

The North East Uni Connect Programme

Impact Report

Universities

Durham University
Newcastle University
Northumbria University
Teesside University
University of Sunderland

Colleges

Bishop Auckland College
City of Sunderland College
Darlington College
Derwentside College
East Durham College
Gateshead College
Hartlepool College of Further Education
Middlesbrough College
Newcastle College
New College Durham
Prior Pursglove and Stockton Sixth Form College
Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College
Stockton Riverside College
The Northern School of Art
Tyne Coast College



Overview

This update shares data on the work of the North East Uni Connect Programme¹ from its launch in 2017 until August 2020. The North East Uni Connect Programme is a partnership of universities and further education colleges in the North East region, working together to support young people in the North East think about their futures and how higher education can help them reach their goals. We are one of 29 partnerships of the National Uni Connect Programme which is funded by the Office for Students to deliver outreach in areas where higher education participation of young people is low, in particular where it is lower than expected based on GCSE-level attainment. Uni Connect started in January 2017, since then the 29 partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners have offered activities, advice and information on the benefits and realities of going to higher education.

Our FutureMe programme of activity is offered to students in these targeted areas, schools and colleges. Students taking part in FutureMe will have access to a range of activities and events to support them in considering their future options and learning about educational pathways available to them. Since 2019, we are also providing a single point of contact for teachers and advisers in the North East, signposting and improving access to information and support to encourage progression to higher education through our outreach hub Outreach North East. The outreach hub also provides a platform for wider collaboration.

We work closely with schools, colleges, Local Enterprise Partnerships, local authorities and other stakeholders not only to deliver outreach activity, but also to develop evidence around effective practice in widening participation through evaluation of its impact on our students.

For example, evaluation of the FutureMe Year 9 Mentoring Programme in 2018/19 has shown a statistically significant positive impact on students' academic self-efficacy.

With schools and colleges facing immense difficulties due to the Covid-19 pandemic, young people from disadvantaged background are affected disproportionately². The Centre of Economic Performance at the London School of Economic warns, that 'without policy action to counter the threat, unprecedented economic and education shocks could inflict long-term 'scarring' effects, damaging future life prospects for young people'³. In fact the Prince's Trust reported that young peoples' outlooks for the future have already been affected with 44% of 16 to 25-year olds reporting that their aspirations for the future are now lower as a result of the pandemic and over a third reporting they have 'lost hope' for the future⁴.

Uni Connect partnerships are in a powerful position to support young people not only in these challenging times, giving them the skills and support needed to make informed decisions about their future and regain lost hope. However the Uni Connect programme, which funds the North East Uni Connect Programme's work, is due to end in July 2021, with future funding yet to be confirmed by the Office for Students. We are working to embed sustainable practice in the region's target schools, while urging the Government to continue funding our work.

Participation in Higher Education in the North East

Figure 1 shows the UCAS higher education entry rate for 18 year olds⁵ in the English regions; although improving, the 18 year old entry rate in the North East of England remains the second lowest in the country, and significantly below the English average.

In the North East, our focus is targeted on 92 wards. These wards were selected based on low participation in higher education for 18 and 19 year olds relative to GSCE-level attainment.

Since the launch of Uni Connect, we have engaged with students in all 92 target wards, engaging over 50% of the target population in 87 out 92 wards.

The benefits of attending higher education on individual and society levels have been widely documented, such as lower crime rates, increased life expectance, better mental health and greater social mobility, even over generations⁶.

Over 87% of the target students⁷ we engaged so far live in the 30% of most deprived⁸ neighbourhoods of England (see Figure 3). Those underrepresented in higher education due to social, financial, cultural or geographical barriers are more likely to be excluded from the benefits higher education has on individuals as well as society.

Despite young people from disadvantaged⁹ areas being 61% more likely to enter higher education than they were ten years ago, young people from the most advantaged areas were still more than twice as likely to enter higher education as the most disadvantaged¹⁰.

Figure 1: UCAS 18 Year Old Entry Rate by Year and Region (UCAS End of Cycle Report 2019)

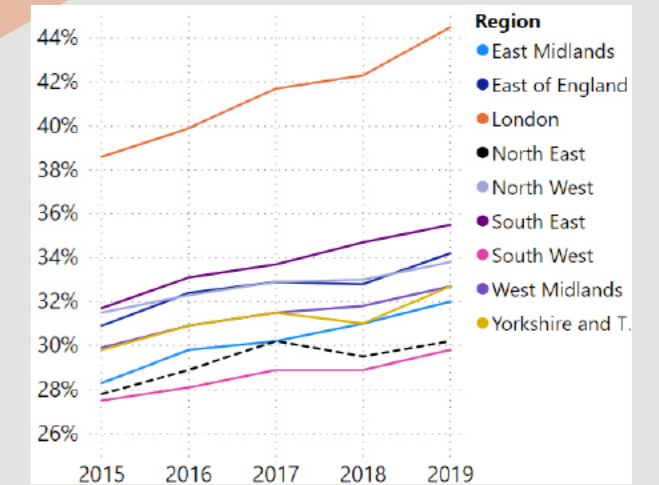


Figure 2: Sample Target Wards in the North East with Ward Penetration¹¹

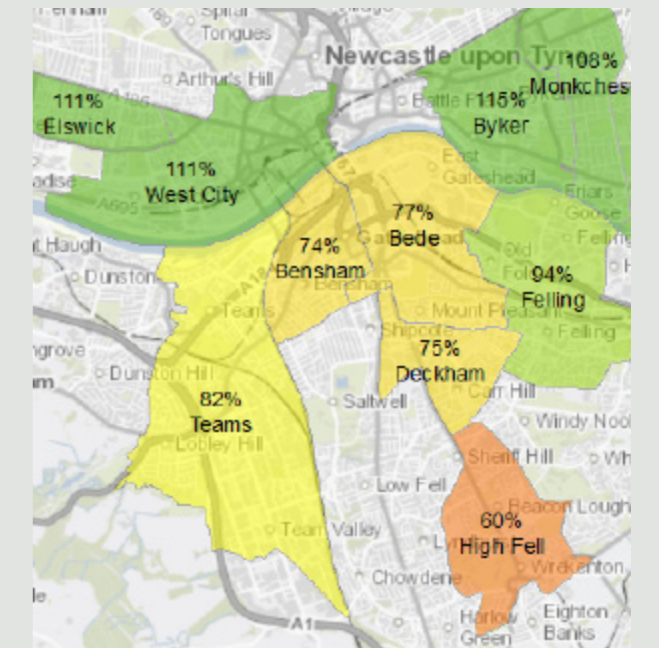
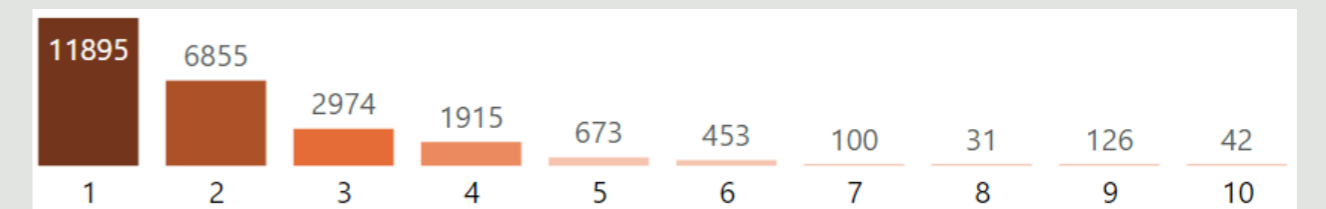


Figure 3: No. of target students engaged by IMD Decile



The North East Uni Connect Programme's Work

In order to address low participation rates, we have been working with institutions in the region to support and enable target students to make informed decisions about their future.

Since the launch of the Uni Connect programme, over 25,000 students in Uni Connect target wards assigned to the North East Uni Connect Programme have been engaged in activity. Over 6,600 activities were delivered, engaging over 160 secondary schools and colleges in the region.

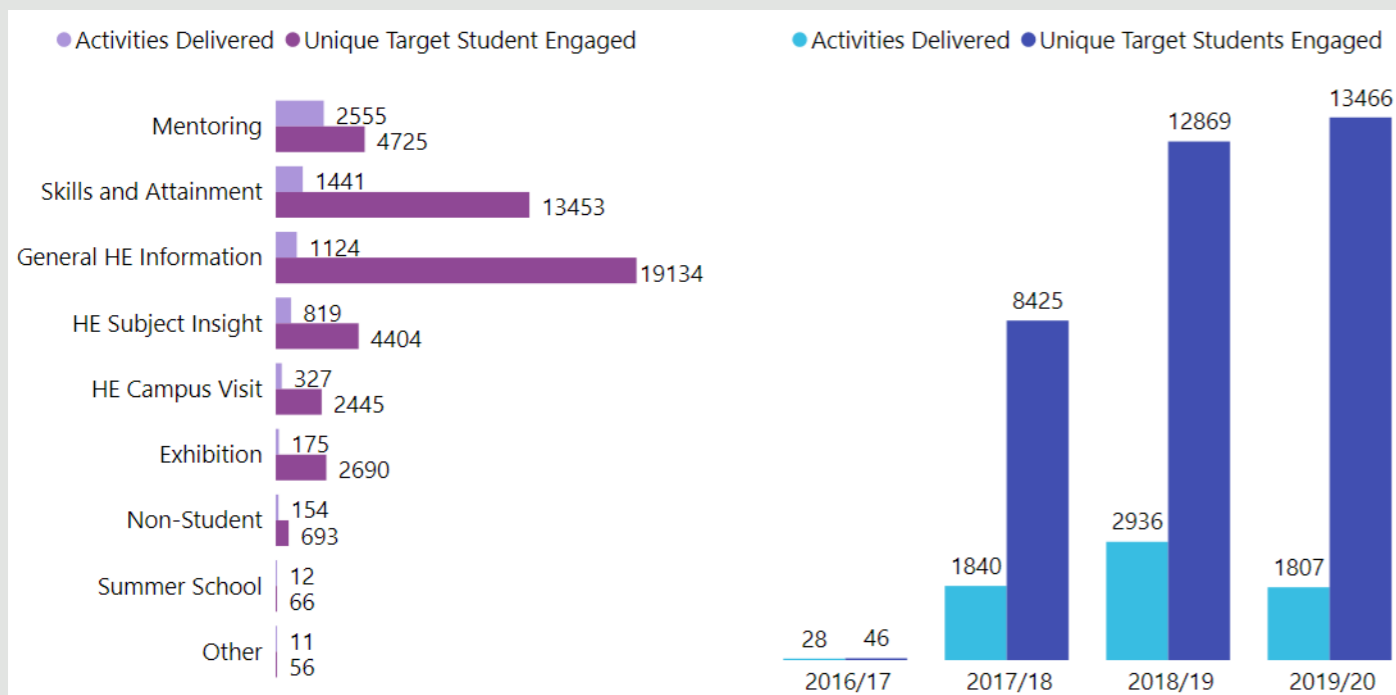
Figure 4 shows a breakdown of the number of activities delivered and the number of target students engaged in the different types of activities.

Mentoring and Skills & Attainment sessions were most commonly organised, including an intensive Year 9 face-to-face mentoring programme and a range of third-party provider sessions such as David Hodgson's 'The Buzz', Medical Mavericks and Enact delivered in schools, as well as a wide variety of skill-focused session delivered in colleges. Most students were engaged in General HE Information activities, which include our wide range of Higher Education Ambassador sessions.



Since the launch of Uni Connect, we have increased the number of students engaged in activity year-on-year. Activities showed a promising up-ward trend, however the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in hundreds of activities being cancelled between March and July 2020. Despite the massive impact these unprecedented times are having, we are proud to have been able to swiftly adapt our delivery to the needs of students and school. More information on our response to the pandemic can be found on page 5.

Figure 4: Activities and target students engaged by activity type (left) and academic year (right)¹²



Higher Education Participation and Student Attitudes

Our outreach work is aimed to be sustained and progressive, which means we intend to engage students throughout years 9-13 with a range of interventions over a period of time. We work with the Office for Students, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS), Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) in order to measure the long-term impact on students' progression to higher education. This data will become more and more meaningful each year as more cohorts we have worked with reach an age at which young people typically apply to higher education.

education, which could be an indication of a positive impact of student finance-focused activities.

Furthermore, despite being motivated in their studies and believing higher education is possible, only 34% of the North East respondents to the 2019 survey felt that higher education was for people like them, highlighting the need for ongoing engagement to change attitudes towards higher education, especially with the Covid-19 pandemic impacting students' aspirations and hopes for the future, and disproportionately affecting disadvantaged young people.

The latest CFE survey¹³ results (2019, Wave 2) for young people in the North East of England show that potential barriers to higher education remain manifold, including getting appropriate grades (21%), the desire to work and earn money right away (18%) and still being undecided whether they wanted to go to higher education (15%).

Interestingly, only 10% named costs as the main reason they might not go on to higher

Figure 5: What is the main reason you might not go on to higher education? (CFE Wave 2, 2019, n=1071)

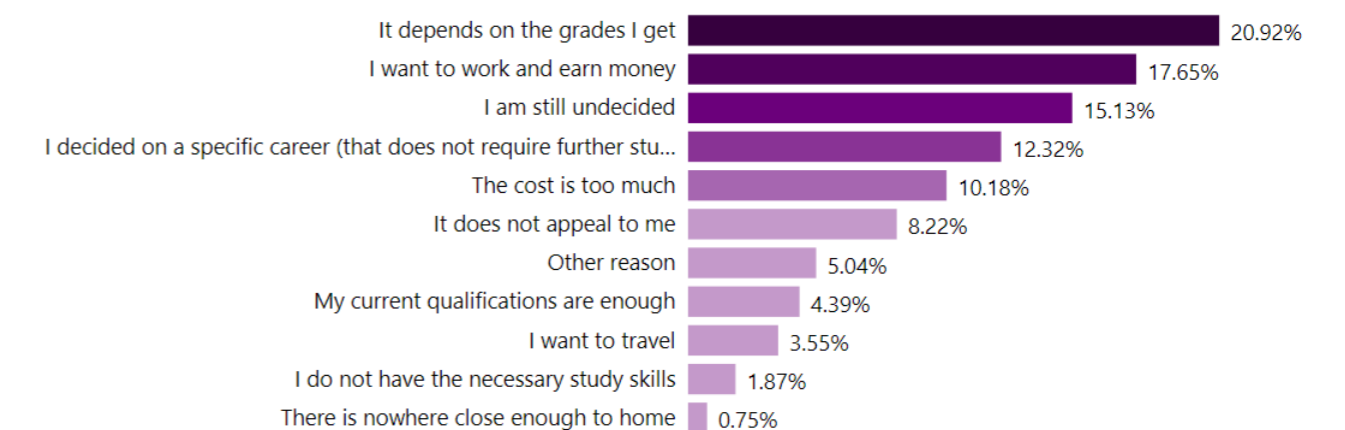
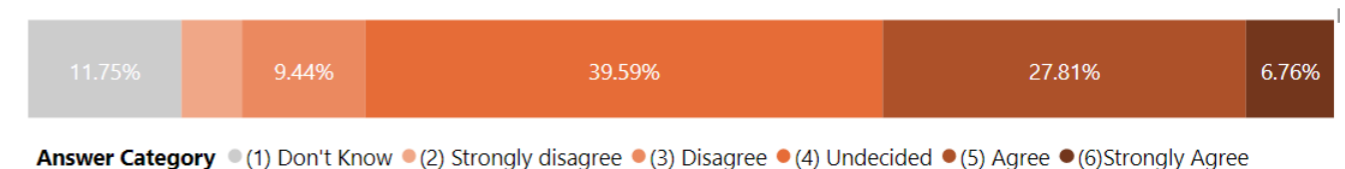


Figure 5: How much do you agree with the following statements about higher education? 'It is for people like me' (CFE Wave 2, 2019, n=2647)



Response to Covid-19 Pandemic

With lockdown measures being introduced and school closures impacting from March 2020, we started adapting our delivery formats as soon as possible to ensure as many students as possible can access our outreach activities despite the additional barriers the pandemic created. Between 17th March and 31st July 2020 we delivered 96% of our activities online, compared to only 1% before March 2020. This enabled us to increase the number of target students we engaged in 2019/20 compared to 2018/19 by 4.6% to over 13,400 students, despite hundreds of face-to-face activities having been cancelled.

In July 2020 we delivered HE Fest 20, our first online higher education festival, which saw 16 of our partner institutions and a number of employers and key sector organisations come together to deliver 21 sessions to students, parents and carers, and teachers and advisers over five days. Each festival day focused on one of the learning outcomes from our own North East Regional Progression Framework¹⁴.

In addition to the vast amount of resources already available to students and their parents and carers on our FutureMe website¹⁵, we also introduced a new online toolkit for teachers and advisers on our Outreach Hub webpages¹⁶ to access up-to-date resources supporting them and their students during this pandemic and in the future.

In 2020/21 the North East Uni Connect Programme continues its work with schools and colleges to support them and their students in these challenging times. In light of the new obstacles schools, colleges and students are facing, we remain responsive to their needs and offer a blended delivery approach. This includes offering sessions in multiple delivery formats, online and in-person, keeping up-to-date with the latest government guidelines, while always putting students', teachers' and our staff's safety first.

Now more than ever, can we have an impact on young people's lives, and support them in these times of uncertainty and going forward.

Endnotes

- 1 Formerly known as 'North East Collaborative Outreach Programme' or NECOP.
- 2 Montacute, R. (2020) Social Mobility and Covid-19. The Sutton Trust.
- 3 Major, L.E., & Machin, S. (2020) Covid-19 and social mobility. London School of Economics.
- 4 Prince's Trust (2020) The Aspiration Gap.
- 5 The 18 year old entry rate refers to the proportion of the 18 year old population who were accepted to higher education.
- 6 Great Britain. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS). (2013). The benefits of higher education participation for individuals and society: key findings and reports: 'the quadrants'.
- 7 Target students are students living in the target wards assigned to our partnership by the Office for Students.
- 8 Based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). IMD is part of the official English Indices of Deprivation 2019 published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government. Decile 1 represents the 10% of most deprived neighbourhoods and Decile 10 the 10% least deprived neighbourhoods.
- 9 'Advantaged' refers to young people living in POLAR4 Quintile 5 areas, while 'disadvantaged' refers to those living in POLAR4 Quintile 1 areas.
- 10 UCAS (2020) End of Cycle Report 2019.
- 11 Ward Penetration is the proportion of students engaged in a target ward. The ward population is based on population estimates. Actual population sizes might be different hence ward penetrations over 100% are possible.
- 12 North East Uni Connect Programme data extracted from HEAT on 29th September 2020.
- 13 The Office for Students commissioned CFE Research to undertake the national evaluation of the Uni Connect Programme, which includes repeated survey rounds capturing students' attitudes towards higher education study.
- 14 More details: <https://www.outreachnortheast.ac.uk/media/1104/north-east-regional-progression-framework.pdf>
- 15 Resources on the FutureMe website: <https://futureme.ac.uk/resources>
- 16 Resources on the Outreach North East website: <https://www.outreachnortheast.ac.uk/toolkit/>

Contact Us:

If you have any questions about the contents of this report, or would like to stay informed about our activity please contact us using the channels below.

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