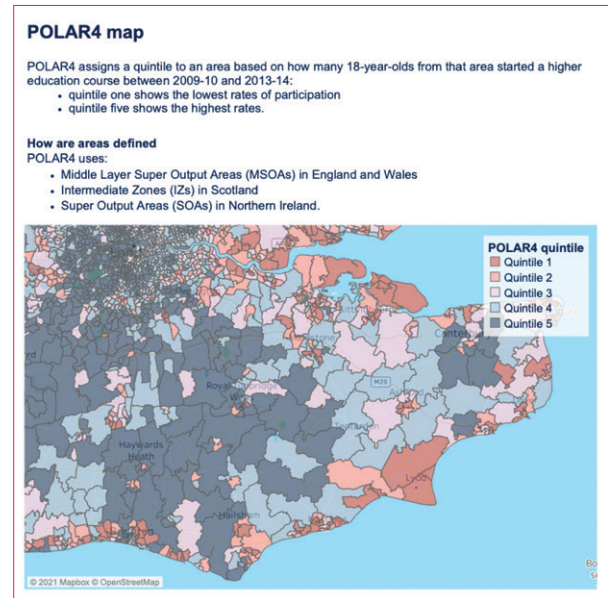
Whatever the exact figures, the difference between the two measures (POLAR and Uni Connect target wards), in terms of their coverage can be illustrated in Figures 8.3 and 8.4. This enables a comparison to be made between the Uni Connect target areas for Kent and SE London and a POLAR4 map of the same region, which highlights the distribution of quintiles, including those described as (Q1 and Q2) low participation neighbourhoods.

Figure 8.3. Distribution of Uni Connect target areas



Source: OfS. 2021c. Young participation by area.

Figure 8.4. Distribution of POLAR 4 quintile areas



Source: OfS. 2021c. Young participation by area.

Whilst most target wards should, consequently, be included in the outreach work of HE providers, it is possible that the loss of Uni Connect might not be compensated for by institutional provision, given the former's focus on a smaller number of neighbourhoods and which includes, in many instances, the provision of a sustained programme of outreach from school year 9 onwards.

As already seen in the spending figures (and will be discussed later in this study), institutional outreach appears to place a greater emphasis on post-16 activity.

Mature students

One particular under-represented group the OfS's (2020c, 10 and 16) analysis of APP targets considered to have been neglected were mature students. These, it is argued, 'have not been prioritised by many providers, despite low and decreasing proportions of such students in their own populations and the sector more broadly.'

Across the sector, 26 access targets relating to mature students were recorded. A similarly small number was returned by the surveyed sample, as shown in Table 8.1.

Table 8.1. Distribution of access targets by type of provider: survey sample

Group	Pre-92	Post-92	Colleges	Total
LPN	18	4	7	29
Ethnicity	4	9	1	14
Socio-economic	2	7	3	12
Multiple	5	3	0	8
Care leavers	4	2	1	7
Mature	3	1	1	5
Disability	1	2	1	4
Attainment raising	1	1	0	2
Other	2	0	0	2
Total	40	29	14	83

Source: Based on OfS. 2021a, 'Table 2a - Access', Access and Participation Plans.

Numbers of access targets set by different types of provider

Table 8.1. also highlights the larger number of access targets set by the 11 pre-92 institutions (40), representing over 48 per cent of all access targets identified in the survey group, and averaging 3.6 targets per provider. The comparable figure for post-92 institutions was just over 2 per provider, whilst for colleges it was 1.3. This, it can be suggested, may reflect the greater priority – and identified need – to improve access amongst pre-92 universities.

However, across all three types of provider those with disabilities and care leavers also appear to have attracted comparatively few access targets, whilst only two relate to pre-16 outreach, concerned with attainment raising (see the next section for a more detailed discussion). It can also be noted that the post-92 institutions featured appear to favour socio-economic measures of under-representation to those based on levels of local HE participation.

- The access target most frequently deployed across the sector and by the surveyed sample related to LPNs
- In both cases, other prominent targets included those concerning ethnicity and socio-economic background
- Some of the commentaries in the APPs from the surveyed sample discuss the alignment between LPNs and Uni Connect target wards.
- However, evidence suggests that there are considerably fewer target wards than LPNs (often defined as POLAR quintile 1 and 2 wards)
- Whilst most target wards should be included in the outreach work of HE providers, it is possible that the loss of Uni Connect will not be compensated for by institutional provision, given Uni Connect's focus on a smaller number of districts which are likely to have been in receipt of a sustained programme of outreach from school year 9 onwards
- Amongst the surveyed sample, a larger number of access targets were set by pre-92 institutions than post-92 universities and FE colleges. This may reflect the greater priority – and identified need – to enhance access amongst pre-92 universities
- Whilst the OfS's review of APPs discusses the modest number of access targets for mature students, those with disabilities and from care backgrounds also appear to have attracted comparatively few access targets, both at sector level and amongst the surveyed sample.

Collaborative targets

The OfS (2019, 16) guidance discusses the use of collaborative targets. Indeed, it 'encourage[s] collaborative targets being set in partnership with other providers to address national, regional and local priorities'. These include 'targets for collaborative activity' that are 'supported by the NCOP infrastructure' (OfS, 2019, 49) and, 'from 2021 onwards, [the] OfS-funded outreach hubs (OfS, 2019, 26). Similarly, providers are urged to consider how their targets 'could align with and support NCOP partnership activity in their locality' (OfS, 2019, 16).

The OfS's (2020c, 41) survey of APPs identifies '67 collaborative access targets', representing 15.5 percent of all access targets. Whilst these include 'shared targets related to access to high-tariff universities' and 'regional care leaver targets', they also comprise 'access targets in collaboration with schools' (OfS, 2020c, 42). The analysis does not go into any further detail in terms of those associated with Uni Connect. However, this was possible with the sample of surveyed APPs. Twelve collaborative targets were recorded amongst this group of providers out of a total 83 targets, representing a similar allocation (14.5 per cent) to that of the wider sector. These were identified where a provider indicated 'yes' to the 'collaborative target' question asked in Table 2a, which featured towards the end of each submitted APP. Six of these involved Uni Connect collaborations and were from four institutions.

In addition, another two – both from the same institution – were not described as collaborative but were based on learners resident in 'Uni Connect target wards', whilst two others – from another institution – were linked to LPN but were considered to 'align' with the Uni Connect collaborative work this institution led on. Given, as will be detailed in the next section, that all sampled providers referenced Uni Connect and described their engagement with the programme, coupled the OfS's encouragement to include collaborative targets, this, it can be suggested, represents a modest set of figures.

In contrast, four institutions declared collaborative targets in relation to the Realising Opportunities scheme. Yet, this programme was only referenced in the accompanying APP commentaries by six of the surveyed institutions.

Pre-16 targets

Whilst the OfS's (2020d) review of APPs discusses the comparative neglect of mature students in access targets, Figure 8.1. identifies that only eight were directed towards attainment raising. A similar pattern was evident amongst the surveyed sample, as depicted in Figure 8.2 and detailed in Table 8.1.

Indeed, only two out of the 83 targets addressed attainment. One of these concerned raising 'attainment 8 and progression 8 score[s] of students from underrepresented backgrounds accessing [this provider's outreach] programmes'. The other was seeking a '10 per cent improvement in results for GCSE science questions post intervention', and which would be 'measured using [a] randomised control trial' (with both study groups receiving the intervention but at different times. See Anon, 2021).

Despite the low numbers returned by the sector and surveyed sample, the OfS's guidance discusses the inclusion of attainment raising targets on a number of occasions. In its Regulatory Advice (OfS, 2019, 30-31) reference is made to access initiatives, 'and therefore outcomes', that encompass 'prior attainment activities'. Similarly, amongst the 'effective approaches' identified later in the same document (OfS, 2019, 45) are those concerned with 'deliver[ing] activity that supports pupil attainment in schools'.

Likewise, under the subject of targets, the OfS's (2020, 22) subsequent Regulatory notice discusses the opportunity for APPs to include 'outcomes-focused targets relat[ing] to raising attainment in schools and colleges'. In addition, the same guidance asks providers to consider 'outcomes-focused targets related to sustained engagement with pre-16 students', although none of the plans surveyed included these either.

This said, a number of the sampled APPs do acknowledge the importance of pre-16 outreach provision. One draws attention to 'analysis [that] suggests most of the socio-economic gap in HE participation in England can be explained by the fact that poorer students have lower levels of attainment at GCSE and Key Stage 5'.

Another describes how their 'pre-16 activity recognises the importance of supporting schools and their students at key points in their secondary education. This', it is added, 'can help to raise aspirations and awareness of higher education opportunities, and support teachers and students to select and achieve the appropriate subjects/qualifications for ongoing progression.'

In referencing their own 'internal evaluations', a third APP discusses how 'behaviours and attitudes toward education generally, and higher education specifically, have shifted positively as a result of extended pre-16 work.' A number of APPs also highlight their pre-16 work, including in addressing 'pupil attainment' and in providing an 'intensive' pre-16 'programme' that includes 'mentoring' and 'residential'. Yet, targets associated with such activity remain largely overlooked.

- Collaborative targets accounted for 15.5 percent of all access targets across the sector
- A comparable figure was found amongst the surveyed sample
- However, only six of the 83 targets set by the surveyed sample involved Uni Connect collaborations and were from four institutions
- Across the sector, comparatively few targets were set relating to pre-16 activity
- A similar pattern was evident amongst the surveyed sample, with only two targets addressing pre-16 attainment
- Yet, a number of the surveyed APPs acknowledged the importance of pre-16 outreach provision and highlighted their pre-16 work.

9.

APP commentaries

Overview

In its Regulatory Advice on preparing access and participation plans the OfS's states that providers 'should include clear information on the collaborative partnerships [they] have in place, or that are in development, and the organisations and networks with which [they] have formal collaborations' (OfS, 2019, 45). In this context, reference is made to Uni Connect.

'Providers involved in Uni Connect should ensure that the work of their Uni Connect partnerships is embedded in their wider access and participation strategy' (OfS, 2019, 49-50). Indeed, it is asserted that providers 'must' report in their access and participation plans on how:

- 'They will support the delivery of collaborative activity through the local infrastructure of the Uni Connect, if appropriate'
- 'They will utilise the local infrastructure of Uni Connect to deliver [their] collaborative goals, if appropriate'
- 'The work delivered through Uni Connect will complement the work being delivered through [their] access and participation plans'
- 'They will ensure underrepresented groups in need of support are not missed, such as geographical areas and age ranges not targeted through Uni Connect activities.'

Informed by this guidance, and the thematic analysis conducted on the commentaries contained in the sample of surveyed APPs, a scale has been developed to describe the nature and extent of institutional participation with Uni Connect.

As outlined in Chapter 5, the initial level concerns referencing the programme and providing information on engagement. The second level relates to recognising and reporting on the benefits arising from involvement, whilst the third concerns a provider's contribution to – and support of – the programme. The fourth level addresses institutional commitment to building on Uni Connect and sustaining regional collaborations in HE access.

1. Recognising and acknowledging NCOP

All 36 surveyed APPs made some reference to Uni Connect. In doing so, these findings align with those from OfS's analysis of APPs. This found that 'over 80 per cent of plans included reference to the National Collaborative Outreach Programme' (OfS, 2020d, 42).

Included amongst the 36 sampled APPs were broad statements about working with the programme. These included references to having a 'good working history of collaboration' with the local Uni Connect (SE4), and of being 'part of the [Uni Connect] project, [which] focuses on promoting participation within the higher education sector' across the region (EN4). A number also described their institutions as 'active' partners (LN4, EM2), which in one case included being a 'founding partner' (EN3).

Looking ahead, some also expressed a commitment to continuing to engage with Uni Connect. Moreover, all nine lead institutions in the sample identified themselves in this role. In some cases, they outlined what this remit entailed, including in 'driving collaboration, both strategically and operationally' (SW1).

In addition, a number discussed the outreach hubs that were being established at the time that plans were being prepared. This included an intention to 'contribute actively to the new outreach hub' (SW2), whilst reference was also made to the opportunities for collaboration with other regional stakeholders that would be facilitated by the establishment of hubs.

A number went a little further in identify these agencies, with some evident collaboration between local providers over the associated wording in their plans. In this respect, three of the providers in the South West described how 'the Uni Connect outreach hub expansion in Phase 2 will facilitate relationship-building with a broader range of regional stakeholders, employers and third sector organisations' (SW1, SW3 and SW4). Similarly, two from the North West described their intention to work with 'the county council, local enterprise partnership, employers and third sector organisations' (NW2, NW3).

It can be noted that these ambitions are consistent with the purpose of outreach hubs as described by OfS (2021b), and which comprise 'provid[ing] a platform for collaborative activity [by] engag[ing] strategically with local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, employers and others'. Moreover, the references made by those from the research sample were consistent with the findings from OfS's (2020d, 42) survey of APPs.

This described how 'many [plans] included details of work which will be taking place as part of the outreach hubs being developed within the[ir] partnerships', and which, it was added, will 'help teachers and advisors find out about outreach activity in their area, support schools and colleges in areas of low participation to access higher education outreach, and provide a platform for other local collaborative activity' (OfS, 2020d, 12).

However, in a few instances, the statements made by the surveyed sample went into more detail by discussing what these relationships could offer. For two providers, both from the East Midlands, this included drawing on new partners to support efforts to 'access' the 'hardest to reach communities'.

- All 36 surveyed APPs made some reference to Uni Connect
- A number discussed the outreach hubs that were being established at the time that plans were being prepared
- Some identified the agencies they would seek to work with
- In a few instances, consideration was given to what these relationships could offer, including in supporting efforts to access the 'hardest to reach communities'.

2. The benefits for providers of engaging with Uni Connect

A number of the surveyed APPs discussed the institutional gains from engaging with their local Uni Connect partnerships. In observing that the consortium's 'provision for target groups complements' their 'broader outreach work', one provider talked about the benefits of collaboration, including in 'avoiding duplication', 'enabling specialisation' (presumably in the outreach offer) as a consequence of drawing on a wider pool of providers, and in allowing 'a broader representation of partners at a larger number of events'.

In addition, it was noted that the 'pooling [of] resources', enables 'partners to make best use of resources for targeting under-represented groups' (SW3). Similarly, another provider from a different region discussed how Uni Connect facilitated 'collaborative working in [their] local area has a beneficial impact on participants, reduces cross-over between institutions and supports value for money' (SE2).

Again, it can be noted that these assessment are consistent with the gains discussed in OfS's (2019, 16) guidance. Collaborative activity, it is noted, 'can deliver significant benefits in terms of increased coverage and co-ordination, and [in] avoiding duplication.'

Knowledge sharing

In addition to efficiency gains, a number of the surveyed APPs identified the knowledge sharing benefits arising from collaborative working. For one provider this included 'learning from the experiences' of a variety of other regional partners (SW2).

Whilst for another provider collaboration had facilitated the 'develop[ment of] a shared understanding of [the] local participation context, including specific barriers, challenges and enablers' (SW3).

Elsewhere, reference was made to a regional Uni Connect project that 'sought to understand barriers to higher education among students living in local quintile 1 areas' (SE2). Such observations, it can be noted, align the findings from the 'formative evaluation' of Uni Connect, which was also reported by OfS (2020d, 42) in its review of APPs. This found that the programme had 'improved knowledge sharing'.

NCOP expertise

Some APPs talked about drawing on Uni Connect evaluation expertise. One outlined how the effectiveness of Uni Connect interventions in closing the gap in access at their institution 'will be monitored and evaluated through the robust Uni Connect monitoring and evaluation strategy' (YH4). Another talked about how 'evaluation from our local Uni Connect [has] highlight[ed] the key role played by parents in influencing decisions around HE progression'. Consequently, it was added, 'we are working to increase opportunities for parental engagement across our partnership schools and colleges' (SW4).

A further APP discussed learning from their Uni Connect's 'focus on engaging and listening to previously silenced voices, including those of young people and parents, with a view to critically considering what pupils and parents [can] tell us about what needs doing'.

Such insights, it was added, are 'vital to developing understanding and inform[ing] responses to why young people do not go to university, rather than simply seeking to encourage them to do so' (SE1). Similarly, two other APPs, both from providers based in the same region, discussed how 'evidence' from their 'Uni Connect activity shows that increased engagement leads to increased HE participation' (WM2 and WM1).

Again, these findings are consistent with the benefits discussed in OfS's (2019, 16) guidance. 'Working collaboratively', providers are informed, 'enables you to employ expertise which may not be available' within your institution, and 'can support you in the design, delivery and evaluation of interventions.'

Influencing outreach plans

However, in a small number instances commentaries went further than the OfS guidance, or the findings from the regulator's summary review of APPs, in acknowledging the impact of Uni Connect on institutional practices, plans and strategies.

One provider talked about 'using datasets provided by [their Uni Connect] to inform effective outreach plans' (SE4).

Another discussed utilising 'the practical experience of evaluating outreach' gained from their Uni Connect in developing a new evaluation strategy for [the university's] access and participation programme' (SW1).

A third described how the local consortium's 'evaluation specialists' had provided support with 'our development of an overarching theory of change to underpin all of our access and participation activity.' Indeed, it was added that their work with the local Uni Connect had 'helped to embed a culture of evaluation within' the institution.

This included recognising the need to 'provide explicit identification of which barriers to HE' particular interventions should address, as well as to the use of specific, measurable and achievable targets, 'rigorous evaluation of impact', and a focus on 'outcomes-based evidence' (SW4).

Informing access targets

In addition, a few APPs discussed drawing on Uni Connect evidence in formulating tactics for addressing institutional access targets. One surveyed provider talked about utilising the 'innovative approaches and new understandings' derived from their local Uni Connect to inform how they will 'engage' and facilitate the HE progression of 'learners' from POLAR quintiles 1 and 2 (SE1).

Another referenced the research findings from a study commissioned by a number of North West based Uni Connect consortia as 'underpinning evidence' for their access aim of 'increas[ing] the intake of young male students from POLAR4 Q1' areas (NW3). Whilst OfS's (2020d, 42) review of APPs has less to say on Uni Connect's influence on institutional access plans and strategies, mention is made to consortia facilitating 'innovative approaches to outreach'.

Finally, amongst the surveyed APPs one reference was made to utilising the Uni Connect infrastructure to support institutional access objectives. In this respect, it is noted that 'the local Uni Connect wards' include areas that also 'fall within IMD deciles 1 and 2', which related to one of the provider's target groups. 'Therefore', it is observed, these 'prospective students will have access to the full range of widening participation initiatives offered by the' partnership (YH4).

- A number of the surveyed APPs discussed the institutional benefits arising from engaging with their local Uni Connect partnership, including efficiency gains and knowledge sharing
- Some talked about drawing on Uni Connect evaluation expertise
- In a small number of instances commentaries went further than the OfS guidance. This included acknowledging the impact of Uni Connect on institutional practices, plans and strategies, and in drawing on Uni Connect evidence in formulating tactics for addressing institutional access targets.

3. Supporting Uni Connect

Collaborative interventions

Whilst all surveyed APPs recognised and acknowledged engagement with Uni Connect, just over half discussed how they would support the delivery of collaborative activity. The statements presented by two West Midlands based institutions also suggest a high degree of collaboration in formulating their responses.

Both talked about working 'collaboratively with cohorts of 11-16' year olds, and of this activity being 'tailored to the needs of learners but typically involve[ing] mentoring from undergraduates and other role models, residential opportunities, and a range of activities to address aspirations, awareness, attainment, access and application' (WM1 and WM3).

In a number of other instances references were made to plans to build on current collaborative efforts. They included developing new 'pre-entry support for looked after children' (WM3), and working on 'a collaborative project which will be specifically targeting young people in care and care leavers' (YH2).

Elsewhere, mention was made to 'a new parent ambassador project, where parents are HE ambassadors within their communities' (EN3), and to 'building on the relationships [facilitated] through Uni Connect to develop a collaborative programme to address the shortfall' in access amongst Black and Asian student, which, it was noted, 'is a feature of our regional demographics' (SW1).

Uni Connect objectives

In a few cases mention was made to supporting Uni Connect access objectives. In the APPs submitted by two North West based providers this involved working in partnership with the local consortium 'to increase the number of care-experienced [and] disabled students, [as well as] older learners living in low participation neighbourhoods to progress to higher education (NW1 and NW2).

Another APP discussed aligning institutional activities with the collaborative objective shared by their Uni Connect. This concerned 'increas[ing] the overall participation rate from the [region], regardless of quintile, to HE in general' (NE1).

Collaborative access targets

As outlined in the earlier quantitative analysis, four providers included collaborative, Uni Connect associated targets in Table 2a of their APP submissions. One of these objectives was to 'increase access from quintile 1 [neighbourhoods], which was declared as a collaborative target supported by the local Uni Connect partnership (WM4).

A second concerned 'increas[ing] the percentage of mature students recruited', which would be achieved through an Uni Connect funded project (EM4), whilst a third aimed at 'reduc[ing] the gap in participation' associated with 'young males from POLAR4 Q1' areas and which would be achieved in 'collaboration with Uni Connect' and the local 'outreach hub' (NW3). The fourth APP to reference Uni Connect associated targets recorded three of them. These related to increasing 'the proportion of BAME students' progressing to HE, along with those from IMD quintiles 1 and 2, and care leavers.

All three objectives, it was noted, would be achieved through 'collaborative outreach work with' the Uni Connect consortium this provider led (EM1).

Complementing Uni Connect delivery

A small minority of the surveyed APPs described how their activities complemented and supported those provided by the local Uni Connect partnership. One of the FECs in the surveyed sample talked about a 'local outreach worker' being based at their institution, which, it was added, 'ensures that activity delivered by the college', including a 'programme of open days and school visits', is complementary to that [provided by] Uni Connect' (YH3).

Similarly, the APPs from two West Midlands providers both stated the intention of ensuring their outreach activities 'complement any activity funded by the OfS, such as the Uni Connect' (WM3 and WM1).

Inclusion of under-represented groups not targeted through NCOP and sharing findings with the wider sector

Elsewhere, one APP described 'dovetail[ing] our support [for] schools whose catchment areas cover low-participation wards' with interventions delivered by Uni Connect (SW4). The example was then offered of 'providing taster sessions for year 8 students before they come into scope of Uni Connect activity', as well as 'focusing our post-16 workshops and tasters on areas' the local consortium 'do not cover, to ensure there is no duplication of support.'

Two other providers discussed using the Uni Connect infrastructure to share their 'evaluation methods, findings and insights' and 'what works' with the wider sector (NE1 and NE3).

- Just over half of the surveyed sample discussed how they would support the delivery of collaborative activity
- In a number of cases, APPs outlined plans to build on current collaborative efforts
- In a few instances, references were made to supporting Uni Connect access objectives, whilst four providers identified collaborative Uni Connect-associated targets
- A small minority described how their activities complemented and supported those provided by the local Uni Connect partnership
- Two discussed using the Uni Connect infrastructure to share their 'evaluation methods, findings and insights' and 'what works' with the wider sector.

4. Sustaining Uni Connect

In looking ahead, two APPs – both from providers based in Eastern England – discussed how they intended to sustain Uni Connect activity. For one, this would involve embedding the collective 'outreach activity we currently undertake within our existing HE and IAG structures', should Uni Connect finish in July 2021 (EN4).

The other expressed a commitment to 'the continuation of the project beyond 2021' by ensuring 'funding is utilised to embed impactful [Uni Connect] work into the [institution's] outreach team and continue the development and running of the outreach hub' (EN2).

Two other APPs, again from providers in the same region but this time the South West, pledged to maintain regional collaboration in access. The first talked about being 'well placed to continue providing robust support' in POLAR4 quintile 1 areas, which, in many cases, 'overlap' with target wards, 'when Uni Connect ends' (SW4).

The second talked about how they had 'considered' ways in which 'we can use our expertise and resources to support' regional access and continue to play a 'role within the region which is sustainable, given the likelihood that initiatives [like Uni Connect] may not be in place for [the] period covered by this plan' (SW4).

- Two of the surveyed APPs discussed an intention to sustain Uni Connect activities by incorporating them in their existing outreach offer
- Two other APPs pledged to maintaining regional collaboration in access.

Summary

Whilst all of the providers in the surveyed sampled referenced Uni Connect, and most identified themselves as active members of their local consortium, there were considerable variations in the nature and extent of coverage given to the programme. This may, in part, reflect the fact that at least some of the guidance issued by the OfS in regard to Uni Connect reporting took the form of recommendations and options, with terms such as 'may' report and should address 'if appropriate' being used.

There is perhaps also a perception that APPs are primarily concerned with an institution's own performance and that providers will be judged accordingly.

However, whilst discussion of Uni Connect was in many APPs rather limited, in some instances coverage was more detailed, including in recognising the institutional gains arising from engagement in the programme. Moreover, a few APPs acknowledging Uni Connect's positive impact on their own practices and approaches, even strategies and perspectives.

Likewise, some detailed the role they played in supporting collaborative outreach, with a few identifying collective targets. Similarly, a small number expressed an intention to continue to abide by the principles of regional collaboration, and, in some instances, to support the infrastructure associated with the programme.

Although no obvious patterns to levels of coverage emerge, either in terms of region or institutional type, these findings suggest the potential to draw on instances of good practice in the coverage given to the programme. And perhaps also for consortia to encourage their HE partners to recognise and better acknowledge the programme's institutional as well as regional contribution to addressing inequalities in HE access.

- Findings from the sample of surveyed APPs reveals considerable variations in the nature and extent of coverage given to the Uni Connect programme
- No obvious patterns to levels of coverage were discerned, either in terms of region or institutional type
- However, the findings suggest the potential to draw on instances of good practice in the coverage given to the programme, and for consortia to encourage HE partners to recognise and fully acknowledge the programme's institutional as well as regional contribution to addressing inequalities in HE access.

10.

Conclusions and reflections

10.1. Conclusions

This study explores how the HE sector – and HE providers in particular – intend to address inequalities in access during the period 2020/21 to 2024/25. It does this by drawing on the evidence provided in access and participation plans. However, individual institutional efforts to widen participation should be seen in the context of other government supported and regulator-monitored initiatives, noticeably the Uni Connect programme. Accordingly, the OfS's (2019, 27) guidance to those submitting APPs is to consider their engagement with collaborative activities, including their 'alignment with Uni Connect and outreach hubs'.

This investigation was based on desk-research and a mixed methods approach. It began by considering the broad investment and targeting plans of the 171 HE institutions with approved APPs (at the time of OfS's own analysis of spending forecasts), before exploring in more detail the same forecasts for a selection of 36 providers. This sample included pre-92 and post-92 universities, as well as FE colleges, from nine different Uni Connect consortia. To ensure a sample that would be geographically representative, each consortia was based in one of England's nine regions. The second part of the investigation considered the commentaries that accompanied the APPs submitted by the sample of surveyed providers.

In many ways – and as would be expected – the investment trends and access targets identified in the analysis of all approved APPs were replicated amongst the 36 comprising the surveyed sample. Funding in all four aspects of access showed an initial increase before plateauing after 2022/23. However, equally noticeable were the varying amounts forecast to be 'invested' into these different strands of access, with post-16 activities receiving the largest proportion, which was almost double that committed to pre-16 work and far more than that set to be allocated to community and adult access.

Whilst focusing on those nearer to university entry – in terms of age and stage – may be understandable, it does raise some concerns, given that pre-16 work is generally considered to have a greater impact. And something that was acknowledged in the commentaries included in some of the surveyed APPs. Moreover, the same spending projections do not appear to acknowledge – or compensate for – the potential cessation of the Uni Connect programme. Yet, analysis of the surveyed sample of APPs shows an awareness of this possibility.

The access targets, for both the wider sector and survey sample, also present a mixed picture. The range of under-represented groups being targeted is significant. Moreover, there is some reference amongst the surveyed sample to matching institutional access coverage with Uni Connect, noticeably in terms of alignment between low participation neighbourhoods and target wards. However, there was awareness in some of the APPs that the overlap would not be perfect, whilst the larger number of LPNs (defined, in many instances, as POLAR quintile 1 and 2 wards), coupled with the greater investment in post-16 activity, suggests the sustained programme of progressive interventions associated with Uni Connect may not be retained should the programme close.

In addition, whilst OfS's initial analysis of APPs drew attention to the comparatively small number of access targets addressing mature students, the number of collaborative targets – both nationally and amongst the surveyed sample – was even smaller. Indeed, the analysis of those submitted by the surveyed sample identified only six out of a total of 83 targets that were associated with Uni Connect. Similarly, only two targets related to pre-16 objectives, despite OfS's guidance encouraging the inclusion of these. A small number of pre-16 targets was also evident in OfS's analysis of all approved APPs.

A similarly varied picture emerged from the qualitative analysis. In terms of acknowledging the programme, all 36 APPs in the surveyed sample referenced Uni Connect, including in working with their local consortium and being active partners. Most also discussed the outreach hubs and how they would facilitate cross-sector relationship building. Some identified the partners they hoped to engage with, which, in most instances, was consistent with the suggestions made in OfS's guidance. A few went further, in talking about what the new partnerships forged through outreach hubs could achieve in terms of accessing groups that had previously proved hard to reach.

A number went on to discuss the benefits arising from engaging with Uni Connect. This included efficiency gains, in addition to knowledge sharing and the development of a mutual understanding of the challenges and enables to progression. Some also discussed drawing on Uni Connect staff expertise, including that associated with evaluation. In doing so, these findings reiterate those from OfS's own studies (OfS, 2019 and 2020d)

on the benefits of collaboration. However, the accounts in a small number of the APPs surveyed went further. These talked about the new insights offered, of learning from research findings, and attributing NCOP to informing and influencing their wider access plans. In sum, these particular APPs were recognising – and articulating – the programme's strategic and even cultural impact on their institutions.

As guided by the OfS, just over half the APPs surveyed described how their institutions contributed to the programme. This included supporting the delivery of collective activity and contributing to shared objectives. A few, as noted, also identified that they were working towards collaborative access targets associated with Uni Connect. A similar minority discussed how their activities complemented those delivered by their Uni Connect partnership, although few details were provided into how and in what ways institutional activities aligned with and augment those of Uni Connect. Finally, in their commentaries four APPs ventured beyond the remit of the guidance to describe their intention to sustain collaborative regional outreach if and when Uni Connect draws to a close.

In summary, this more detailed examination identifies that in their APPs some providers were aware and prepared to acknowledge the work, role and impact of the Uni Connect programme but this was not the case with all. Nor did there seem to be any patterns in terms of Uni Connect coverage, either by region, consortium, or provider type. The variations in coverage that are revealed is, it can be suggested, of concern in terms of evidencing the true impact of Uni Connect. However, it can also be argued that the same findings indicate the potential to draw on instances of good practice in the programme's coverage, and for consortia to encourage their partner HE providers to recognise and fully acknowledge the programme's institutional as well as regional contribution to addressing inequalities in HE access.

10.2. Reflections

Data source

In reviewing the findings of this study there is a need to recognise the limitations of APPs as a data source and what may be deduced from them. As institution-wide plans they have a broad, strategic focus. Indeed, OfS's (2020e) guidance is for them not to exceed 20 pages in length. Consequently, they provide few insights into the operational aspects of access and participation, which is perhaps where the contribution and impact of Uni Connect may be most readily witnessed.

Moreover, as Baldwin (2021, n.p.) discusses, the standardised structure and format of APPs may favour some providers and disadvantage others in what they are able to report. Here, reference is made to colleges struggling to provide the necessary data 'because they have far fewer students and, consequently, there is often insufficient data to populate' the specified categories.

And to encountering access - and participation - challenges that can be 'quite different to those faced by universities but still hav[ing] to use the same template', and 'still hav[ing] to describe their strategic aims and objectives' as they relate to HE. Although', it is added, 'this provision is entangled with FE provision, as is the monitoring and evaluation of the targets.'

Beyond this – and as plans – APPs are based on forecasts and, as Martin (2014) argues in regard to strategic planning more generally, force their authors 'to confront a future they can only guess at', whilst also requiring them to make 'decisions that explicitly cut off possibilities and options.'

In this respect – and understandably – none of the APPs submitted anticipated the pandemic which, a growing body of evidence suggests, has had an especially detrimental impact on the very individuals these plans are aimed at supporting (Raven, 2020, Booth, 2020, Carr, 2020, Montacute, 2020, Robinson, 2020, Speck, 2020).

Arguably, under these unprecedented circumstances APPs will need to be reviewed and revised. And, to a degree, this has been recognised by OfS (2020f) in a 'letter to providers' requesting information concerning 'additional student groups requiring support, new priorities in respect of those groups, [and] strategic measures needed to support them', as well as any 'new objectives and targets'.

Similarly, as one of the surveyed APPs noted, these plans were being requested at a time when future funding for the Uni Connect programme remained uncertain.

Research design and future research

Finally, there is a need to recognise the limitations of the approach adopted for this investigation. Basing in-depth analysis on a sample of submitted APPs represents a methodologically viable strategy. However, there is potential to learn more, especially in relation to what might be viewed as the pivotal access targets and summary commentaries captured in Table 2a of each submitted plan.

A comprehensive survey drawing on the evidence provided in this table by all approved APPs would help to confirm (categorically) or qualify (with precision) this study's findings that comparatively few targets relate to the Uni Connect programme, and even fewer address the intermediate (pre-16) steps towards progression.

- Few insights are offered into the operational aspects of access and participation, which is perhaps where the contribution and impact of Uni Connect may be most readily witnessed
- The standardised structure and format of APPs may disadvantage some providers, including FECs, in what they are able to report
- As planning documents they are be unable to take account of unexpected events, such as the pandemic
- Yet, despite these limitations the findings from this study suggest the potential to learn more from this source. Notably, from the access targets and summary commentaries captured in Table 2a and that is included in all plans
- A comprehensive survey of all approved plans that draws on the evidence provided in Table 2a would either confirm (categorically) or qualify (with precision) this study's findings that comparatively few targets relate to the Uni Connect programme, and even fewer address pre-16, intermediate steps towards progression.

11.

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