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NERUPI *network*

Evaluating & Researching University
Participation Interventions

NERUPI Uni Connect partnerships:

**Collaborative research
to explore experiences of
outreach during the pandemic**

Final Report

March 2022

NERUPI Uni Connect partnerships: Collaborative research to explore experiences of outreach during the pandemic

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I. Introduction

This report examines qualitative research into young people's attitudes to their future education prospects and their experience of higher education outreach since 2020. The focus is on Year 10 and post-16 students in the Uni Connect target group. The aims of this research were:

- to explore the post-16/18 choices and perspectives of Uni Connect target groups;
- to assess what role and benefits Uni Connect delivery has had in different contexts on participants future prospects and attitudes to progression to higher education,
- to consider the implications of COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions/changes on any other local and individual factors that may have influenced these;
- to provide insights on future interventions to benefit target learners in Year 10 and Year 12/13 from and support positive progression routes including higher education.

I.1 Background to this project

Uni Connect was originally set up to support and encourage pupils living in areas of England with relatively low levels of higher education participation than would be expected given the prevalent GCSE attainment levels, as shown in an analysis of 'Gaps in young participation into higher education' (HEFCE, 2017). Higher Education Institutions applied for funding from HEFCE (now the Office for Students) to form consortia to deliver outreach activity. Working closely with schools and colleges, area specific programmes were designed to encourage and support young people into further and higher education. This national programme is now in its third phase with its original aims being modified to focus not only on the most disadvantaged wards but to have a broader emphasis to include adults and additional discrete groups such as care experienced and disabled learners from 2021 (OfS, 2021).¹

A key objective of Uni Connect is to develop local approaches which target local participation gaps. Whilst the local contexts and models vary the partnerships share common features including:

- A focus on activities designed to support progression to further and higher education. Consortia aim to develop participants' knowledge of further and higher education study and their capacity to navigate the system, as well as supporting informed decision making around future options. In addition, activities are offered to develop expertise and understanding in a subject area and boost attainment. Students living in wards with low levels of higher education progression relative to the levels of educational achievement are the key target group, and the pattern of delivery is guided by the 'Explaining the Gaps' analysis, to ensure the activity programmes are designed to support the needs of the Uni Connect students. The delivery structures are designed to target resources to those in the schools and colleges who can benefit most.
- Patterns of delivery are based on a Progression Framework approach. Participation by individuals is intended to be on a sustained and progressive basis. This is reflective of national evaluation about the importance of sustained and progressive interventions and the significantly lower impact of one-off activities. LiNCHigher for example reports working with more students 2+ times in an academic year than in Phase I.
- Focus across educational sectors. Further education students are prioritised alongside those in schools. For example, the Uni Connect partners included have identified links with college partners including employing staff in colleges as well as schools whose remit is to work with internal target learners on a sustained basis. FutureHY for instance has seven Outreach Assistant roles based in local colleges and the WIN has Higher Education Advisers in their colleges.
- Targeted and bespoke strands of activity. In addition to work across mainstream schools and colleges initiatives to support specific groups of Uni Connect students are delivered. For example, LiNCHigher, FutureHY, and WIN have a relatively high proportion of learners from a service family background in their catchment areas. This has resulted in targeted initiatives to support service children and their families to progress within education and make informed decisions on their future, some of which is on a cross area basis (Creative Forces days). A relatively high

¹ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/a-new-approach-to-the-uni-connect-programme-from-2021-22-to-2024-25/>

number of learners of Eastern European heritage with English as an Additional Language (EAL) is also a feature of some areas (e.g. parts of LiNCHigher). In addition, there is targeted support for Gypsy, Romany and Traveller (GRT) (e.g. activities in FutureHY areas with GRT learners and an English and Maths Hub, resource support, and campus visits as part of the LiNCHigher programme).

- Work with Stakeholders and Influencers. In addition to activities with young people themselves, the partnerships also support work with stakeholders and influencers. This includes CPD opportunities for teachers (for example LiNCHigher provides financial bursaries for schools to train staff to be Level 3 qualified careers information and advice qualified professionals; FutureHY have supported schools to obtain the Quality in Careers standard). Efforts are also made to engage parents and carers (examples here include parent and carer specific events and activities in the community).

A number of Uni Connect consortia use the framework developed by the Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Intervention (NERUPI) as the basis for planning and evaluating their programmes. The NERUPI framework draws largely on the theoretical work of Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1986²; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992³) and provides a basis for designing and evaluating programmes and activities to develop student cultural capital and habitus, and foster agency and a sense of belonging in higher education settings. The framework sets out a set of learning outcomes organised under six overarching aims:

- Develop students' capacity to navigate higher education and graduate employment sectors and make informed choices.
- Develop students' confidence and resilience to negotiate the challenge of university life and graduate progression
- Develop students' knowledge and awareness of the benefits of higher education and graduate employment
- Develop students' study skills and capacity for academic attainment and successful graduate progression
- Develop students' understanding by contextualising subject knowledge
- Develop students' understanding by contextualising subject knowledge and supporting attainment raising.

While the link to the subject knowledge and study skills aspects of the Framework remain important, Uni Connect programmes tend to focus mainly on three of the NERUPI aims related to social and academic capital and habitus/student identities (developing students' knowledge and awareness of the benefits of higher education and graduate employment; developing students' capacity to navigate higher education and graduate employment sectors and make informed choices; and developing student confidence and resilience to negotiate the challenge of university life and graduate progression).

1.2 Implications of COVID-19

Schools and colleges in England closed in response to the pandemic in March 2020 with in-person teaching only offered for children of key workers and children considered vulnerable. With most children remaining at home, teaching took place online, GCSE and A Level exams were cancelled, and the government announced that grades were to be based on predicted grades and teacher assessment. Partial reopening of schools for Years 10 and 12 began in June 2020 and continued to September 2020. With the spread of a new COVID 19 variant in December 2020, schools switched to remote learning again from January 2021. Secondary schools began to open again in March 2021, however, social distancing measures were enforced such as year and class group 'bubbles' along with weekly testing and other protective measures including restrictions on external visitors to schools. From July 2021 the government announced that 'bubbles' could end for all children under 18 and that social distancing would no longer be necessary, although schools could continue with existing arrangements until the end of term if they wished.

The COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions meant that, as well as participation in mainstream education being disrupted, most Uni Connect outreach delivery and evaluation could not go ahead as planned after March 2020. In addition, anecdotal and research evidence indicated that the pandemic was affecting young peoples' thoughts and feelings about their educational experience and future prospects. In order to deliver their programmes Uni Connect

² <https://www.socialcapitalgateway.org/sites/socialcapitalgateway.org/files/data/paper/2016/10/18/rbasicsbourdieu1986-theformsofcapital.pdf>

³ <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/canadian-journal-of-law-and-society-la-revue-canadienne-droit-et-societe/article/abs/an-invitation-to-reflexive-sociology-pierre-bourdieu-and-loic-j-d-wacquant-chicago-london-university-of-chicago-press-1992-xiv-332-pp/813D5DD95C2F3C76401A7DA53BAD41AA>

Consortia developed online outreach activities but this shift to remote delivery presented a number of challenges including difficulties in conducting evaluation, with partners encountering resistance to online methods.

In this context of changes to the planned programmes of work locally, the Uni Connect partners in NERUPI sought to gain insights into young people's attitudes to their future education prospects and their experience of higher education outreach since the pandemic. It was intended that this would inform an assessment of the implications both in terms of the progress towards Uni Connect objectives and also to inform future directions. Qualitative research on a cross-area collaborative basis was seen as a way of making the research more robust and impactful. Cross-area data can shed light on the role and benefits of Uni Connect delivery in different contexts, and the influence of other local and individual factors including the type of outreach provision and how it was delivered.

1.3 This report

This report is relevant to the Uni Connect partners to assist with the planning of future activities and its evaluation, and other Uni Connect stakeholders and practitioners who are looking to support awareness raising of Uni Connect. The report also contains findings and recommendations relevant to higher education policy makers including the Office for Students (OfS) and Department for Education (DfE). The findings will also be of general interest to all those involved in higher education outreach.

The report is structured as follows:

Section 2 describes the project including the Uni Connect partners and local contexts involved. It explains the method of approach to data collection and the sample sizes for the report.

Section 3 sets out the findings from the focus group research in relation to their perceptions of future careers. It discusses young people's feelings about progression in education and employment; their levels of understanding about future options and how this has been affected by the pandemic.

Section 4 explores the feedback on higher education outreach; the experience of outreach during the pandemic, benefit and influences of participating, and views on what else students would like to support their decision making and careers.

Section 5 sets out the conclusions and the recommendations which have emerged from the research.

2. The Focus Group Research Project

2.1 The partnerships included in the research

This collaborative project was initiated by the Uni Connect consortia members of NERUPI. The report has been mainly informed by research undertaken in June to September 2021 across three consortia (LiNCHigher, FutureHY and Wessex Inspiration Network (WIN)). Subsequently, in November 2021, data was collected within a fourth consortia area (Make Happen) which is also referred to in the report (although the sample is not directly comparable with the earlier research given that the participants were a school year below the participants in the main study). A pragmatic approach had to be taken to setting up and running the focus groups given that schools and colleges tended to have other priorities, plus were only just coming out of lockdown conditions at the time of the study which restricted access to students.

The Uni Connect partnerships included in the project covered a range of contexts in terms of partners, geographical focus and local factors, and models for delivery of outreach. Table 1 provides a summary of the Uni Connect partnerships included in this study, drawing out the geographical context and delivery arrangements. The Uni Connect partnerships are designed to engage partners at both further and higher education level, and local priorities guide the partners in terms of the activities delivered on the ground.

The restrictions to education necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic signalled a dramatic shift in Uni Connect programme delivery, and from March 2020 onwards the local teams were forced to reassess and adapt what was being provided to the new conditions. The partners in the main were quick to shift to virtual forms of outreach delivery in order to make sure that those elements of provision which were possible online could go ahead. In some cases it has been very important for the partnership to reduce reliance on third party delivery, generating a more tailored programme by providing funding to partners to develop activities and resources that have sustained during the pandemic. Examples in LiNCHigher include the Future Focus website, the LiNCHigher Online Learning platform, and the LiNCHigher Live series. FutureHY have funded third party provision and online platforms such as UniFrog, and also delivered online events such as the 'Level Up' Conference for boys, where students were logged in as a group in their classrooms at school. However, engagement in activities has been more challenging as a result of virtual delivery – new bookings/activities were very difficult to generate because teachers had other priorities. Even where delivery did go ahead (for example during the January lockdown activities already arranged could continue), attendance was generally much lower than if the activity was delivered in school/college. The partners report that new bookings were rapidly generated in the third Term, and it was during the school lockdowns and closures when engagement proved more challenging.

Figures provided by LiNCHigher give a sense of the restrictions to delivery implied by the pandemic: the number of activities in the year to July 2020 fell by more than half to 316 compared to 670 in the previous year. Figures for the year to July 2021 show the number of activities on the rise again but they remain well below the pre-pandemic level. The number of students attending careers fairs, higher education fairs, or campus visits, has been completely restricted by the pandemic, explaining some of the differences between activity and participant numbers. Figures for FutureHY show a reduction in learners engaged over the pandemic, but an increase in reported activities which was due to much of the delivery being one-to-one (there were large numbers of CIAG interviews, application support etc., and very few events with larger numbers of participants attending at once (such as workshops and campus visits). Similarly Make Happen have reported a fall in the number of students engaging in activity in 2020-21 but an increase in the number of activities delivered reflecting effort to focus on smaller-scale, multi-activity programmes.

The partnerships report that as restrictions ease, there has been a renewed appetite for in-school delivery, rather than through virtual mechanisms, albeit dependent on the COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time.

Table 1: Profile of the Uni Connect partnerships and areas

Name	Consortia partners	Geographical focus	Delivery arrangements
LiNCHigher (Lincolnshire)	Bishop Grosseteste University (Lead Institution), University of Lincoln, Boston College, Lincoln College, Riseholme College, Grantham College, Stamford College, Grimsby Institute for Further and Higher Education, Lincolnshire County Council). The project also has an Implementation Board, which is comprised of delivery agents and other organisations, including private sector, public sector, and third sector organisations.	Works within the seven districts of Lincolnshire which include students from coastal communities, rural communities, and inner-city/urban communities. Some districts report high rates of leavers not in education, employment or training (NEET) as well as low higher education progression, and there is disparity between some schools with regards to students in receipt to Free School Meals. Some areas are characterised by seasonal work, particularly in the summer term, which can influence and impact activities and support to schools and students. Lincolnshire has retained 11+ examinations to determine who receives places within the county's grammar school system, and this can generate a complex sense of inferiority in non-selective school students as early as Year 7	Delivery in schools is based on three tiers: Target; Hub+; and Hub schools (equating to 70+ target students = Target, 35-69 students = Hub+, less than 34 = Hub), each receiving a slightly different version of the LiNCHigher programme. Target schools are supported by four 'Area Engagement Officers' who concentrate broadly on a particular geographical area, working with schools. Hub and Hub + schools are supported by a Hub officer who is responsible for core programme provision and signposting. LiNCHigher also have a College Engagement officer, who leads on engagement across six Colleges.
WIN (Bath and North East Somerset, North Somerset and Wiltshire (excluding Swindon)).	University of Bath (Lead Institution), Wiltshire College and University Centre, Bath Spa University, Bath College, and Weston College (University Centre Weston).	Covers the areas of North Somerset, Bath and Northeast Somerset and Wiltshire. Partners include University of Bath, Bath Spa University, Bath College, Wiltshire College and University Centre and University Centre Weston. Data provided by the OfS clearly shows that certain schools have significant numbers of students from wards where the progression rates are significantly lower than expected given the students attainment (GAP wards).	For each region the WIN has identified a Lead School; where there is a large number of GAP students in attendance at the school. A WIN adviser is based at each of these schools, and the three colleges, but also works with other schools in the area. Three phases of delivery have been outlined through a progression framework that aligns with the year groups. Typically: Phase 1 – Discovery (Year 9); Phase 2 – Development (Years 10 & 11); Phase 3 – Preparing for higher education (Year 12 & 13, Level 3 Year 1 & 2). Support includes sessions to address issues with confidence, self-esteem and overall resilience, workshops and mentoring that address key knowledge gaps relating to higher education and progression, and targeted careers guidance through a partner organisation, CareerPilot.

Name	Consortia partners	Geographical focus	Delivery arrangements
FutureHY (York & North Yorkshire)	University Centre Askham Bryan, Craven College, CU Scarborough, Harrogate College, Scarborough TEC, Selby College, York College, University of York and York St John University (lead institution), as well as York City Council, North Yorkshire County Council, LEP/Careers Enterprise Company, National Citizen Service (NCS), North Yorkshire Coast Opportunity Area, NYBEP and York Cares.	There are ten target wards: three of FutureHY's target wards are on the east coast (Scarborough and Whitby areas). These form part of the North Yorkshire Coast Opportunity Area (https://northyorkshirecoastoa.com/). The area hosts the largest army garrison and FutureHY have been instrumental in developing outreach activity with children from military service families and lead the Service Children's Progression Alliance (SCiP) Yorkshire and North East hub.	The project consists of a central team of six, based at York St John University. This includes a Programme Manager, Communications, Signposting and Finance Officer, two Outreach Officers, a Monitoring and Evaluation Officer and a Graduate Intern. There are also seven Outreach Assistants, each based at a partner college. Outreach Assistants also have responsibility for engagement in designated schools
Make Happen	University of Essex (lead), University of East London, Writtle University College, Anglia Ruskin University, Harlow College, S.E. College University Centre, USP College, University Centre Colchester, Essex County Council, Thurrock Council, Southend on Sea Borough Council	The focus is the county of Essex Progression rates of students from further education colleges have consistently been lower than their counterparts in sixth form colleges.	Make Happen operates with a central team and a school/college-led model consisting of around 20 staff members. The central team consists of support staff working on finance and evaluation, working alongside outreach officers and assistants who work with 83 schools and colleges to plan and deliver outreach sessions. All target schools are linked with to an outreach officer in order to promote a bespoke model of activity. Each officer is a point of contact for 6-10 schools. Support to colleges is via dedicated resource to ensure activity is tailored appropriately. Each school and college is allocated a budget for tailored activities based on the number of Uni Connect students plus the dedicated projects team promote centrally identified activities across the region.

2.2 Methodology

This was a qualitative project to capture the views of students, using focus group research. This approach was considered the best way to explore perspectives to outreach during the pandemic by drawing upon respondents' attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions in a way which is not possible in quantitative research. The research partners agreed a common method of data collection and used common research questions in order to collect robust and comparable data capable of in-depth analysis including exploration of the similarities and differences across different participant groups and geographical areas.

2.2.1 Development of research tools

The idea for the collaborative research was first agreed in April 2021, and a format and scripts for the focus group research to be carried out by Consortia evaluators, were finalised at the beginning of June 2021, following a collective training session held online on 27th May. Fifteen focus groups were held during the main research phase in May to September 2021, followed by two further groups in November 2021. Recruitment of participants was undertaken in conjunction with school and college teachers and the Uni Connect outreach officers associated with the establishments involved. Annex 1 presents the focus group script that was used.

2.2.2 Setting up and undertaking the focus groups

The focus groups were set up and managed locally. Annex 2 presents a project information sheet that was used to promote the research to teachers in the target schools. In light of the restrictions in place due to the pandemic during this period a pragmatic approach was taken to the format of the focus groups. For example, in some cases focus groups were hosted in person at the school or college, and in other cases focus groups were hosted remotely via Microsoft Teams with students in a group in school, or individually, to comply with the establishments' ongoing COVID-19 related policies.

Table 2 provides an overview of the focus groups undertaken and the number of students that took part in the research, and nature of the focus group interaction. Further information is given in Annex 3 including details of the school context and nature of the Uni Connect activities delivered in each case. The participants were students in Uni Connect target schools and colleges, who had participated in higher education outreach interventions. As shown in Table 2, participants had been involved in a range of different types of interventions. This reflects the varying types of interventions at different education levels and across different partnership areas depending on the local priorities.

Table 2: Information on the focus groups

Level	Groups	Mode	Total Number of participants
Post 16	7 groups across 3 consortia areas in May-July 2021 1 group in additional consortia area in November 2021	May-July: 4 groups in person groups in classroom; 2 online groups with remote participants; 1 online group with students accessing as a group with teacher present. November: 1 online group with a member of teaching staff present	31 students in May-July plus 7 students in November 2021
Year 10	8 groups across 3 consortia areas in May-July 2021 1 group in additional consortia area in November 2021	May-July: 7 in person groups in classroom; 1 online group with students accessing as a group with teacher present November: 1 online group with a member of teaching staff present	40 students in May-July plus 7 students in November 2021

The focus group script elicited feedback on participants' views and experiences of outreach during the pandemic and before. As part of the discussion participants were asked to rate where they were on a five point scale in terms of how sure they were about what they will do in the future, their level of knowledge about education and training options that would help their future careers, their understanding of the benefits of higher education, how confident they felt about getting into higher education, and how difficult it would be for them personally to enter and succeed in higher

education. These questions were designed to inform thinking in relation to the different aspects of the NERUPI framework relating to developing students' awareness of the benefits of higher education, their knowledge and skills around progression options, confidence to progress and student identity).

2.2.3 Analysis and reporting

The data was transcribed locally by the local researchers and shared in an anonymous form. The analysis phase involved undertaking framework analysis, mapping of themes and interpretation. In light of time restrictions for the analysis, data was tagged manually and recorded in excel. The focus groups have also been analysed locally using different approaches to inform local reports to the consortia. In some cases this includes as part of wider studies which draw on additional evidence from additional fieldwork locally.

A draft report was circulated in the first instance to the local researchers who were asked to check and collaborate the findings. The report was amended in light of comments received and the findings were presented during a virtual meeting of colleagues in the local Uni Connect teams. A follow-on meeting was also held to discuss and refine the recommendations for policy and practice.

2.2.4 Dissemination of findings and discussion of recommendations

A half day event was held virtually in January 2022, during which the research team, reported the findings of the collaborative research. The event was open to all Uni Connect partnerships, This event included small group working of Uni Connect outreach practitioners during which the recommendations regarding outreach activities were discussed and enhanced.

2.3 Ethical and other considerations

The local partnerships were responsible for achieving ethics committee approval for the research in each of their local areas, and this was undertaken through the institution with leading responsibility for evaluation. In some cases ethical approval for focus group research into their issues had already been granted as part of putting in place plans for the local evaluation of the activities.

Participation in the focus groups was based on informed consent and the process included: making sure the participants were informed about the nature of the research and how their information would be used; getting permission to record the discussion for transcription, and for sharing the data externally for the purposes of preparing the collaborative report; and making clear that participation was entirely voluntary and they could join or leave the discussion at any point and/or choose not to comment without giving a reason. In some cases, Privacy Notices and data sharing arrangements were covered in schools' agreements with Uni Connect partnership. Otherwise, a Privacy Notice was agreed to provide this information, and the local researchers asked participants to confirm that they have read and understand this document prior to taking part in the Focus Group session.

The local partners have put in place appropriate safeguards for secure collection, storage, transmission and disposal of the Focus Group participants' personal data in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation. The data and transcripts were shared in an anonymous format that did not include personal data.

2.4 Feedback on the focus groups

The focus group script included questions designed to collect feedback on the participants' experience of the focus groups. The comments suggest that most participants found the focus group to be a positive experience, which may in itself be considered an outreach intervention. For example, a Year 10 participant said: 'I've enjoyed it and I feel more confident on what I want to do now'. Another participant in the same group echoed: 'I feel like the same. I feel more confident and that I've enjoyed it. It's helped quite a lot'. Other comments from Year 10 students included: '...it has made me more confident, more open to talk about my future' and 'It's made me realise that there are people out there that can help you with careers and give you advice on it'. A participant at Level 3 said: 'I have enjoyed taking part in the focus group as it's good to listen to other people's opinions and what they are going to do after College'. Similarly, a Year 10 participant felt the session was 'informative'.

A couple of participants drew attention to the role of the focus groups in terms of the student voice: one person said they like the idea that student opinions (voice) are being listened to and another said 'it's been good to say what we need to help make decisions'.

3. Key Findings: Future Perspectives & Levels of Understanding

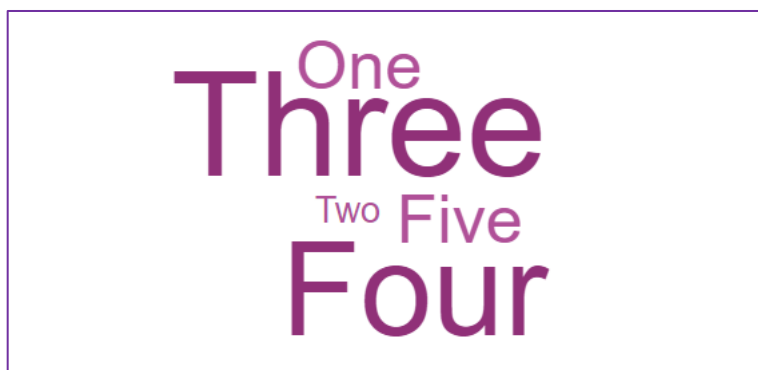
This section reviews the discussions across the focus groups about how students view their future options after school and college, their levels of understanding and knowledge about future choices, and the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on their perspectives and decisions about their futures. Note, not all the groups had enough time to include all the questions in their discussions.

3.1 Views about future careers

3.1.1 How students rated their feelings about their future careers

The focus groups sought perspectives on what participants want to do after school/college, and how sure they felt about their future choices using a five point scale. Amongst participants in the main research phase to July 2021, a score of 'Three' (30%) and 'Four' (27%) were the most common answer overall (Figure 1). The comments suggest that most participants have an idea of which option or options they are interested in, but that this is open to change or contingency. A significant minority are at the top end of the scale (17%) (i.e. sure about a particular option) or at the bottom end of the scale (16%) (i.e. not sure at all about what they want to do).

Figure 1: Word cloud – How sure are you about what you want to do when you leave school/college? (Scale of one to five where five is very sure)



Source: Year 10 and Year 12 focus groups in May-July 2021

As we might expect the extent to which the participants were sure about what they want to do in future is related to the stage of education. Overall, a third (36%) of the students consulted in post-16 education rated themselves a five (i.e. very sure) compared to only 7% in Year 10 who said this. All the participants in the LiNCHigher Year 13 focus group were at the 'pretty sure' end mainly because they had made applications for courses or were staying on at the school to complete Level 3 or A Level courses before progressing to higher level courses. Year 12 participants in the additional research phase all rated their feelings about future careers very highly (either a 4 or 5). This group were all set on progression to university, although some in the group were not yet fixed on which option to take.

Participants who were expecting to carry on with subjects beyond compulsory education also indicated high levels of confidence about their future direction and in some cases this included progression to higher levels of education. For example, this included a Year 12 respondent who said they knew they will go to university (to carry on business studies). Another who gave a high rating said they know what they want to do and was very specific about the job and field (Agricultural engineering). Others were less certain on the field but nevertheless had decided to continue in education and this was giving them a high sense of surety about the future. For example, a Year 10 student who gave a relatively high score (4) said they know that they want to go to college but are just not 100% sure which one.

The contrast of views across the different groups stood out as being a striking feature - the group level differences were evident in the analysis as well as differences between individuals within each group, particularly for those in post-16 education. Participants across the three Level 3 focus groups in the WIN region appeared clearer on their next steps based on where they were in the education/decision-making journey, particularly Year 13 and Level 3 Year 2 learners (all 5s) as they were awaiting results to go on to university. Those that were clear on what they wanted to do were able to talk about this in more detail, discussing the pathway (degree or apprenticeship), and further detail about

the subject (mentions were made of Teaching/Childhood studies – Level 3 Year 1, Psychology, IT/Software Engineering and Music Production – Year 12, Musical Theatre – Year 13, Marine Biology, Children’s Nursing – Level 3 Year 2). Indeed, participants rated how sure they were about what they would do after college as at least a 4 on average in most (4) of the Level 3 groups. On the other hand, participants in a Year 12 group in a large inner-city school in the LiNCHigher region came out as mostly 1’s and 2’s. Students in this group spoke about having no idea about what they would do. Not feeling engaged in current subjects may be part of this. Comments included:

Not enjoying a subject or finding it hard going was a feature of participants in other groups. This includes a female student who is taking Law, psychology and sociology A-levels who commented:

I did want to do Law, but then it got too difficult, so I didn’t want to do it anymore. I don’t want to do it at uni. I know I want to go to university, I just don’t know what I want to study there because I’m not really sure what career I want or what to do with the rest of my life, really. It seems a bit scary. I don’t want to make the wrong choice at university and then I’m stuck with one certain path, whereas only a limited job you could do with that law degree.

Other low scoring participants in the post-16 phase were characterised by not being able to settle on what they want to do. An example of this perspective from a female AS level student:

Yeah, I don’t know if I want to go to uni or not. Well, I did want to and then didn’t, and then I wanted to do it all, and then I didn’t. And then I wanted to do psychology, and now I don’t know. So, to be fair, I’m probably a two (laughing).

In addition, having a wide range of options open to them also came out in the comments as a factor which affects how sure students are about what they will do in future. Some post-16 focus group participants said whilst they knew the field they are hoping for, they are not clear on the education route to take. For example, a female AS student who is interested in jobs related to fitness and health commented:

I’m quite sure in the fact that I know what I’m going to do through college, so I know the path I want to go to. It’s just the choice at the end, what I choose. It’s like there’s multiple choice and it’s just trying to pick between which will be best for me at the time. I’m going to choose this year, so I’m going to do one year and I’m going to a different course in the college... After then, I know what career I want to do, but it’s just about which education path I take to get there.

A few post-16 participants spoke about not wanting to continue in education, and in some cases this was an issue in terms of career choices in future:

Yeah. I think I want to go and do forensic psychology, which obviously, I have to go to uni for, but then I also don’t really want to stay in education, so I don’t know.

Some participants who said they did not want to go to a university nevertheless spoke about studying higher education locally. This included a participant in the Level 3 Year 1 group in FutureHY region who is considering a Level 5 qualification at College such as FdA Young Children’s Learning and Development.

Some participants indicated that they had long held career aspirations; these participants tended to rate how sure they are about what they want to do in future the most highly. Examples included a male AS student who said that joining the RAF is an aspiration he’s had for a while. He is taking A-levels to help with this and plans to apply directly to the RAF after A-levels. Clearly, for some students being fixed on as future career direction happens quite early. For example, a Year 10 student said that they had wanted to act their whole life and are really dedicated to acting. Another said they want to be a musician and are thinking of going to college but needed more information about the different aspects of it. This contrasts with a low scoring Year 10 student who said: “I’ve got no idea”.

Comments from a small number of Year 10 students who rated themselves relatively low in terms of knowing what they will do in future said that there were specific opportunities open to them (jobs mentioned included engineering, hair and beauty, joinery), but these were met with limited enthusiasm. One person who said there was an option for them to work in engineering at a specific plant, but said:

I don't see any enjoyment in it. I don't know what I want to do. I don't think to myself, wow. I can't wait to get into that.

Undecided participants tended to perceive a range of options open to them, and this was the case for younger participants in Year 10. Comments from Year 10 students about their future prospects included:

I know what I want to do, I want to help people like a solicitor or social worker. But there's so many levels that you can do that, and you just have to find the one for you.

I've got an idea too through my subjects, but I still haven't decided on the subject I want to go through with... So it's either use geography, and become a person that digs up skeletons and stuff like that... Or I take health and social care, become a social worker.

Because I've got a big variety of what I want to do. I want to be a lorry driver but then I've got to wait until I'm 21-years-old to do that, so I can't do lorry driving. So, I want something that's hands-on like construction or mechanics, but with that I want a job that's enough pay as well. I don't want a job that you don't get enough pay.

Because I don't know where abouts I want to do because I got too many careers what I want to do. I want to do motor vehicles or construction but then if I can do motor vehicles cos I don't... then construction, I'm good at that too. So, I actually don't know yet.

Some students in the Year 10 groups said they had an idea of the field they were heading for but remain uncertain about routes into these. A wide range of career areas were mentioned by participants in this group (careers mentioned included childcare, police, engineering/railway industry, zoology and IT/technology, hair and beauty). Several in this group inferred they are planning to stay on in post-compulsory education, but the scoring was low: two key issues emerged: not being sure about the career and uncertainty over the college, course or educational route. Indeed, over a quarter (26%) of Year 10 participants rated how sure they were on the future as 2 or less and most of these had not narrowed down their prospects. Comments included:

I don't really know what I'm, like, really good at. Like, I haven't got a big thing to do, like, I don't know. Like, I'd want to do something that I actually enjoy rather than having to put myself through something I'm not really a fan of. I like media and travel, but that's about it.

I just can't decide what to do. I don't know. No idea.

and

I have, like, a rough idea but not, like, a specific thing I want to do.

Some students in the Year 10 group in the Make Happen focus group interviewed in November 2021 mentioned a beneficial effect of lockdown when it came to their subject choices since it gave them time to look into different career options or to research what they wanted to do. However, comments suggest that choosing options out of school could be problematic. One participant commented that some of their options choices might not be relevant knowing what they now might want to do. Another expressed the view that some students lost confidence and motivation when not at school when it came to choosing their options. Another said students in Year 9 were pressured to choose options in a short period of time.

3.1.2 Implications of COVID-19 for feelings about future careers

Lockdown does seem to have been a time when many people have re-evaluated their positions and are seeking to counterbalance the limited life experience available during lockdown with more active lifestyle choices in future: This came out strongly in comments from students in the Year 10 focus group in FutureHY region:

It has made me not want to stay inside and do an office job anymore. It makes me want to see more of the world and do stuff.

Because I was trapped inside for so long, it just made me miss my bike and gave me a love for it.

COVID-19 has made me realise like what I want to do with my life. I've had year of no movement, so I want to make the most of what you can.

I feel like COVID-19 has changed who I am in personality. After being stuck inside I feel a lot more social, like I want to talk to people now.

Comments from a male student in Year 13 demonstrated how one of the more positive implications of COVID was to provide time to consider the future:

My mind keeps changing quite a lot because, yeah, COVID's allowed me to think about where I want to be and what I want to be, so...

It was a good thing it happened because it allowed me to think, slow down.

Facilitator: *And are the rest of you agreeing with that?*

All: *Yeah.*

Lockdown seems to have provided space for some students to develop new interests which could influence future directions:

I think maybe different... because, obviously, COVID, kind of...you start to pick up different interesting hobbies. So, for me, I got a lot more into fitness over COVID, so it was like looking into a career in that a lot more.

In relation to specific changes in career choices, there is also some evidence that the experience of the pandemic has influenced some participants views about what they want to do in future (although they are probably in the minority). Some of these examples suggest students were looking for jobs which included more scope for being with and working with other people in different environments. Students in the Level 3 Year 1 group in Future HY region seem to have been particularly affected by changes in career aspirations. One person said they had wanted to go into social care but were now planning to go to the USA to be a nanny (although is worried about the impact of the pandemic on travel). This person said they definitely did not want to go to university, and that the motivation for working abroad was to gain life experience. Another learner in the same group had decided to leave the course at the end of year 1 to get a job, the reason being that they felt they would enjoy the real work environment. A third person said they had wanted to go to university but since the pandemic they now want to stay working in a primary school (possibly with SEN children).

One student said that before COVID, they had wanted to be a police investigator/forensic scientist but had been put off since the pandemic: 'I just feel like I don't want to do that no more because 'it's going near bodies'.

At least one Year 12 student, with a poor experience of online learning during COVID, was concerned about having an online higher education experience that would not suit them. This was putting them off university:

Like, I couldn't do any of the online lessons though, I struggled to...I like to be in person, which if I went to uni, I don't think I would do as well if it was all online.

Facilitator: *So because of COVID, you're worried that that might be the case.*

Yeah.

Comments from some participants planning to continue in education suggested it could be that the experience of education during the pandemic was affecting some student's views about the type of educational (as well as employment) situation they would like in future. For example a female AS student in LiNCHigher region commented:

I don't think it's affected directly. I think it may have affected the way I'm going about things. I'm still... my aspirations are very much the same, it's just I think because of how COVID is, I've not coped with the academics as well, so I'm going to do, like, a course where it's more a balance of academics and more physical, then I cope with it there, because I think if COVID, if there wasn't any, I probably would have caught up a bit more in the academic side and still be staying on.

Facilitator: *So, it's sort of made you think about which path to get where you want to go?*

Female: *Yeah.*

Similarly, a Year 10 student spoke about preferring more practical approaches to learning (although a learning disability was also a factor in this case):

I wanted to do something practical through the laptop and stuff and now I'm more about hands-on type of person, because when you get to do it yourself, actually have to write it down, it's a lot easier... being dyslexic is a lot harder because people need to read your handwriting and stuff. And that's hard to do, so for hands-on experience because you retain more knowledge that way than writing stuff down.

There were also examples of students who were revising their career choices after thinking about the impact of COVID-19 on employment prospects in different sectors. This meant that some students were facing a dilemma around which route to take because they perceived that future job prospects would be diminished in their areas of interest. One student spoke in a general way about how the different jobs they wanted to do are not around anymore due to COVID-19, and comments about limited prospects also came from individuals across a range of specific job contexts:

The career that I was going into does not have good money compared to other jobs and not very stable – being a chef. The pandemic has made me think I might want to do something else but I don't know what

Yeah. It's made me take a look at what's popular in the world. It's all technology based. I mean, I kind of want to be a joiner, but then again, the amount of jobs you'd probably get from that are pretty slim. It's got to be about electrical wires or technology these days. You want to get well-paid, modern job that isn't going to die out. Maybe take a look at that

I wanted to actually go into embroidery, and I was going to a work experience in a sewing shop. But throughout that I just found that it is a dying art and with COVID how many people are going to walk around wanting stuff embroidered, especially because no one's leaving the house.

A fourth learner who had an eye to future job prospects was looking for a career in the same field as before (motor mechanics) but was considering a shift of focus in light of perceived trends:

I was going to try to work in London, and now I realise I don't want to work in London. The money where it's going to come from is all the farm vehicles now.

One post-16 learner said they had been looking to get a job prior to COVID-19 but had been unable to because the company were not taking on new staff due to furlough. Another person spoke about how the pandemic had affected their ability to undertake work experience. They spoke about having a negative experience of work placement due to the placement provider not being ready for a student straight after lockdown. A couple of learners in the post-16 focus group in LiNCHigher region also pointed to issues with gaining work experience during the pandemic. One said they regretted not doing work experience but it was hard finding the right place and getting accepted to it. Another said:

Because a lot of people would reject you... probably wouldn't get in touch with you and they can't because of COVID reasons.

The comments also focused attention on the impact of COVID-19 on young people's learning experience, and the educational impact in the last two years came out as the main concern of young people rather than the implications for their future plans. This issue is explored in relation to young people's confidence in achieving good educational outcomes.

Comments during the additional research phase in November 2021 echoed the earlier finding that the pandemic had given students more time to research options that might interest them. One Year 12 student in the Make Happen focus group said that since the pandemic they had started to think about, and get information on other options. This included information on degree apprenticeships which were seen as an attractive options not because it allows for work experience and study.

3.2 Knowledge of courses or training that will help with future career

3.2.1 How participants rated their knowledge of courses/training

Most participants put their level of knowledge of courses in the mid-range (Figure 2). The average rating for knowledge of courses or training to help with future careers across all groups comes out at a relatively low 2.8 out of 5. Across all groups, around a third (32%) of post-16 learners and 36% of Year 10 learners rated themselves two or below.

Figure 2: How much do you know about courses or training that will help you with your future career and what you want to do next? (Scale of 1-5 where 5 is very knowledgeable)



Source: Year 10 and Year 12 focus groups in May-July 2021

The post-16 groups tended to rate their knowledge most highly on average (40% rated themselves a 4 or above). Those in the Level 3 Year 1 focus group at a general further education college also rated as requiring improvement were all positive about the need to have a Level 3 qualification and several in the group were aware of further qualifications that might be helpful. A range of types of courses came up in the feedback including apprenticeships, and qualifications related specific occupations. The comments indicate that outreach is playing a part in helping students to enhance their knowledge of courses or training that will help their future career (discussed further below). One person said they had booked a 1:1 with an advisor to discuss their options.

On the other hand, many of those most recently entering post-16 education expressed relatively low levels of knowledge of the next steps in education or training. The AS group in a coastal college and the Year 13 group in an inner-city school requiring improvement scored particularly low on knowledge of courses. This was clearly evident amongst several participants who had fixed on an aspiration to go to university but were seeing this as a general ambition rather than specific to a particular career pathway. For example, a female participant in the AS Level group said:

I have no idea where I'm going. Just, I want to study locally at university, but I don't know what I want to study, so I'll be zero... I've had a look at some, but it's just, like, I'm trying to decide which ones I'm going to like and if I want to take the career paths with that.

Another female AS Level student implied the problem in their case was struggling with which specialism to take:

Yeah, I know the end goal pretty well. It's just, I don't know where I want to go. I know what area, but the different courses... so, like, it's got medicine, it's got fitness, it's got nutrition. It's like picking one of those and a place that just keeps me at a lower path.... Yeah. I know the overall thing, but what I want to specialise in and what courses you'd need to choose.

Other participants were more specific about the fields they were interested in and gave a general indication that they were aiming to get more information at a future time. For example, a Year 12 respondent who scored themselves highly in terms of being sure what they want to do in future, but low in terms of knowledge of courses said:

I don't know, like, what uni or what type of business course yet though.

Another student in the first year of Level 3 commented:

I don't know quite a lot about the different courses out there that can help you with the um, with my dream job. All I know is that there are teaching degrees and that this course that I am doing right now, will benefit me.

Comments from other post-16 students suggested they had an understanding of courses related to their primary career choice, but had not looked into options more broadly than this:

Yeah. I mean, I've got a backup plan if I can't get in. I was going to go to university to do something like paramedic science, but I don't know what university or other do that, but that's another path I'll look into if something comes up.

In terms of awareness, many Year 12 students felt confident that they could find courses and opportunities based on the support they had already received. Concerns were raised about finding jobs afterwards – with some worried that they would complete a degree course and leave with no job opportunities. There was some reference to speaking to older siblings to discuss their experiences of higher education or higher-level opportunities such as apprenticeships.

Knowledge of courses or training to help with careers was relatively low on average across the Year 10 focus group cohorts (only 17% rated themselves as 4 or over). One person who was considering A Levels admitted they did not know enough about A Levels – what subjects you do and how you choose and what they are used for. There was general agreement amongst participants in one of the Year 10 groups in LiNCHigher area with a participant who commented:

I feel like I just really haven't looked into the courses and, like, what you need for them, like, grades and stuff to get into them.

Several participants indicated that low scoring reflected knowing what career they want to do but not how to get there, or which way to go. Some participants had identified which subjects would help them in future depending on what they wanted to do, but were not completely sure of these choices. It was evident that finding out about options from friends came out as an influence for Year 10 students who are thinking about their options. For example, a Year 10 in FutureHY region said they know what course to go on because I have a friend who has been doing the same course and wants to do the same career path.

On the other hand, a few in Year 10 indicated that even though they do not know what they want to do, they nevertheless have some knowledge of potential courses – the main issue being the number of options available. This included a Year 10 student who said they were facing a choice about potential courses they could do in beauty or childcare, and another Year 10 student spoke about wanting to do something in the music industry but being unsure of exactly what (because there's a lot of options). In this respect, mid-range scoring on knowledge of courses reflects knowing the direction they want to go in but not having enough information on the area within it.

Some participants had been looking at courses and felt they had an awareness of what's available but were unable to choose the right course for them. For example, a student who had been looking at courses related to history said:

I put three because I don't know what job I want to do, like specific. But I've been looking online, because I know I want to go to uni. Been looking at the university courses and how wide the range of opportunities that gives me.

Another student who was interested in technology said:

Like I said, I don't know what I want to do as a job, so I just don't know what courses I need to take. But if I was to be an engineer, I'd probably need about ... well, I want to go into an apprenticeship instead. I don't know. But if I go to university, it would be technology... stuff like that.

Only a few Year 10 group students rated their knowledge fairly highly and the discussion suggests this is because they had gone onto various websites to do research. A few students in Year 10 who had an idea of what they would like to do in future rated their knowledge of courses relatively highly and spoke about how they had undertaken research into course options and routes into the jobs they were aiming for. This included someone who had used college websites to research qualifications needed for lorry driving and construction; someone who had looked at Level 3 qualifications for motor vehicles; another participant who had researched a specialist college offering courses for drama. Overall,

however, the year 10 participants' self-rated levels of knowledge of courses or training to help with careers tended to be relatively low, even amongst those who have an idea of their future career, and many appear to face difficulties in doing research into courses. A Year 10 participant said they had tried doing some research on courses, but had encountered problems: saying:

I don't really understand anything. I feel like I don't know where to start.' Another said: 'We've no idea what anything is.

Not knowing what you want to do in future comes out as an obstacle when it comes to finding out about relevant courses or training that may be of benefit:

Yeah, I think I'm only going to really look at courses when I find out what I want to do. I have no idea, so therefore I can't plan it out. I know I need to go to college to do the course, but I've not really thought – like [Student 1], I'm not sure what.

Year 10 participants in the Make Happen focus group in November 2021 also spoke about needing more information on courses, and commented that getting work experience would help when it comes to deciding on careers. Teachers were having an influence through a 'job of the week' activity, and the school is offering the option of some additional personal development courses which are designed to enhance students' CVs.

Year 12 students in the focus groups in November 2021 were set on University but spoke about being undecided between different courses and placement options. Some students commented that they might not be able to get on the course of their choice. This included one student who spoke about the need to keep an open mind since:

'there's always a chance of things not panning out the way you want to, and a sudden career change or you may be interested in something else, so I always want to be like extra prepared for that type of scenario.'

3.2.2 Implications of COVID-19 on understanding of options

In relation to focus group participants who were aiming for higher education, the responses to questions about the impact of the pandemic suggested that it had not necessarily changed learner's minds when it came to planning next steps, but it had affected their ability to plan and access information and resources – in particular comments from the post-16 cohort made it clear they had been unable to attend open days and visit to the universities. Comments from some students suggest that this was affecting how confident they felt about progressing:

I mean with my course it has, yeah. But I've had a look on the websites and stuff and it still says that it's going ahead in person, but like with the Open Days and stuff I haven't seen where I'm going to be living for the next couple of years which is a bit scary

It got to the point where I was like applying for unis that I've never even visited, because I wasn't able to visit them

There has been no open days and haven't been around colleges and with our applications due only a few months away. You don't know what's going ahead on stuff.

However, the timing of the focus groups (as restrictions started to be lifted) meant that other students were upbeat about being able to visit and obtain the information they need to make decisions:

But in terms of uni, not really. I'm going to see, I was waiting for a visit to uni and I'm hopefully going this weekend to see it, but yeah, not really big problems.

The discussion of knowledge and understanding of courses and training in the Year 12 focus group in an inner city secondary school in the LiNCHigher region put attention on knowledge of higher education courses, and it was notable that several in this group felt they had missed out on gaining some understanding of higher education options. Speaking in relation to an experience of a University Talk, one participant said they felt like the speaker '...sort of expected us to have some sort of knowledge. I think a lot of us didn't really know anything.' Another participant agreed that if they had been at school at the time rather than at home then they would have been doing more to find out about courses:

So when he came in, he was obviously just sort of talking about personal statements and stuff rather than, like, benefits of, like, the courses, why you would want to go to uni.

Facilitator: *So you think at that point, it's started did it, to assume that you already had some knowledge of why you would go, and that you would want to go?*

Yeah.

Facilitator: *Yeah. And do you think COVID has had an impact on that, because you didn't get anything earlier in the year?*

Yeah.

However, on a more positive note, a Year 13 student in the focus group at a large coastal secondary school in LiNCHigher region seemed to express a commonly held view amongst fellow Year 13 students that the time at home due to COVID-19 had provided a chance to do more research into options than might otherwise have been the case:

I think with the times that we had off of school that we all looked into what we wanted to do after leaving. And researching where we wanted to go and what courses we wanted to do, which has made it a lot easier for us to choose what we're doing after.

In the main, comments from some Year 10 students implied that COVID-19 related issues and the experience of education during lockdown had limited the extent to which younger learners' could think about and plan their futures in terms of courses and training. One Year 10 learner said that because they had missed so much of Years 9 and 10 they had not made any decisions about the future. Another said: 'because we weren't at school in Year 9 we couldn't really guess what came after high school' and a third said they feel underprepared for life and underprepared for what they are doing next after high school. Another Year 10 learner in the same group drew attention to the fact that the types of experiences that they would normally have to help future thinking were less available during the pandemic:

...missed a lot of our GCSEs and for some subjects. It's hard to understand stuff... we haven't had much help about revision so we're worried for GCSE when we do our exams. ...there's been a big loss in practicals – in science we haven't done practicals. Geography haven't done trips and we've missed out on wider experiences.

3.3 Knowledge and awareness of the benefits of studying in higher education

3.3.1 Participant's views on benefits of studying in higher education

Overall, well over half (59%) of focus group participants who rated their level of knowledge of the benefits of higher education gave themselves a fairly high score (at least a four out of five). A large majority (79%) of the post-16 focus group participants rated their knowledge of the benefits of higher education as four or higher. Year 10 learners were less likely to say they know a lot about the benefits of higher education (48%)

Figure 3: What is your knowledge and awareness about the benefits of further/higher education? (Scale of 1-5 where 5 is very knowledgeable)



Source: Year 10 and Year 12 focus groups in May-July 2021

There was a wide breadth of scores within the AS level group at a medium sized college on the East Coast – ranging from as low as 2 and up to 5 within the same group. Those who identified benefits from higher education study highlighted three aspects in particular: the financial benefits; the breadth of career opportunities; and the personal benefits in terms of life skills. Other benefits mentioned by participants in other groups included: studying/learning more about something that you're passionate about; improving prospects with work in the future; prove to yourself that you can set a goal and achieve it (finish the course) which builds confidence.

Participants in the Year 12 and Year 13 focus groups at a new academy school in the WIN area focused more on the disadvantages of going to university, with the primary focus being debt and the reduced opportunity to earn money whilst away studying. This was compared a lot to apprenticeships, where many participants pointed out that you would be gaining on the job work experience whilst earning money (although it was also discussed that Degree apprenticeships might be limited in terms of field of interest).

Figure 4: Key Quotes – Benefits of Higher Education

Knowledge and Qualifications

I know why you have to go to get your qualifications, and that's about it.

You'll have a higher knowledge of what you're getting into.

I know that you can get a lot of good stuff out of it. Because the knowledge ... in pursuing a good position. Because you know what you're talking about when you apply for jobs. You know you've got a lot of information. It makes you more experienced. But there are some things, like I wouldn't know exactly why it would be helpful. I just know that it can help you with the career that you take. That's about it.

Enhancing job prospects (including higher pay)

A higher chance of being employed.

A higher paid rate in jobs and stuff.

Having the extra qualifications can broaden your pay barrier and just your overall knowledge of it. So, if I went for a job and only had A-levels, even though it's the same job, I'm going to be offered a lot less because of how much I know. Whereas, if I went for higher education, I've clearly got more experience and spent more time there, so I'm going to be offered a bigger opportunity.

More money. More success.

When you go to college and get your A-levels if you go on to do university and do a Masters degree you can get a much better job and much better pay. Like a much higher role in a company. The further up education you go the better the job you can get, the more money, the more power you will have with that company.

Breadth of careers opportunities

I think it's doing what you really do like and what you're interested in, and for future jobs and possibilities, rather than just going to school and leaving to work and working your life away.

I suppose some places, I've got wider horizons, different jobs you can do at higher education. So if you go to something like med school, you can obviously apply for no end of jobs in the NHS and stuff like that.

Greater jobs. Got the wider horizon of jobs that you can look for...Specific that you want to do.

Because you need to get through your levels to be able to have different opportunities of what to do.

I know the benefits of that side. And I know that it can benefit in other ways which might look good on a CV, even if you don't need a degree for that particular career.

Benefits are if I do get really good grades in my GCSEs then I go to higher education, it's a really good thing for my CV because once I've added that to my CV I can then be able to get quite a few jobs, so I think I like a little variety. I've got a large amount of variety of things I can go to.

Better jobs, more opportunity.

Yeah, being at the top, more opportunity, more likely to be picked.

It gives you more freedom to like choose the jobs you want to choose. If you have A-levels and go to university you have more chance of getting a job.

Personal benefits in terms of life experience and transferable skills

I think it gives you more of a sense of independence, because whereas in A-levels, we still have very much a teacher helping us along, in higher education, you start to learn how to be an adult, so you experience things by

yourself. Your education's more independent, even though you have someone teaching you. It's very much learning for yourself.

Yeah, and I feel like those are skills you can take on then, whereas if I went from A-levels to a job, I haven't learnt how to live for myself, whereas if you went to uni where you're also learning on your course, you're also just learning general life skills that you wouldn't if you didn't take yourself to uni.

I feel like it's going to give me a lot more experience as well as the knowledge.

I know there are some children that think they aren't able to do higher education, and the benefit of that is that if you do set yourself a goal to do higher education, you have to achieve it and see if you are able to do it because it builds your confidence.

For me it's the actual experience of being independent, because in school your teachers do your work, but in college you make those decisions on your own. There's no one really holding you accountable.

Meeting people and having new experiences, more money.

Participants who had researched higher education options were most likely to identify benefits from higher education. One Year 12 learner explained that he was not planning to go into higher education, although admittedly had not done much research, as he did not think there were any opportunities in the field he wanted to progress in - motor vehicle engineering. In this example, an adviser pointed out to them that there was a higher-level course in Motor Sport Engineering at a local college, which they were unaware of. When this vote was explored amongst the Year 3 Level 1 learners at a general further education college in FutureHY region, knowledge and understanding was mainly based on family and/or friends that have been or are at university. It was interesting to note that in terms of finding out about the personal benefits of HE, for some students contact with others who have progressed to higher education is a key source of information.

I think, 5, because...after my sister went to uni I always wanted to go to uni and every time I went to her, she always said lovely things about uni-life and how it changed her life. I can see her now doing what she always loved to do and what she's interested to do and that probably made me aware of the benefits and I do think it's really beneficial to go to uni.

On the other hand, many Year 10 students said they didn't know about the benefits of going to study further. A Year 10 student who voted 2 to this question commented:

I gave a two because it's helpful, but I don't really know. I'll be honest.... I'm not sure. I mean, it gave me some options. But I still don't know, I'm sorry to say.

This view was echoed across many of the Year 10 groups, with comments ranging from 'not a clue' to 'I kind of know the differences and everything, but I'm still not 100% sure.'

Where Year 10 participants could identify benefits, financial benefits, were at the forefront. Amongst Year 10 students benefits were associated with further as well as higher education (summarised as more experience and knowledge which equates to more chance of getting chosen for a higher-paying or high-skilled job). One Year 10 student identified that the benefits are different depending on the field:

Yeah, it changes on what you want to do. There's some things that's more [academic] whilst there's other things it's more hands-on, and it's more physical.

Year 10 students in the Make Happen focus groups held in November 2021 spoke about how university can provide qualifications which can increase your job prospects but the discussion also focused on the costs and risks of not getting the job you want at the end of it. Furthermore, Several students commented that many people get to be successful without a degree.

3.3.2 Implications of COVID-19 on perceptions of benefits of HE

As noted above, comments from participants suggested that some participant's views of higher education had been influenced by the pandemic, in that there was evidence that concerns about the student experience going forward in a post-pandemic world, coupled with a reassessment by some of what they wanted to do in future, has perhaps caused some students to reject progression to university from post-16 training as an immediate option for them. It is perhaps

also fair to say that in a situation of general uncertainty some students were questioning whether the benefits of higher education would be realised. There was also an element in a few of the discussions regarding the extent to which the financial implications of higher education were being viewed differently in light of uncertainty about the long-term financial benefits. This was evidenced in a comment from a participant in the Year 10 group at an academy trust school in FutureHY region:

I feel like less confident about going to university. If I end up getting into a lot of debt, if there is a lockdown I might not be able to get a job.

At the same time, comments in general suggests that worries about the balance of the costs and benefits of higher education are probably a general rather than a COVID-19 specific aspect. Spending resources and time at university and not gaining any benefit from it came up independently of the discussions around the impact of the pandemic:

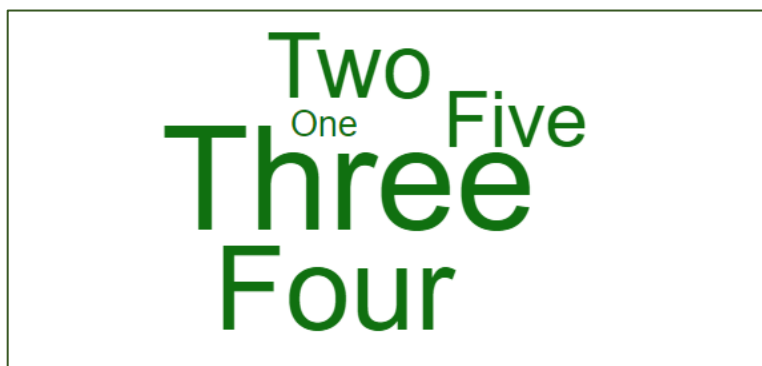
And obviously as well, a lot of time, depending on what you do, you can be there for quite a few years, and if you come out of it with nothing, you might just feel like it was a waste of time.

3.4 Confidence in grades

3.4.1 Participant's rating of their confidence in achieving the grades to enter higher education

When asked how confident they were about achieving the grades to enter higher education if that was what they decided to do, the largest group (35%) sat in the middle (Figure 5). On average across all groups the level of confidence in achieving the grades to go into higher education was 3.3, suggesting more positive than negative feelings about getting into higher education. There were big differences between participants depending on the level of study: the vast majority (86%) of post-16 learners who were asked this question responded on the positive side (4 or 5), compared to only just over a quarter (28%) of Year 10 learners who were confident.

Figure 5: How confident do you feel about getting the grades to get onto your further/higher education course if that's what you decide to do? (Scale of 1-5 where 5 is very confident)



Source: Year 10 and Year 12 focus groups in May-July 2021

Some of the post-16 learners in later focus groups had already achieved the grades necessary for their chosen option, which obviously skewed the results towards the confident end of the scale. All the participants in the AS group in LiNCHigher region were confident about getting into higher education if that was what they decided to do. Clearly, some students in this group had high levels of confidence about their ability to get high grades required for courses.

I know that I could get in if I tried hard enough, so I'm not worried about not getting in. I've always got decent grades, so if I just put the work in, yeah.

No, because I have pretty decent grades, so I think as long as I maintain those grades, I can get into a good university, whatever the subject is. [It's just deciding on which –] Subject to take, yeah.

I have got quite good grades so I am confident that I will be able to [get] accepted onto a course.

The Year 13 and Level 3 Year 2 learners in the WIN area felt confident that going on to university would be relatively simple in terms of achieving their required grades. Level 3 Year 2 students recalled that they were confident they

would achieve their marks based on what their teacher had told them, whereas the Year 13 student explained that the hardest part of her application was the audition process, which she had already passed. The entry requirements were lower, therefore and they felt confident they could achieve them.

At the same time, other participants who expressed a high degree of confidence prior to their results spoke about how they understood that there were different course options depending on the grades achieved. Comments in this respect suggest some students were confident because of a feeling that there would be higher education options at different levels dependent on the grades achieved:

I think it's because I've looked at different unis with different entrance things, so I know that wherever I kind of end up with my qualifications, I will still have a chance at getting in one.

Facilitator: *So, again, having those options available?*

Yeah, the options.

Facilitator: *Yeah, you're all nodding.*

Other comments along similar lines were made in other groups:

I think it just... so, it teaches you that... like, about how different universities, even if you don't get the best grades, you can get an average grade but you still have a chance, kind of, you still have an opportunity if you work hard. You can get into it.

'The WIN kind of helped me by saying that [...] if you do go for your dream job, there are different courses and you will need to look at your grades and what the universities are asking you' [Level 3 Year 1 Group]

Students who had particular career routes in mind spoke about getting the grades required for these. This included a male student who had an aspiration to join the RAF who said:

I think it's 64 UCAS points, so it's not a huge amount. I'm quite confident I should be able to achieve that, and so for university and the courses, I think it's Bs and Cs. So if I push myself, I really should be able to achieve those grades.

A few students in Year 10, also said that they felt confidence in being able to achieve the entry requirements for their choices. This included a student interested in study around motor vehicles who said they know the grades needed and felt he could easily get on this course. A Level 3 Year 1 student explained that they were not concerned about achieving the required result for their BTEC course (rated 4) but had some worries over the additional Maths GCSE that they would need to take in their second year of college (rated 2). This person did state that knowing the entry requirements has given them a confidence boost because they know what they need to work towards.

A student who was less confident about achieving the grades required put this down to the fact that universities could change the entry criteria year on year:

I put two because I know my research towards it but at the same time, sometimes you've got to be aware of how to get those grades so you can be accepted to them. Because sometimes maybe within a half year's time that grade boundary will get changed, you have to work harder to get that grade.

Self-belief stands out as a factor in helping to boost the students' confidence in their ability to get the grades required to get into HE:

Well, I'm pretty confident where I am at the moment. I'm pretty sure I can get good grades. I know I can do things when I really try. So I'm pretty confident I can get through what I want if I try hard enough.

I think that...I don't really know how to explain it. I think I'll be able to do it if I try hard enough.

A Year 10 student who scored the level of confidence in getting on a higher education course as '3' said this was because:

I've got quite a bit of confidence, but there's always that part of you not being confident. So it wouldn't have been right for a five because I'm not 100% confident.

Other students in this group agreed, perhaps due to natural uncertainty about what will happen in future: "there's always a chance that things aren't going to go right" Year 10 student.

Students in Year 10 tended to be more pessimistic about getting grades required for higher education. The issues affecting their confidence which came out in the discussions included not being able to achieve the required standard and suffering from stress or poor exam performance issues.

Because I know I can get my grades, but I know that I won't always achieve them but I need to... I don't know... I just can't always get the grades that I can.

For me, I'm pretty confident in the work I do, and I know that I'm going to organise it. For me, it's just more of a stress thing. Like I'm going to overthink, and I'm going to write down everything I know.

For me, it's probably that I know I can achieve the grades I have, but it's the mental health stage of it where it says you can't do it and that's what usually puts me down a lot, and it makes me stress out.

Because I think I could get my grades, but when it comes to exams I do horrible on them.

Well, I'm better at coursework than exam work, so I feel like I'd do well in that side of things, but then my confidence drops when it comes to exams.

I don't know, just because obviously as well, when you look into different courses, different courses need different grades, and I feel like if you're aiming for a high one, I don't know, I sometimes feel like I won't be able to get it.

Behaviour issues were mentioned as a factor for one Year 10 student:

My grades are good enough, but my behaviour sometimes lets me down.

3.4.2 Implications of COVID-19 for views on achieving the grades for HE

There tended to be quite lively discussions in the focus groups about how the gaps in education and changes to educational delivery due to COVID-19 had affected young people's confidence in obtaining the grades they require for higher education entry. Comments from some participants do suggest that changes in education associated with the COVID pandemic have implications for how confident students feel about getting their grades.

Because I'm scared that, because COVID has come and we've gone into so many lockdowns, that we might not get the grades we want.

Facilitator: So you're worried about the learning that you've lost?

Yeah.

One student said they know what grades they need to do the courses they want after school; but are currently performing below the level required (threes rather than fours). This person put poor performance down to not having enough time to learn because of lockdown. Another Year 10 student in the Future HY feels that the pandemic has impacted on future plans and does not feel the College was supported in terms of getting online learning right – both resources and access.

Focus group members were vocal about the implications of the COVID pandemic for young people's student experience and exam prospects. Comments from these Year 10 students were typical:

We missed out a load of activities, what we hadn't done, because there were a lot of activities that were missed out. Yes. Especially from music, with year nine supposed to be getting ready for course work, and since we came up we had to hit the course work straight away so we do not know how to do it at the learning stage.

Especially the fact that we're moving in from Year 9 to 10, we missed a lot, most of lockdown was the end of year nine and the beginning of Year 10, so we had a lot of time missed out as well. Even though most of us attended the online school work, the school and stuff, it isn't the same as being in class.

Before COVID my grades were really good and high, and I didn't have that much revision of time to do much work as we would do in school, my grades just got lower and lower.

That's why year 10's been a really hard year for me, because it's like really hit.... Because I've been doing self-isolating for most of the time, and we missed half of year 10, so we didn't really get much of year 10 business to do.

I feel like because us going into year 11, we're going to have mocks and we're going to have all these revisions that we need to go through, that if we were to even catch up on what we missed out on, are we taking away from revision exam time?

The changes to university entry to take account of predicted rather than actual grades because of students missing exams was a positive thing for some students in Year 12 (described by a Level 3 Year 2 student as taking the pressure off workload). However other students saw this in a negative light:

I'm worried about being prepared for next year as some units were given predicted grades so missed the exam experience and concerned that I won't be properly prepared for next year when we have to take exams.

Well, because we haven't sat exams before, because we didn't sit them in year 11, and then this year we haven't really had that experience of actually doing them, whereas we have with coursework. I'm worried (about having to do exams), because, like, we've only ever done mock exams, not like a proper one.

Year 10 students expressed concerns about the longer-term effects of COVID-19 on their educational attainment. For example, there was consensus across one of the groups with a participant who said they know they want to go to college but are unsure if whether they will achieve the grades. Even participants with good grades expressed concerns for the longer term:

Yeah, I feel like my grades are really good, but it's just like... missing the work, and the fact that it might affect the grades that I do get.

Missing work is clearly an issue which undermines confidence in getting good grades.

Yeah, because when we were doing, like, work at home, it felt like we weren't really taking it in because we weren't in school, so, like, some of it we probably missed out on or don't fully understand, so we're not really, like, prepared properly for exams and that fully.

Yeah, like, we haven't had enough time to fully learn everything, for this year anyway, that would help us for next year.

I think... I know that I'm not failing in most of the subjects I need to get where I want to be, but I know I'm not doing as well as I could be, so that's probably why I picked two. I'm not very attentive, and I did miss a lot of work due to COVID; and even though we had the online classes and courses, they didn't work as well as I think they should have, because most of the people either couldn't attend them due to a reason, or the didn't attend them due to the fact that they were at home – but I feel like, if they were reinforced more, then we probably could have learned a lot more than we did.

Some participants mentioned that they felt less supported in their studies. Comments to this effect included:

Well, doing it online over Zoom isn't the same as getting help in the classroom.

I think if you have a problem with work, it's more difficult to get across, because obviously, you're going back and forth through, like say if you have an issue and you need to show them something, it's a little more difficult to physically show them where you need help with, especially because our classes are split in two. So, like, they're still teaching, like if we do different things, they're still teaching so it's difficult to bother them while they're teaching that.

I feel like you couldn't really ask questions obviously of the teachers and stuff as well, and, like, come in for help, because obviously we were at home on computers and stuff doing it over Zoom calls.

A key issue for students has been feeling that they are not as engaged in their studies as they would be if learning was in-school/college. Several comments highlight the danger to studying from distractions in the home environment (ranging from the temptation to go back to bed, to TV and pets).

The comments from one student in particular seem to express a high degree of frustration about the loss of learning time, and fears that it might have an irreversible effect on attainment prospects. Outreach activities which put the focus on the importance of attainment for future progression seem to have exacerbated this sense of frustration:

Yeah, because I feel stupid now. I just feel like I can't live with it anymore. Because we have about no more school. Like, am I even going to get my grades?

Facilitator: You think that's because of LiNCHigher?

Yeah, because we had all that time after school for things that we could have been learning that we shouldn't have to do now. So now we've not even got that long.

A key issue for many learners during the pandemic was problems with concentrating on studying during lockdown. Comments from focus group participants across a range of contexts highlight the difficulties of studying at home with multiple other distractions:

For me, I'll probably just barely pass them as of COVID and stuff, it made my work slow down and stuff because I work better in a school environment, because I know I can get my head down and do my work without your parents nagging you, "Hey, go clean your room, or hey come for dinner" but I'm in the middle of class, or you get distracted by your phone and stuff.

All the lessons were cancelled most of the time. It was like, you, the better you want it. Then it's a bit hard when you're in a house, and you get distracted easier. It's not really a place for you to be learning it. I think the way I see it, is since the last year got all the muck, the exams is their results. I think we should be given a ... I don't know ... something to help us out during the exams. Like maybe easier questions or an easier exam paper, since we missed out on a year of good learning.

Yeah. Could you imagine waking up in the morning and you're in bed all nice and warm, and then having to go and sit down and go on the computer, and having all your stuff around you. It is distracting.

I don't do as much work as I used to, because when you're at home, there's, like, Netflix, YouTube, and I'd rather just do that and leave the work, and then it just piles up. Like, with GCSEs, I was really organised...

Yeah. At home, it's like constant, but even things like if you have a cat, it's just like, they look at you and you'd rather go and look at your cat than write the essay.

Lack of motivation also came out in the focus group discussions as a barrier to learning:

Yeah, motivation too. Because the thing was, my computer, my PC was like two seconds away from me. I'll just sleep in five minutes, until it gets about one minute. And then I might turn it on. But you just fall asleep, don't you? You just give up.

It's made me lazy. I don't really want to study or try hard at school

Oh, I think it's just really hard staying motivated whilst you're at home, because it just feels a bit pointless when you're at home because I'd lie on the bed and still doing the work.

It's more comfortable than college, but, like, the comfort takes you away from the work, if you get what I mean. It's like, you'll be sat nicely, but then you'll think about how you're sitting really nicely and you get too comfortable and then you'll just fall asleep.

Some students commented that the educational experience was more organised during the second lockdown (and a few students mentioned having more equipment for the second lockdown). The suggestion made was that a number of students found it easier to focus on studying at this time. However, lack of motivation clearly remained a problem for some participants:

Facilitator: You think you were more motivated in the second one because things were more in place?

Personally, yeah. Because it just helped me because I like structure.

I wasn't. I just think it was exactly the same. There was more structure to the lessons, but that didn't change my motivation, change me. I'm like, my bed's there. I'm going to sleep.

I think I was less motivated to tell you the truth. Because the thing was, for the first one ... I don't know. Some people are out, some people aren't. But in the second one, everyone was inside... I don't know. Just didn't feel like I wanted to learn.

One student suggested that having to combine learning in school with learning at home had made things particularly difficult:

It's easier to be either/or, in college or out of college, because when it's half-and-half, the ones in college obviously get the more time with the teacher and the teacher will say to us at home, you can revise. And when they say that, you just go back to bed.

On the other hand, a few students identified more positive aspects of learning during lockdown, related to a slower pace of learning and having more space in students' own time to absorb the information delivered in lessons, coupled with teaching methods based on recapping information.

If you don't understand it you get to recap it a lot further because teachers have a scheme, so this many times... and then maybe two weeks later, oh we're moving onto something new. And we probably only just put our heads around what we're learning. And it's like we're moving onto new ones, like oh okay.

3.5 Feelings about difficulty of entering and succeeding in higher education

3.5.1 Participant's rating of the difficulty of entering and succeeding in higher education

The focus group script included voting on participants' perceptions of how difficult it would be for them personally to go to university and gain an higher education qualification. Across all the groups that covered this question, the largest share of participants (40%) were undecided (a '3') (Figure 6). However, over a quarter (26%) perceived that it would be difficult for them personally ('voting 4) and some (16%) said it would be very difficult (voting 5). Many Year 10 respondents appeared to vote in the middle because they had not really thought about it:

Because I'm not really sure how it's going to be, I'm not sure what it's going to be like.

Facilitator: Okay, so the unknown.

Yeah.

Figure 6: How difficult will it be for you personally to go to university and gain a higher education qualification? (Scale of 1-5 where 5 is very difficult)



Source: Year 10 and Year 12 focus groups in May-July 2021

Just over half (55%) of post-16 learners who were asked this question said it would be difficult or very difficult for them personally to enter and succeed in HE, and over two-fifths (42%) of Year 10 respondents. The academic demands of higher education stand out as an area of difficulty for some post-16 learners. For example, there was concern from Year 12 students in the WIN region about the difficulty of a degree course based on their experience of A-Levels:

It kind of scares me because I'm already struggling here then how is it going to be in uni, you know, yeah.'

Similarly, a student in another region said:

There's a fair chance I can get the grades to do it, but I don't know how I would cope at college and that. Yeah, and the fact that you've got more learning to do there, and it's higher up than this.

Indeed, several participants in the post-16 groups said that going to higher education would mean the need to study at a higher level, and this was the main issue:

Obviously, university is quite a step up from A-levels, so obviously there's that difficulty there. I don't really see any other problems than that, to be honest.

At least one person felt that university is bound to be hard because of the nature of university being an elite competitive level of education:

Because you think everything that you do is hard. Nothing is ever is going to be easy. And I just think that everything will be hard.

Facilitator: Why do you think it will be hard?

Because it wouldn't be a qualification if everyone could get it.

Facilitator: So you think if it's worth getting, it's going to be-

It'll be hard, yeah.

Another in the group identified that the level of difficulty depends on the nature of the course, but said that having a lack of confidence would make it harder. Plus in this case, lack of confidence in exams could mean having to retake which would imply extra stress.

A student who felt it would not be too hard to enter and succeed in higher education put this down to a love of their chosen field (in this case music):

Because I know I'm quite good at my music. And even though it can be challenging at times, when you know what you're doing, it's basically like a labour of love. It can be hard, but it doesn't affect you mentally. You just think, well, I'm enjoying this. If it's something that you can enjoy, it shouldn't be as hard. If you know what you're doing and you want to do it, then it should make it a bit easier.

Facilitator: So you think it would be easier to go because you're going to do something that you're passionate about.

I think it'll be fairly easy because I already know some things about what I want to do.

The comments from different participants imply different perceptions of how degree level studying compares to A Levels. For example, for another post-16 learner the social side presented the main challenge, and they were confident about dealing with the academic challenges of higher education based on their experience of A Levels:

I've been told that A-levels are the hardest... so yeah, I haven't really found them difficult. The only thing that I struggle with is the fact I'm really socially awkward, so I struggle with other people.

Challenges mentioned in the Year 12 group in LiNCHigher region included: coping with stress, managing to meet the deadlines for coursework; problems with note taking (one participant said they would struggle because they are not good at taking notes). Getting distracted from studying also came up as a difficulty for a couple of participants in this group:

Like, just being able to, like, focus and concentrate, because I struggle with that sometimes.

And, like, if I went to university, I'd probably rather be out looking at the city and everything, rather than staying in and doing the work.

For me I am very confident in the fact that I will get the grades that I need. For me it's more of will I be able to stay on track, or will I stop myself? You did all this hard work, just relax. And to get into uni, I know it's competitive. The thing is once you're in uni, everybody's the same. No one's different at that point.

Moving away from home was a relatively commonly mentioned difficulty, and the discussions identified that entering a local university was very much a preferred option for many in the Uni Connect target group.

'I don't think you know how much other people do for you, and I think I'll notice that when I'm at uni. I think I will miss my family'

'I think I'm more confident about going into the situation ...but I'm still very nervous about meeting people and say if I don't get along with someone in my room or if they don't like me, and meeting new friends when you're away from home because obviously you need that support system because you won't be close to home.'

Because I have been stuck inside with my family it will make it hard to leave them

Other potential challenges mentioned by participants in the post-16 focus groups were those around budgeting properly and good time management to keep on top of work. Indeed, managing the cost issues of higher education was a common theme across all age groups. Cost issues stood out in comments from Year 10 learners (although the older learners focused on strategies to deal with this, perhaps as a result of outreach interventions as discussed below). Financial concerns were a feature of the discussion amongst Year 10 participants in FutureHY region. Some participants questioned whether they could afford the cost implications of university study. Comments included:

It's really expensive university and I don't know if I have the money for it.

I'm quite close to college so that would not be a problem. For university I would have to take out student loans and that because I want to get an apprenticeship eventually and pay that off as well.

Clearly for some participants the cost implications of university add to the emotional (as well as the financial) burden:

Just, like pressure, because when you go to uni, you're spending a lot of money, so it's kind of like you have pressure to do well.

Yeah, and I wouldn't want it to be a waste of money from my mum and dad and from myself.

Some participants mentioned access to support networks, and in these cases having support appeared to be a factor in reassuring them about coping with going to HE:

I think I've definitely got the support and the knowledge to get in, so there's nothing else to really worry about as long as I'm confident with what I'm going to do. I think I've definitely got a good chance.

3.5.2 Implications of COVID-19 on entering HE

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was seen in comments relating to the level of difficulty participants perceived around going to university/gaining a higher education qualification, especially amongst Level 3 students. The perception is that COVID-19 has made going to university more difficult in terms of not having face to face teaching and the student experience being impacted:

I don't feel as confident about the possibility of going to university – worried about another lockdown or everything being online – I don't like learning like this.

Comments from a participant who was worried about her ability to cope with the social aspects of higher education in terms of feeling comfortable around new people implied that her concerns had worsened due to the pandemic:

I think it's mainly looking through it more, so whereas before I was like, yeah, it won't be a problem, I've looked into the different parts of what could be a problem and it just makes you want to make sure what you think is what you think. Yeah, just kind of looking to boost your confidence and allows you to be like, yeah, I can. So, it's not – because of COVID, you start to overthink... and you're doubting yourself constantly, so it just makes you look into the fact and look at the details.

Themes relating to the difficulty of socialising came up in other group discussions across educational levels:

For me, I would find transitioning into a place where not everyone's all over you like you've got to do your homework and it's due in tomorrow and stuff. Again, that freedom, but also the change of friends, have a different friend's group. So people have got to get to know you and find some sort of mental health issue and you don't really want to open up to people, too shy or have anxiety, it's a lot harder to open up and get to know more people.

I think it will be more difficult because people have lost over a year of socialising so like going to new places with new people. It's just hard.

It has affected my anxiety as I don't want to step out of the house.

That environment, going a whole month without interacting, a whole year without interacting with anyone, you kind of just get used to being alone and you start to like it more.

4. Key Findings: Role of Higher Education Outreach

Taken collectively, the students involved in the focus groups had taken part in a wide and disparate range of outreach activities, ranging from whole school assemblies to one-to-one support from a personal guidance person. The discussions focused attention on the students' recent experiences of Uni Connect higher education outreach provision, and views on the nature and benefits of this provision in the context of the pandemic. This section summarizes feedback on particular types of activities, and also draws some conclusions at a general level regarding where outreach seems to have made most difference.

4.1 Experience of virtual outreach delivery during lockdowns

The comments made in relation to the focus group participants' experience of virtual sessions online suggest that this provision had been well received in the main. Members of the focus groups stressed there had been many positive aspects to their experience of virtual forms of outreach during lockdown:

Accessibility

A few participants spoke about having issues accessing education and outreach online due to not have IT equipment (although the comments imply that IT issues had been resolved over time). Most participants, it appears, found online outreach fairly accessible. For example, a Year 10 student said that participation was 'quite easy, to be honest' and another agreed, emphasising that working online enabled a concentrated focus:

Yeah, because you were in your own zone and you weren't around anyone else.

The comments also highlight that some students found online sessions easy to participate in (implying they were easier than in person). For example, a female AS level student said:

You could comment just underneath, everyone could comment without having to fight to talk or anything, and so you could ask questions quite easily, as well.

Indeed, other participants in this group said they would prefer virtual delivery, suggesting:

I think they have been pretty similar. Like, I'm just very used to virtual now.

The comments suggest that the students had been able to engage with one-to-one support as well as group sessions online. For example, a participant in the Level 3 Year 2 group said:

...in terms of COVID impact, in class I don't put my hand up as much or I don't talk as much as my lecturers want me to, but I don't mind talking, he would say I talk loads more over call. It's like with [one to one support], I find it much easier to talk over a call than in person. And I don't think I would have been as quick to approach [one to one support] when my lecturer told me to if it was in person. Nothing on Natalie because I don't think I would have went up to someone and asked a question.

Year 10 students in the Make Happen focus group in November 2021 commented that online careers information was useful for several reasons: everything in one place; provides examples of what is needed for particular careers; a source that you can return to if you don't understand something; kept up-to-date. One student said that if you hear someone say the information once, then it is gone whereas you can return to online information, plus the information is up-dated.

Interesting and engaging content: focus group participants who had undertaken some virtual sessions said these were 'quite engaging' and 'they weren't very boring, so you could easily listen.' One participant commented:

I don't think I can bring up names, but a lot of them were quite engaging, so that was quite nice about them because you could actually listen. It wasn't... they weren't dragging on.

A couple of participants in one of the focus groups spoke about how being able to see and listen to an online presentation had been engaging and impactful. One person said: 'Well, I didn't understand anything before, and now I did.' And another explained

'Yeah, it was more like a visual thing where, even though it was online, it was very well shown, rather than just spoken. So it was quite – like, you knew what you were... like, you were very clear, sort of thing.'

Motivation/future orientation

Comments from focus group participants who had taken part in various activities during lockdown(s) emphasised that such activities were a change of focus from immediate college or school work. Comments highlighted outreach as ‘a nice break from lessons’ and ‘something different’. A Year 10 participant said: ‘whereas in a normal, like, from week-to-week, we’ll be learning strictly what we’re doing in classes, whereas we were getting to look at future stuff and help us plan that stuff.’ The aspect of having a future focus seems to be important to some students in helping them to maintain motivation and momentum in their studies. For example, a student in a Year 10 group in LiNCHigher region implied that they personally particularly struggled during lockdown because whilst school course work continued there was not the possibility of having practical sessions (in this case for motor vehicle training). In fact, this person said that their grades had dipped but that after taking part in LiNCHigher activities ‘they’ve gone a little bit higher.’ The reason given was that the activities (in this case sessions on Understanding Apprenticeships and study skills and revision strategies) have: ‘opened a lot more doors for us.’

It was also interesting to note that participants who were actively thinking about future options tended to say that the activities encouraged them to make better use of the time they had available during lockdown for researching options. This was the case for a male Year 13 learner who said:

I think the pandemic quite knocked quite a few people’s motivation and stuff. But after speaking to some teachers and obviously the Lincs people that come in, that the virtual stuff, it motivated quite a lot of them people to carry on with their work.

Similarly, another Uni Connect student in LiNCHigher region said:

Yeah, because I feel like a lot of people sort of gave up with their... what they wanted to do because of the pandemic thinking, “Oh we’ll try and get in next year”. But with the LiNCHigher motivational speakers, they helped a lot of people think that they didn’t have to give up. They could do what they wanted this year despite what was going on.

At the same time, not all participants were enthusiastic about the virtual sessions. One participant in a virtual session for example thought it was ‘a bit boring’ and another said that going into the psychology of anxiety and breathing was confusing: ‘It was just using a lot of scientific explanations for it, so I didn’t understand a thing.’

When it came to thinking about college/university visits and campus tours, the students were adamant that going in person is preferable – to be able to see the facilities for yourself. Indeed, one student was suspicious of online campus visits: ‘They can restrict what you see on virtual tours.’

4.2 Feedback on different activities

The transcripts showed that the facilitators often had to use prompts to jog participants’ memories about the activities, and participants were asked to share what they could remember with peers to aid recall. It was notable that when asked to remember the activities, that participants often found it hard to recall the nature of the activities and detail of the content, even when they could recall taking part. For example, an AS level student who had taken part in virtual outreach activities including managing change and study skills sessions said: ‘I remember somebody talked about this [focusing]... I can’t remember much else if I’m honest’. Another in this group said: ‘I can only remember that Paul guy. But I can’t really remember much of it’. However, on deeper prompting most participants were able to share their memories.

Students identified many positive aspects of outreach, although some issues also emerged, as discussed in Table 3 below. Some activities were better received than others, and to an extent an overall pattern emerged suggesting that in the main the bespoke and small-group or individualised activities were better received and more impactful than general and whole-group sessions. This is perhaps to be expected and it is a feature of the Uni Connect programme to combine light-touch information provision with a range of in-depth interventions which address particular needs, where possible within the context of a sustained and progressive programme of ongoing support for target group learners.

Table 3: Comments on activities

Group	Outreach activities	UniConnect area(s)	Summary of perspectives
AS Level	Study Skills	LiNCHigher	<p>Feedback on sessions designed to offer strategies for planning and organisation (e.g. study skills and revision sessions) have put the spotlight on techniques which students can adopt. The comments highlighted that some participants felt the sessions had given them strategies for studying. A male participant said: 'I wasn't very good at studying before. It helped broaden my different types of revision, so it helps me learn more.' A female in the same group concluded: 'You don't have to be using everything you learnt, but you've picked up little bits from each thing and now it just makes things a tad easier.'</p> <p>A Year 10 participant in study skills provision said the session helped them 'a little bit': they found useful 'different bits of how to revise, how to organise your notes, the best way to put your notes, how to revise properly.' On the other hand some of the feedback suggests that sessions had been only marginally impactful. The conclusion of one group was that this was because 'the sessions had not gone into sufficient detail: Like not in depth anyway, because I don't feel we had...we didn't have enough time or there wasn't that many sessions.' Other comments included Student 2: 'the revision thing was a bit repetitive. If it was not interactive, and there was little revision challenge, I guess we would enjoy it more.'</p>
AS Level Year 13	Finance session	LiNCHigher	<p>AS level students said the session they took part in on finance was the most useful. The comments highlight that for some students the sessions provided reassurance that the financial implications of higher education would be manageable: 'I'd probably go for the finance one because it reassured me that, no, university debt is not scary. Yeah, because I was like, oh no, I can't do it because I'd get into all this debt and I won't be able to afford it, but then they reassured me, like how it's kind of like a tax almost, in terms of when you can afford to pay it.' Another in the same group said: 'I think I picked up little bits... like, there's nothing scary about the debt. You've just got to know what you're doing and go ahead with it.'. Other students emphasised the importance of managing your finances correctly, and the comments suggested the session had taught them how to do that, which had been reassuring.</p> <p>One student in the Year 13 focus group said the session on student finance really helped them: 'because I had quite little knowledge about it beforehand. It showed me what I had to do, the deadlines, how much you could potentially be getting and how you need to go about it. [It made me feel] Quite relaxed. It didn't make me feel as stressed out about it.'</p> <p>Other participants were less enthusiastic: 'I think we might have done a little bit about, like, how much it would cost, sort of, but I can't really remember.'</p>
Year 10	University Visit	LiNCHigher	<p>Comments from Year 10 students who had taken part in a University visit the previous year (prior to COVID-19) said it was interesting to see what facilities the university offered, and interesting to find out about people, and learnt a lot about options, what you have to do – described by one participant as 'mainly research on the actual university itself. So it was good'. Another student said: 'You learned about not just about the education side of university, but the other side and the living side also.' At least one in the group said the visit had made them excited to go to university. A Year 10 student in another group in the same region said they had enjoyed going to Lincoln University: 'because you got to see what it's actually like there.'</p>
Year 13	Motivational speaker	LiNCHigher	<p>Male voice: 'The motivational speaker was pretty good. Yeah. Yeah, it helped with some motivation throughout the, when you was doing work virtually to try and getting out there to do the work again. Yeah, it was really useful. Just like... just it felt like uplifted and you felt motivated after to do, to go out and achieve what you want to achieve and complete the work that you needed to. And just like go as far as you can.'</p>
Year 10 Post-16	Careers events	LiNCHigher, WIN	<p>Feedback from Year 10 students highlights that careers events had enabled them to find out about different options: One student said: 'I think it was at the start of year nine, when there was a carnival here, where there was different stalls with different jobs and stuff. I feel like that helped us a lot because we got to go to where we were interested.'</p>

Group	Outreach activities	UniConnect area(s)	Summary of perspectives
			<p>Another commented: 'I liked the apprenticeship shop, because you just realised there's so much that you just don't know.'</p> <p>On the other hand, feedback from a post-16 group was less positive, perhaps because at this age learners wanted information more specific to their aspirations. Comments from post-16 students in WIN region highlight that the range covered had not met everyone's expectations, One person in the post-16 group said: 'I think for me when we did like the career fairs and stuff, there was a lot of focus on medical or kind of academic things like engineering that something, but there wasn't much on the creative side and I think there needs to be more on that'. Another commented: 'I remember coming in and seeing kind of a lot of like same unis or companies being there' and a third said: 'It just felt like there's lots of STEM and not much else.' Clearly the students wanted a wider range, and recommendations were: 'Enough STEM and enough creative, enough, like, law stuff or whatever, enough university stuff just so I just so everyone knows, they've got enough information' (when asked what they would like to see next year).</p>
Year 10	Xello	LiNCHigher	<p>Comments implied Xello had helped participants in gaining insights: 'With Xello you learn a lot about yourself, because you do the little skill sets, and you're like oh I never realised, you know?' and '...what your personality's like and what job would suit you best.' Another person implied the package had helped with thinking about suitable options: 'Yeah, so I liked the part where as soon as you've done it it gives you in this category, so what's very good, excellent, what matches and what's in the middle, so what you can do, but it's not that your type, if that makes sense.'</p> <p>Comments from another participant suggest that even though the IAG was via an IT solution, some students felt particularly engaged because it was something they could work with by themselves: 'When we got to, like, do it ourselves it was better. It was better to, like, understand it, because we get to do it ourselves.'</p>
Year 13 Year 12/AS Level	University Talks (whole year group in person)	LiNCHigher	<p>A couple of participants in the Year 13 group said the higher education talks had been the most enjoyable provision. One said this was because 'that's where I want to go'. Comments from others implied that the sessions helped the participants understand what they should be aiming for. For example: '[I learnt] How to go about looking for universities and where to go and what's best for what uni you... what to look at and how to get into one and stuff like that. To know where I am at the end of the year as well. Grade wise and where I need to be in the UCAS points and stuff like that to try and get there.'</p> <p>As well as learning about university in general, other messages taken away included: 'what to put in a personal statement and stuff and how to, like, if you're going to apply, to make yourself stand out more, to give you more of a chance.' At least one respondent in this group said that the information had been new to them commenting: 'I didn't really know anything at all.'</p> <p>Other students in another group were less enthusiastic: 'He came in and just, like, spoke about how to sort of apply and making decisions and stuff about university.' One participant in the Higher Education talks felt that there had not been enough sessions: 'It helped to get, like, a basic understanding, but there wasn't that many...I think he only came in about three times, so if he came in a bit more, maybe it would have helped us further.' Other comments suggest the content could have been broader: 'It's like we only really got shown one website that we could use, and obviously there's, like, a lot you could use to help research into courses, but we didn't really get into that.'</p> <p>The comments suggest that the sessions could have been more engaging: 'Because I feel like we didn't really want to talk either because it was, like, a big group of people.' This person implied they would have talked more in a smaller group. Indeed, comments suggest that some students did not find a whole group session that impactful: 'I'm not very great at understanding when people talk for a long time, so I just get distracted and so, like, most of the time I wasn't</p>

Group	Outreach activities	UniConnect area(s)	Summary of perspectives
			really focused; and its because you're not really being spoken to, it's not like on a...he's obviously speaking to everybody.'
Year 10	Motivational speaker	LiNCHigher	The feedback suggests that some students had taken away strategies from the session: 'Like, he gave us ideas of what we could do to try and achieve the goals we want, for jobs and that'. Another student said the session had taught him about having a back up plan: 'Obviously his first career didn't work out very well. And it kind of feels that that's not the end of the world. That kind of helps with if it does go wrong, it's not the end of the world. There's another one.' There was also a sense that the students had taken away messages about the importance of hard work: 'He talked through what he did to get where he was, and how he worked. Yeah, [I learnt] that you need to work hard.'
Year 10	Careers options support (whole group and individual)	FutureHY	<p>Comments from Year 10 participants in the post-16 options talk put attention on helping participants to become more aware of the wide range of options available. For example, one person said: 'There's more options to choose from. I didn't realise how many there were. That's about it really.' Another in this group agreed highlighting how different options might suit different people: 'Yeah, finding out what's out there, what you can do basically. Mostly about the available Sixth Forms around the area what could be better for us, for each individual.'</p> <p>One to one support got favourable reviews from Year 10 students in FutureHY region and the comments suggest the support had aided decision making. Participants said: I learnt about information about a career path that I wanted to do; I learnt about college and sixth forms and which one I would rather go to. The talks have put the focus on the requirements of employment and education: 'I learnt what are required from the job I want in the future; and I've learnt that I've got to work hard to get into colleges and universities that I want to get into.'</p>
Level 3 Year 1	Bespoke sessions on CV writing and Professional Development Plans	FutureHY	[I learnt] the importance of my personal profile on [my] CV and the importance of certain information being in the CV.
Level 3 Year 1	One to one IAG sessions on university applications	FutureHY WIN	<p>Clearly students who had one to one support appreciated the sessions. For example, a Post-16 student talking about Careerpilot appointments in WIN region said: 'I think from year 9, it was quite a lot to take in at that age and I tried to push it away and not really think about it. I think having someone there, sitting with you, telling you these are the options, even now when I have them, I leave the meetings, feeling a bit more, like calmer, about what is going to happen in the future because I know the options and the choices'.</p> <p>Generally students in the Level 3 Year 1 the group felt that the tutors provide excellent support and help and they like any input on employment opportunities and local jobs/apprenticeships – e.g. Next Steps Hangout group. Comments from participants in one to one IAG sessions said the benefits had been in terms of understanding next steps and thinking about options. Comments included: 'The face to face support with university research has increased my knowledge and understanding of the UCAS process and how to proceed'; 'The one to one session was good because we looked at different courses at college and I found out what some courses were that I could do'; 'The meeting helped me to confirm what I want to do after I leave school'.</p>
Year 10	Online careers website	Make Happen	Students said Unifrog was simple to use once it became familiar and useful as an all-in-one place for finding out about different careers and their requirements, and getting information on universities. However, they said only basic information was available for engineering jobs, and information was not available on all the jobs they were interested in.

4.3 Views on influence of outreach provision on higher education aspirations

The data suggests that arriving at careers and education decisions is a long-term process, and one which draws on a wide range of influences and factors specific to the individual, their context and how they see their future themselves. It would be unrealistic to be able to attribute a person's decision to continue in education to any particular activity or experience.

The types of learning outcomes from taking part in different types of higher education outreach which were most commonly identified by the students during the discussions are listed below.

Finding out about different careers

This aspect came out particularly strongly in the conversations with students in Year 10. Activities mentioned in this respect included careers talks and related sessions which put attention on different types of work and employment opportunities which young people might not otherwise consider. A careers event had been influential for another Year 10 participant because it helped him with:

'Different kind of jobs we didn't know about, like how to get a job, like what you need for GCSEs and that.'

A Year 10 learner in FutureHY region said:

'It opened up my mind to different things. If I want to do different things and not stay in the same job for ages.'

Comments from students involved in the progression framework approach in LiNCHigher region suggested that interventions over a period of time had allowed for a wide range of options to be addressed:

Yes, a lot because since year eight [they] came in to talk to us, they opened a lot of doors for us.

Facilitator: *Yeah, okay. That seems interesting. And so what did you learn from going to those activities?*

Different kind of jobs we didn't know about, like how to get a job, like what you need for GCSEs and that.

As might be expected, the comments showed that putting a focus on higher education as an option was one way in which Uni Connect was enabling a wider range of options:

It showed me options in case I want to do something at the university. When I went to the university, I mean. That was helpful there.

I suppose they have a little, because before I was originally not interested in going to university, but obviously, I've got the backup plan now to be in paramedic science and I believe they help you understand university a bit more.

I feel like it has as well because before the whole coronavirus I didn't really want to go to uni. And then at the time when we were at home I was thinking about it, so looking at the resources that they'd given me I sort of looked through those to see what I wanted to do.

Thinking about the possibility of different modes of study had been impactful for a student in one of the LiNCHigher groups:

It's also given us more opportunity knowing that not everything has to be directly this time I start this and this lesson, it can also have sort of freedom to choose a full-time or a part-time timetable for learning.

Identifying future education/training courses

The discussions in the focus groups highlighted how different types of interventions empower students to be aware of options both in a general sense (in terms of being aware of how to access information) and in a specific sense (finding out about specific options).

The post-16 participants emphasised the role higher education talks and careers guidance played in enabling them to undertake their own research. For example, a male student in Year 13 said: 'Yeah, with UCAS and where I need to be and everything like that, I know where I can get hold of information'. A female student in a different group mentioned the benefit of coming into contact with a wider range of online resources that could be used by individuals:

I think it's just broadened – like, schools are not aware... but now we're kind of there, we're using them and it's given us an extra push to be able to use them.

In terms of thinking about specific options, prominent here was individualised support at key transition points. A Year 10 participant in individualised support under the FutureHY programme of activities said:

The one-to-one meeting was good because we were talking about what I am interested in doing and what course I want to do after GCSEs.

Another Year 10 student who had received careers support said:

It made me realise different routes that I can go down at college or sixth form such as A-levels.

In relation to higher education options, there was a sense that Uni Connect outreach is enabling students not only to be better informed but to be more discerning in terms of terms of the process of decision making on courses. This was apparent in comments from Level 3 learners:

I think it just makes me look deeper into what the factors of... like, the differences between unis that are offering the same course, but different... like, which ones have the better offers with finance that it can help me, because it just makes me look into it a little more and think which one would be better for me.

The WIN can help you to make your decision and help you identify whether or not you truly want to be something, or you thought you wanted to do but there's something else that might suit you more.

Helping with understanding the requirements

Both group and individualised support appears to help with planning strategies at different stages of education. For example, a male student in Year 10 who had had a FutureHY guidance interview said the activities have helped him to understand what I need to set a target that I can achieve. Other comments from Year 10 students highlight benefits in terms of understanding what might be needed in future:

It hasn't really changed my mind, it's helped me have a better understanding of it and I know what to do

I know what I'm doing, so like whenever, like with a career, but I just look up the right qualifications I need for like computing. As I said, for like computing and stuff. And now I know what like what the focus on my strongest and my weakest point of views. (talking about using CareerPilot).

The comments suggest that the strongest influence of higher education outreach is felt in providing clarity on different routes and the implications of different options. Some learners emphasised the benefits in terms of understanding what is required for their specific higher education choices. For example, a post-16 learner who had benefit from a range of interventions including one to one support commented:

The WIN has helped me with that because they have shown me that looking at the university criteria is important and knowing what the university want from you in results and your grade it has shown me and made me more confident to work harder for it.

Application support

Both group and individual support were mentioned as being helpful in terms of making applications for courses. Comments focused participants who had made an higher education application highlighted the practical benefits from this type of support:

They've helped obviously, like we said, with personal statements and how to, like, actually apply and make yourself stick out. And with obviously they've shown us, like, different websites that we can use if we want to go online.

I can only imagine how stressful it might be to choose a university or trying to choose a higher education path to go to and not knowing the options and not knowing what there is for you. The WIN is supporting you for the first few steps in going to choose your path.

One learner in the WIN post-16 cohort said they didn't know they were a Uni Connect student and were 'quite surprised' when they received emails from a Uni Connect tutor (WIN region). However, in this case the support offered was instrumental in enabling an higher education application to be a possibility:

I was quite surprised when WIN started to email me and ask me about what you wanted and stuff like that. I think if I didn't have WIN, it would be very difficult to like do anything in terms of uni and applications, so yeah I'm really thankful that I got help.

Reassurance

HE outreach was clearly playing a role for many participants in terms of offering reassurance in relation to any fears and worries. This seems to be particularly the case around the financial aspects of higher education as shown in these comments from post-16 students:

I think it just kind of reassures you, makes you feel a little more comfortable in your decisions, especially if you apply to go to uni. It just relaxes you a little about different stresses and things, as well [AS Level student]

Yeah, I think I kind of knew what it entails, but you still, in the back of your mind, you think, how could I afford that? When do I have to pay for that? Now, it's kind of just reassured. It's like, you don't think about it as much. You think... instead of thinking, I want to go to uni, how do I pay for it, you kind of think, I want to go to uni because I want to go, and the money's more of a back thought because you know that it's not such a worry.

Motivational aspects

The students at the beginning of Year 12 in the Make Happen focus group said that a campus visit had proved motivation in terms of their decision to progress to higher education. For example, one student said:

'...when we went to the campus for university, that really influenced me wanting to go to university more. It really pushed that. Because of that I really wanted to go more than I would have done before.'

4.4 What else would you like to help you plan for your future?

Comments from Year 10 focus group participants about types of activities they would like to see in future to help them plan their careers mainly put the focus on exposure to a wider range of options and experiences outside school. This included calls for more trips to universities and clearly some students value the opportunity to see the educational options first-hand. Students in a Year 10 group in LiNCHigher region said they would like to spend 1-2 weeks at college in order to have an immersive experience of it. The focus in Year 10 was on the next step after age 16. One Year 10 student in the Make Happen focus group commented that they were not prepared to think about university yet (this would come later after Year 11).

A Year 13 participant commented that: 'it would have been a lot better if we had more university tours – like we did at the start of our sixth form course' (although he recognised that due to the pandemic that was not allowed). He said he had been on a couple of virtual university tours, and suggested it was not the same as an in person visit. Students in the Make Happen focus groups also want to see more campus tours and highlighted the following: talking to teachers who can explain what to expect and what they would be doing at university; experiencing a typical day as a student; fun activities which show what a certain subject of interest is about; finding out about facilities available for courses.

Work experience opportunities were highlighted as being important: students suggested that having work experience would make them more attractive to employers as well as giving them the chance to experience different jobs to aid their decision making on careers. Students in the Make Happen focus group stressed the importance of experiencing a job first-hand to understand what's involved.

More bespoke and individualised support came out as important for post-16 learners, to help them make decisions about specific options in education or careers:

Like, small group, like groups of people who are on the same level and then someone talking to us about how we can find a uni and courses to do and stuff like that.

Like, look in more depth into the courses and what you need to get into them and stuff, and what different unis...

Indeed, it was suggested that tailored support is a must, given that every young person will be in a different place as regards their career decision making:

Yeah, because there's some people who definitely know what they're doing and then there's others who have no idea, so it's a bit of, like, you can't talk to everyone about the same thing, because some people already know.

In terms of specific types of information that post-16 learners would like to see, more website resources and more information on finance (how to fund what they are looking to do) was requested. One participant requested more support to find specific courses – and also mentioned wanting to live and work abroad (this person is possibly looking for a course where you can learn a new language as well).

Some Year 12 and 13 learners wanted more variety in terms of the industries and pathways available when attending careers fairs, or progression-related events. Repeated mention of most events being about Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) or subjects in that field, with some learners wanting more from the humanities and social sciences (psychology) and more creative subjects (music and performing arts). Some students recalled that it became more about 'how many pens' they could get because the information was not relevant to them or their interests.

In terms of other aspects that are important to help career planning from a young person's perspective, support from family and friends came out as being especially helpful.

A number of comments focused on the participants' current experience of education and how this might be improved. Pretty much all those consulted agreed that they wanted to be in school or college and not working remotely which they all found difficult as motivation to learn was negatively impacted. In the context of COVID-19 related restrictions to educational delivery, many students felt strongly that their learning experience is more positive face to face and there needs to be more focus on student's emotional needs and the impact on mental health than the last year has had on students. There were also some suggestions for improvements to the education experience. For example, one Year 10 student made a case for better equipment in their school; another Year 10 student said their school need to 'control student's behaviour and help them focus'. Again, this person felt there is not enough support for students with mental health issues in school.

5. Key Findings and Recommendations

5.1 Key findings

- Arriving at a career decision is a long-term process for most students and students in the Uni Connect target group appear to require significant support to improve their knowledge and understanding of the options available to them. They also appear to need relatively high degrees of reassurance about how they might be able to cope with the demands of different education and training pathways.
- In the main young people are unsure of their future prospects and the pandemic is fuelling uncertainty and indecision. Even though most students have an idea of which option or options they are interested in, this is open to change. COVID-19 may be fuelling young people's indecision.
- A decision to continue in education may give some students a sense of security about the path they will follow even if they are unsure of the field. However, students do not necessarily feel well informed about their options because they appear to put off doing research into options until later in their education.
- Not wanting to continue in education can be an issue in terms of career choices in future because the careers some students were interested in required higher education. Not feeling engaged in current subjects, or not enjoying the subject, seems to contribute to feeling less sure about what to do in future.
- Some students are worried about future job prospects in some sectors in future due to the impact of COVID-19 (e.g. hospitality). This leads to further indecision and their decision making is constrained by uncertainty about the long term prospects for careers they are interested in. They do not appear to have accurate information on the job opportunities available or future trends.
- Some students are unsure because they cannot decide on an option (perceiving a wide range of options can contribute to this).
- COVID seems to have provided time to consider the future and has been a time when many students have re-evaluated their positions and are seeking to counterbalance the limited life experience available during lockdown with more active lifestyle choices in future. Some students have developed interests and aspirations during lockdown which could affect future career directions (e.g. fitness, working with people, travel related).
- The experience of education during lockdown has affected students' views about the type of educational experience (as well as employment situation) they would like in future (i.e. in favour of practical and group-based ways of learning).
- The culture of the school appears to be important in giving students a future focus, incubating ambition and providing a space for students to explore career options and reflect on future options. Outreach is playing a part in helping young people to enhance their knowledge of courses or training that will help their future career, but many students still rate their knowledge of future options as quite low because they appear to have only partial knowledge of courses or training. Different scenarios appeared: seeing higher education as a general ambition rather than specific to a particular career pathway; choosing a field but struggling with which specialism to take; finding out about one main thing but being in the dark about other options available. Not knowing what they want to do in future is as an obstacle when it comes to finding out about relevant courses or training that may be of benefit. Knowledge of labour market opportunities are quite limited and, in some cases, their plans have been unduly influenced by the short-term impact of the pandemic.
- The experience of lockdown has not necessarily changed the students' minds about higher education but had affected their ability to plan and access information and resources (e.g. attending open days etc). Some focus group participants had used time at home to research their future options, but many said they were missing out on having the opportunity discuss and grow their knowledge of their future options because they were out of the

school/college environment. COVID-19 related restrictions and the experience of education during the pandemic appears to have limited the extent to which younger learners' thought about or planned their futures.

- Understanding of the benefits of higher education is rated highly overall. Financial benefits; the breadth of career opportunities; and the personal benefits in terms of life skills were most commonly mentioned. Knowing someone who has gone into higher education helps students to learn about the personal benefits of higher education. Debt and the reduced opportunity to earn money whilst studying are the most commonly mentioned disadvantages of higher education. Some students said they were only considering local providers.
- Views of higher education have been influenced by the pandemic. Concern about the student experience going forward in a post-pandemic world, coupled with reassessment of what some participants want to do in future, had perhaps caused some students to reject progression to university from post-16 training as an immediate option for them. Plus in a situation of general uncertainty some students question whether the benefits of higher education would be realised.
- Changes in education associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have implications for how confident students feel about getting their grades – e.g. poor performance because of not having enough time to learn because of COVID. Year 10 students are concerned about the longer-term effects of the pandemic on their educational attainment. Comments highlight the danger to studying from distractions in the home environment.
- Some students feel confident about higher education because they perceive different higher education options are available to them at different levels depending on the grades achieved.
- A relatively large proportion of Uni Connect students were undecided, about their prospects in higher education. Study at a higher level appears to be the main area of concern (along with concerns about coping with stress, managing to meet the deadlines for coursework; problems with note taking; and getting distracted from studying). Moving away from home was a relatively commonly mentioned difficulty. Having access to support appeared to be a factor in reassuring students about coping with going to higher education.
- There is a perception that COVID-19 has made going to university more difficult in terms of not having face to face teaching and the student experience being impacted.
- Uni Connect is playing a role in enhancing participants' knowledge and understanding about their future options. The evidence based in this report is qualitative and cannot establish causality, however activities which appear to have particular promise in terms of effectiveness in boosting students' knowledge and capacity to navigate the process towards higher education include: finance sessions, university visits, and one to one support. Overall, bespoke and small-group or individualised activities were better received than whole-class interventions. These seem to be particularly in demand from post-16 students who want tailored help to make career decisions and education choices.
- The Uni Connect partnerships proved agile and flexible in continuing to deliver outreach with the target groups despite the lockdown. Online delivery has allowed Uni Connect to support the young people they had been working with before the pandemic and comments suggest some of them find this easier to engage with than traditional forms of outreach. Interactive activities have been particularly well received. Virtual sessions online appear to have been well received in the main and may have encouraged some students to make better use of the time they had available during lockdown for researching their options. At the same time, feedback from students suggests that in-person and group activities help to maximise the learning, and there is a perception that not being in a school environment damages understanding of future options.
- Uni Connect activities support a range of outcomes: finding out about different careers; identifying future education/training courses; helping with understanding the requirements; application support; and offering reassurance (e.g. around financial aspects).
- Students need different types of inputs at different educational stages. Year 10 focus group participants would like more trips to universities; an immersive experience of college/university; and more work experience

opportunities. Post-16 learners would like more university tours, and more bespoke and individualised support to help them make decisions about specific options in education or careers.

5.2 Recommendations

A series of recommendations emerged from the research, which were refined in the first instance in discussion with the researchers and practitioners involved in the local fieldwork. The virtual event for colleagues in Uni Connect partnerships held in January 2022 was an opportunity to further discuss the recommendations. Colleagues identified suggestions for how the recommendations might be operationalised in practice, and the potential challenges to be addressed, which are reported here, alongside the recommendations.

5.2.1 Recommendations for Uni Connect consortia and partner organisations

1. The research supports the case for ongoing and sustained interventions with the Uni Connect target groups. This is in line with conclusions from national and local evaluations of Uni Connect (CFE, 2020⁴).
2. As well as setting up activities within a progression framework, consortia should work with teachers in schools and colleges to ensure programmes are directed at those who can benefit most and to implement tracking mechanisms which ensure longitudinal support can be put in place.
3. Tailored and targeted forms of support should be prioritised, especially for post-16 learners. Uni Connect consortia partners delivering outreach should review their offer to make sure that targeted and tailored approaches are prioritised.
4. Learner voice activities should underpin the development and delivery of targeted and tailored provision.
5. Outreach activities with students should include time for reflective practices in order to help students to arrive at well-considered career decisions. Activities which build appreciation of, and skills for, reflexive practice should be prioritised.
6. Resources and materials are needed which improve students' knowledge of the labour market and the future predicted trends to help students to make more informed choices about learning and jobs. Uni Connect partners and careers information, advice and guidance practitioners should work together to develop practical guidance for an activity or resource to support students in making better informed careers choices, including how to use national and local labour market trend data.

Practitioners at the virtual event spoke about the challenges to sustained programmes given the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. There was agreement that Uni Connect teams are well placed to work closely with staff in schools and colleges to plan effective provision going forward, including working with careers leads and careers providers to ensure an integrated approach. Strengthening the capacity of Uni Connect partnerships to place staff in schools and colleges on a long-term basis came out as a recommendation of a practitioner working group. The ongoing challenge identified by practitioners is engaging with school senior leadership teams who may have other priorities. Some people would like to see clearer messaging and project planning across collaborative partnerships and higher education providers to reduce duplication and build teachers' understanding of what is on offer. There was also some discussion of how to maximise the benefits for students of taking part in a sustained programme, and suggestions included using a booklet or achievement record which students could use to collect their activities.

Colleagues said that bespoke and tailored outreach is becoming more common and it can be challenging to deliver more frequent individual support, so an agile, flexible approach is needed. Examples were given of mentoring activities which practitioners felt demonstrated promise in terms of offering tailored individual support. There were calls for outreach teams to seek to re-engage students who have become disengaged during the pandemic, and this will require a targeted approach. At the same time, it was argued that practitioners and policy makers should remain cognisant of

⁴ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/e3989a60-1314-43f5-ae0-7e94ae3946da/cfe-review-of-uni-connect-evaluation-evidence.pdf>

the ongoing implications of the pandemic for students in younger cohorts coming through the education system (Year 7 onwards), because these cohorts may need additional support to aid their educational transitions.

During the virtual discussion of the recommendations, some practitioners were keen to put the focus on proactively supporting parents and carers of target students. Potentially promising examples of approaches emerged during the discussion including student and parent virtual information sessions and a parent-to-parent ambassador model.

Much of the discussion in the practitioner working groups focused on the issue of operationalising the recommendation to build reflective practice into outreach. Examples emerged including using prompts for reflection at the end of activities, using visualisation techniques, and putting in place reflective logs/journals for completion over time. Helping students to reflect on their learning in general (i.e. metacognition) was identified as an important life-skill. Other suggestions included using light touch reflection (e.g. post-its) which could be used over time as a basis for a reflective discussion or a focus group. It was argued that reflective activities could be combined with evaluation in order to inform decision-making on activities, which would be beneficial to delivery teams as well potentially more engaging for students than other ways of getting feedback such as surveys. Some practitioners were in favour of making reflective practice an activity in itself, and this could be within the school/college curriculum as well as delivered as part of Uni Connect activities. Such an approach might be particularly effective with younger students to build useful skills for reflexive practice early on.

There was general agreement during the practitioner discussion groups on the need for more resources and materials on the labour market. Some people felt more use could be made of university careers services. Examples were given of drawing on the experiences of undergraduate alumni to help students gain perspectives on the labour market as part of a vertical tutoring model.

5.2.2 Recommendations for senior leadership teams in schools and colleges

7. Support for career decision-making should be embedded throughout the culture rather than an add on. The curriculum should allow space for discussion and reflection of students' future options.
8. Schools should seek to collaborate with Uni Connect partners to design activities for those students who missed examinations in Year 9 and 11 which will build study and revision skills in order to address the heightened anxiety which these students have around future examinations. Subject specific activities delivered in schools could be most beneficial to reinforce support from teachers.
9. Students should have opportunities to take part in campus visits in order to gain first-hand experience of a higher education environment.

There was discussion during the virtual event about the variability of approaches to delivering careers IAG across schools and colleges, including differences in what is requested from external providers and how this might supplement in-school IAG. The perception was that lack of consistency in the schools sector means a responsive, adaptive approach is needed. It was suggested that there is a gap in teacher professional development on careers and labour markets.

It was suggested that subject specific enrichment related to careers can be extremely useful for motivation and attainment and therefore easier to convince schools of its value. Some practitioners reported that schools are asking Uni Connect teams and partners for academic catch-up sessions. Several examples were given of combining visits to campus for students with activities to address missed study time and lack of examination experience (e.g. on-campus study skills sessions and subject-related masterclasses). Communication to teachers and students about how students can benefit from Uni Connect campus visits was identified as a priority by practitioners on the ground. Engaging academics in delivery, and in some cases, space, staffing and other capacity issues, were identified as constraints in a few cases. In the view of some practitioners, emotional support, as well as careers support are needed, as well as activities to support curriculum related catch-up.

Outreach practitioners at the virtual event concurred with the view that young people would like hands-on experiences and that experiences outside the students' immediate environment, such as campus visits, are beneficial to expanding horizons. Work experience was pinpointed in the discussions as an aspect which can also help to shift

students' perspectives, and one where practitioners would like to see more opportunities (although it was recognised that this is outside the remit of higher education outreach). This perspective resonates with the evidence from the focus groups regarding disruptions to work experience being a constraint to career decision-making during the pandemic.

5.2.3 Recommendations for policy makers and funders locally and nationally

10. Systematic research and evaluation is needed which might best be undertaken nationally, drawing on the experiences of local consortia, to test the strengths and weaknesses of a blended approach to outreach delivery which synthesises online and face to face interventions. This work should inform recommendations to the sector regarding blended models of delivery of sustained and progressive outreach.
11. Strengthen the capacity of Uni Connect partnerships to place staff in schools and colleges on a long-term basis

The working groups identified that practitioners would like to see more research focusing on the best way to effectively manage dual/blended delivery. Examples were given of where virtual delivery had been useful for providing individual support (for example using mentoring platforms). When it comes to virtual delivery, challenges to be addressed include identifying the best way of working within students' timetables to maximise the number of students who attend who can benefit most from online sessions; crafting an offer which is engaging to students and emphasises active rather than passive participation; the most effective approaches for combatting 'virtual fatigue'; and the best ways to encourage and promote self-directed activities online including research on higher education opportunities. Some people said there is a mismatch between what students want and what schools choose to accept, which needs unpicking. The opportunity was identified by practitioners to review the effectiveness of interventions using the approaches of different collaborative partnerships.

Annex I: The Focus Group script

I. Introduction

- Introduce yourself and the co-facilitator, if used.
- Thank everyone for attending and explain the purpose of the session and how the information will be used.
- Make sure they have seen the privacy notice /consent to take part and give them the opportunity to ask questions/clarifications if needed.
- Assure students of confidentiality and anonymity. They have the right to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.
- Ask permission to audio record the session.
- Ask the students to introduce themselves.
- Set some ground rules – e.g. just one person to talk at a time, respect other people’s views. Ask them to suggest any other ground rules.

2. Student demographic information

Note number attending, student’s year group, gender, and which Uni Connect activities they’ve been involved in (or not).

3. Views on Uni Connect / [Local Programme] outreach activities

*3.1 Which Uni Connect / [Local Programme] have you taken part in this school year? (Have a list at hand to act as a prompt)

3.2 How were the activities delivered? (i.e. virtually - recorded or live / in person in the classroom)

3.2.1. Which format do you prefer and why?

3.3 Which activity did you enjoy the most and why? (Prompts: What did they think of the presenters, format of delivery / length / topics and information covered, etc)

3.4 Which activity did you enjoy the least and why?

*3.5 What did you learn from taking part in the activities? (i.e. new skills, information, about F/HE etc)

4. Voting questions (note: adapt questions to reflect the year group of the students)

- Use coloured post-it notes or any paper available.
- Ask the students to vote by holding up a number between 1 and 5 as indicated under each question.

Career Plans

*4.1 How sure are you about what you want to do next when you leave school/college? (Vote 1 if you are not at all sure what you want to do next and 5 if you are very sure)

a) Explore why the students voted the way they did.

b) What career(s) are you considering/decided on and why?

c) Has the COVID-19 pandemic and school lockdowns affected your plans for the future?

If YES How? (i.e. has it been in a negative or a positive way).

d) How has taking part in the Uni Connect / [Local Programme] outreach activities affected your decision on what you will do next?

e) What, or who, else has helped you with making decisions about what to do when you leave school/college (e.g. teachers – which ones specially, parents, friends, the internet, etc)?

Knowledge

*4.2 How much do you know about courses or training that will help you with your future career and what you

want to do next? (Prompts: for example, the courses and qualifications needed to be a teacher or a nurse, or to work in hospitality or in business). (Vote 5 if you know a lot about the courses that will help you with your career and 1 if you have not yet looked into it.)

- a) Explore why the students voted the way they did.
- b) Has taking part in Uni Connect / [Local Programme] activities helped you find out about courses or training that you were previously unaware of and if so how?
- c) What else has helped you to find out about courses and training (e.g. their family, friends, the internet etc)?

Benefits of HE

*4.3 How would you rate your level of knowledge and awareness of the benefits of studying in further / higher education? (Vote 5 if it is very high and 1 if it is very low)

- a) Explore why the students voted the way they did.
- b) How, if at all, has taking part in Uni Connect / [Local Programme] activities improved your knowledge and awareness of the benefits of going to F/HE.

Confidence

Years 9, 10 and 12

4.4 How confident do you feel about getting onto your further / higher education course if that's what you decide you want to do?

Years 11 and 13

4.4 How confident do you feel about meeting the entry criteria to get onto your chosen course?

(Vote 5 if you are very confident and 1 if you are not at all confident)

- a) Explore why the students voted the way they did. Why do or don't they feel confident of getting onto their chosen course?
- b) How, if at all, has taking part in Uni Connect / [Local Programme] helped you with your confidence, especially in relation to getting on the course you want to go onto?
- c) What, or who else, has helped you with your confidence in this area (e.g. teachers - which ones specially, parental support etc)?

Challenges

*4.5 How difficult will it be for you personally to go to college / university and gain a further / higher education qualification? (Vote 5 if you think it will be extremely difficult or challenging and 1 if you are confident that it will not be a problem)

- a) Explore why the students voted the way they did.
- b) Has the COVID-19 pandemic made going to college or university more or less difficult for you and why?
- c) How has taking part in the Uni Connect/ [Local Programme] activities has helped you with strategies or tips on how to overcome or negotiate some of the difficulties you face?

5. What else?

5.1 What is important to you when deciding what to do after your exams?

5.2 What sort of help or support would you like to help you plan for your future?

*5.3 What else would you like to help you succeed in your future career?

6. Uni Connect

6.1 How, if at all, has taking part in Uni Connect / [Local Programme] outreach activities influenced your decision of what you will or might do when you leave school?

a) Has it changed your mind and if so how?

b) Has the COVID-19 pandemic influenced you in any way and if so how?

*6.2 Is there anything else anyone would like to say about their experience of Uni Connect [Local Programme] activities or the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their future plans?

7. The Focus Group

*7.1 How have you found taking part in the focus group today?

7.2 Is there anything you've enjoyed about this group session or anything that you've not liked about it? If so, what?

Thank you all for taking part in the group today.

Note: Questions with a * are the priority questions – if you are short of time and need to ditch some aspects focus on the starred questions only.

Collaborative research to understand what young people think about their future options in times of COVID-19

About the research project

Research Aims

The research aims to gain an understanding of:

- ❖ the effect of COVID-19 on pre- and post-16 students' attitudes to the future
- ❖ their views on higher education
- ❖ the factors which might affect their progression in education (positive and negative)
- ❖ the implications for outreach, and
- ❖ what Uni Connect partnerships might do now to support them with their future careers.

Key features

A collaborative project across different parts of the country (North Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Humberside, Wessex, Essex, Swindon, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire).

Using a series of focus groups with students in Years 10 and 12/13 to develop conclusions and to make recommendations.

Who's the research for?

- ❖ The Uni Connect partners: FutureHY, Study Higher, LiNCHigher, Make Happen, Wessex Inspiration Network (WIN), and Humber Outreach Programme (HOP)
- ❖ Teachers and other stakeholders involved in planning and delivering higher education outreach
- ❖ Policy makers in the Office for Students and Department for Education
- ❖ Other bodies involved in outreach evidence and evaluation

Further Information

For further information please contact:

XXXX local contact

What's involved?

- Focus groups with students in Year 10 and Year 12/13 who have taken part in Uni Connect activities.
- 6-8 students per group lasting approximately 40 minutes.
- Ideally groups will be face to face in a quiet space at the school/college (could be online or socially distanced if required).
- The groups will be facilitated by a member of the research team (working with a co-facilitator).
- Confidentiality and anonymity in reporting is assured.

What will the students get out of it?

- An opportunity to reflect on their next steps in education and future career aspirations
- Learning from each other about potential future option choices and different career trajectories
- The chance to be consulted and to have their viewpoints heard
- The opportunity to participate in a group discussion session and get an insight into the type of activities used in higher education
- Learning about how focus groups are used for research purposes
- The chance to influence future outreach activities for other students like them

Annex 3: Information on the focus groups

Level	Timing	Mode	Number of participants*	Uni Connect Activities	Uni Connect	Context
AS Level	May 2021	In person in classroom	4 students 1 boy / 3 girls	Finance talk; Managing change; Made Training study skills.	LiNCHigher	A medium size college with ~1,700 full-time students on the east coast rated as outstanding by Ofsted in October 2019.
Year 10	June 2021	In person in classroom with teacher present	5 students 3 boys / 2 girls	Motivational speakers. Some also had First Steps	LiNCHigher	A medium sized secondary school (~700 students) in the rural north of the county without a sixth form. 19% of the target students are UC. The most recent Ofsted rating was Requires Improvement.
Year 13	May 2021	Conducted over TEAMS with the students accessing as a group in their classrooms with a teacher present.	6 students 5 boys / 1 girls	Motivational speaker and Student Finance workshop	LiNCHigher	This is a large (~950 students) coastal secondary school with a sixth form 64% of students in the target years are UC. The school was Ofsted rated as Requires Improvement in January 2020
Year 10	July 2021	The session was conducted over Teams with the students in the classroom together along with a teacher.	4 students 1 boy and 3 girls	A motivational speaker; Post-16 options sessions x2; Goal Mapping; Into to further and higher education	LiNCHigher	
Year 12	May 2021	Face to face in the classroom.	5 students All girls	HE talks included finance, research and personal statements	LiNCHigher	37% of target years are UC, Ofsted rated Good (April 2016), a large inner city secondary school (~920 students) with a sixth form
Year 10	July 2021	The session was conducted in person in a classroom.	6 students 3 boys and 3 girls	A motivational speaker via Teams – during lockdown (note only one participant actually attended).	LiNCHigher	
Year 10	July 2021		5 students 3 boys and 2 girls	Understanding apprenticeships; Made Training; access to Xello (a career system)	LiNCHigher	This is a large school with around 1165 students on the north east coast of the county. The school has approximately 50% of Uni Connect students and was Ofsted rated as Requires Improvement in January 2019.
Year 10	July 2021	The session took place in person, in the classroom.	4 students: 2 boys and 2 girls.	A motivational speaker; Further Education talks; Aim a little higher part 1; Kudos	LiNCHigher	This is a very small secondary school (~235 students) in the counties market down. 61% of its student population in the target year groups are UC. It was rated by Ofsted as Inadequate in November 2020 and has had several changes in identity / management during Phase 2 of the Uni Connect programme, the most recent being in January 2021.
Year 10	June 2021	Hosted in person at the school with HEA present	7 students	A mentoring programme, in year 9, which was run over several	WIN	A new academy school established in September 2019 and part of an Academy

Level	Timing	Mode	Number of participants*	Uni Connect Activities	Uni Connect	Context
				weeks, where the each learner was mentored by an employer mentor. A talk about apprenticeships, a Careerpilot workshop and a CV workshop. Some were career ambassadors and attended extra events.		Trust. Secondary school with a sixth form, approximately 800 pupils. The last Ofsted inspection was in 2018 and was graded as 'Requires Improvement'. The school has been involved with the WIN since the start in 2017 and the Head Teacher. They employ an higher education adviser, funded by the WIN, to work with learners in their school and other schools in their area.
Year 12/13	June 2021	Hosted in person at the school with HEA present	5 students	Substantive programme of activities since Year 9 including Career Pilot Workshop and follow-up, Careers Fair, study support (Year 9); Interview support, 1:1 interview, work placement and support, higher education Talks and taster days (Year 10); Apprenticeship Assembly, Careers Fairs, 1:1 support, sessions on stress, higher education talks (Year 11); virtual higher education Fairs and talks (Year 12), WIN Advisor 1:1 and email support (Year 13).	WIN	
Level 3 Year 1 Learners	June 2021	Hosted remotely via Microsoft Teams	1 student	1:1 higher education adviser and email support	WIN	A substantive general further education college and university centre with provision across 4 campuses. The college offers a wide range of apprenticeships as well as full-time, part-time and university level courses. The last Ofsted inspection was in May 2018, when they maintained the 'Good' assessment achieved in 2015.
Level 3 Year 2 learners	June 2021	Hosted remotely via Microsoft Teams	2students	1:1 with HEA Adviser, phone and email support, Preparing for Personal Statement and preparing for the UCAS Fair' talk, UCAS Apply Session, well-being support and webinar tutorials	WIN	
Year 10		In school facilitated by outreach assistant	6 students	Exam prep workshops, revision residentials, and 'Small Changes, Big Difference' workshops. Uni Connect work here has been around Careers, IAG, and individualised support. Many years 11 students receive 121 college/post-16 application support. All target learners in year 10 received a careers interview in the 2020-21 academic year. FutureHY supported	FutureHY	A member of an Academy Trust with approx. 730 learners across year 7-11. Approximately 61% of year 9-11 pupils are Uni Connect target learners. Across years 7-11, approximately 63% of pupils live in POLAR 4 Quintile 1 or 2 areas. Less than 5% live in POLAR4 Quintile 4 or 5 areas. The school was rated 'Inadequate' by OFSTED in a January 2017 inspection. Observations

Level	Timing	Mode	Number of participants*	Uni Connect Activities	Uni Connect	Context
				the school to obtain the Quality in Careers Standard and supports with both FutureHY staff delivering careers interviews and by providing funding to buy in additional careers support.		included that: Teachers do not have high enough expectations of what all pupils, but especially the most able, can achieve; Disadvantaged pupils make much less progress than they should; Year 11 pupils have failed to reach their potential over a three-year period (Source: OFSTED, 2017). The school have engaged with the Uni Connect Programme (formally known as NCOP), since its' launch in 2017.
Level 3 Year 1 students, all returning to College in September 2021 to complete a 2 year Extended Diploma		Session ran in school with course tutor taking notes	8 students All female	One to one CEIAG activity (self-referred); CV workshop; Next Steps Google Hangout (weekly 1 hour remote session answering questions on progression); remote session on student finance and budgeting; remote session on student accommodation. Bespoke sessions on CV writing and Professional Development Plans; one to one IAG sessions on university applications (2 students).	FutureHY	General further education college (and part of a wider education group which includes colleges and Academy Schools) with approx. 505 learners. Ofsted rating: Requires Improvement (May 2019). Progression trends data shows that 79% of 16-18 students achieved their qualification; 80% of 19+ students achieved their qualification; 75% of all students have a positive destination either into employment or further study.
Year 10		PG ran the session Session recorded on laptop	7 students 5 male and 2 female	One year group session on Post-16 options; One to one CEIAG meetings	FutureHY	This is an 11-16 Secondary school currently with 666 pupils (with a capacity of 750). Ofsted rated this school as Good in Nov 2017. Subject specialism is Sport. The school 6 th form closed in July 2019. About 50% of students progress to further education colleges. 40% of students progress to a 6 th form. 10% of students go onto an apprenticeship programme
Year 10	November 2021	Session run online and recorded on laptop. Member of staff present	7 students 3 males and 4 females	Unifrog (in Year 9)	Make Happen	A mid-sized school with sixth form. The school resides in the south of the county in a large town, it received 'Requires improvement' Ofsted rating in October 2019. Over 90% of the pupils at the school are Uni Connect target learners.
Year 12	November 2021	Session run online and recorded on laptop. Member of staff present	4 students 3 females and 1 male	Campus visit (in Year 12)	Make Happen	

*Gender split information was not consistently collected