

Explaining the Gaps: Using Lincolnshire-specific data from the national Uni Connect learner survey for targeted outreach

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Report

Funded by the Office for Students (OfS), Uni Connect (formerly the National Collaborative Outreach Programme) is delivered through 29 local learning partnerships comprising universities and colleges depending on local context. It delivers targeted Higher Education outreach activities to young people in Years 9 to 13 in schools or their equivalent elsewhere. The focus of Uni Connect is in geographical areas where the Higher Education participation of young people is much lower than expected based on GCSE-level attainment. There are some 997 wards across England that fall into this category. At the time of writing (May 2020), the initiative was currently in its second phase (August 2019 to July 2021).

Within Lincolnshire, the Uni Connect programme is delivered by LiNCHigher based at Bishop Grossteste University in Lincoln. The project team ordinarily delivers outreach activities as part of the Uni Connect programme to over 40 schools and colleges in the county reaching approximately 4,200 target learners. The local evaluation for Phase 2 of the programme is managed within the Lincoln Higher Education Research Institute (LHERI) at the University of Lincoln.

During the ongoing Covid-19 crisis, Uni Connect partnerships are exploring alternative ways of engaging with learners, and evaluation methodologies are evolving to reflect the different modes of delivery. Like other evaluators, LHERI is currently embedding evaluation in the online delivery of the LiNCHigher programme. The LHERI evaluation team also manages a LiNCHigher funded project called 'Explaining the Gaps'. This project has been running since 2018 and informs the LiNCHigher evaluation using analysis of the Lincolnshire-specific data collected through a national learner survey. This survey addresses learners' knowledge and awareness of Higher Education (in addition to other educational benchmarks) and is a key part of the national impact evaluation. During Phase 1, a baseline and follow-up (Wave 1) survey were completed in 2017 and 2018 respectively. Wave 2 of the survey was completed at the beginning of Phase 2 during Autumn 2019. Within the Explaining the Gaps project, gaps in learners' knowledge and awareness are

identified based upon responses to the survey. One of the aims of the project is to enable the delivery of targeted outreach activities and to identify hidden sub-groups of learners within larger cohorts using quantitative methods. In light of the current situation, the 'gaps' identified will be used as a forward planning tool for when schools reopen. Gaps are identified at a school and year group level, and where possible by further sub-groups (e.g. gender, Uni Connect target learners and students with a self-reported disability). This targeted approach is intended to enable LiNCHigher to deliver effective outreach activities within schools, making the biggest impact whilst maximising resources.

Although the survey is focussed on Uni Connect target learners, responses are not restricted to these students. Similar to the experience of Uni Connect partnerships in other parts of the country (Tazzyman, et al., 2018), many schools in Lincolnshire prefer not to single out Uni Connect learners, and collecting responses from a wider population makes it possible to have a comparison group. In 2019, LiNCHigher collected 10,875 responses to the Wave 2 follow-up survey, 9,800 for Wave 1 (2018) and 2,400 at baseline (2017). Wave 1 and 2 were completed online, whilst the baseline data was collected via a paper survey, which helps account for the reduced response rate.

The LiNCHigher version of the survey contained 29 questions about various aspects of Higher Education. Whilst it is valuable to look at the responses to each of the individual questions on a school by school basis, it is usually more beneficial for planning targeted interventions to group questions that address similar themes together.

The national learner survey is arranged so that distinct blocks of questions address different topics. In order to confirm that questions may be aggregated, a technique called principal components analysis (PCA) was used to reduce the number of variables to produce a smaller set of so-called hidden or latent variables, or principal components, in order to aid description and analysis (for an overview of principal components analysis see Jolliffe and Cadima 2016). Standard criteria were adopted (e.g. scree plot, eigenvalues greater than one) to determine that five components was the optimal number. Once established, a simple score determined from the average of each survey item can then be applied to each. Once the scores are applied, each learner ends up with a summary score for each component. Finally, the components are summarised by the underlying theme of the grouped variables. The five LiNCHigher survey themes included:

- Application knowledge
- Participation knowledge
- Confidence and resilience
- Study skills
- Personal benefits of Higher Education

The OfS strongly encourage embedding the Uni Connect local evaluation within an appropriate framework such as Hayton and Bengry-Howell's (2016) theory- and evidence-based Network for Evaluating and Researching University Participation Interventions (NERUPI) Framework. LINCHigher outreach activities have been mapped to both the Gatsby Benchmarks of good careers guidance (Holman, 2014) and the Network for Evaluating and Researching Participation Interventions (NERUPI) Framework in order to categorise each activity by the intended learning objective. The five learner survey themes generated using PCA broadly align with the NERUPI Framework's five 'Practical Learning Outcomes' (see Hayton and Bengry-Howell 2016 for a detailed discussion of these).

In order to use the data for targeted outreach, firstly the scores within a year group for each of the five survey themes were ranked by centile and reported by quartile. Secondly, an average score for each of the themes was calculated for each year group within individual schools. These scores were then compared to the overall Lincolnshire year group quartiles. Where there was enough data, average scores were also compared for sub-groups. Scores that fell within the lowest or the highest quartiles were highlighted, and all scores were summarised using a red, amber and green traffic light scale presented in table format. Scores for each of the themes were calculated using all the survey responses within each year group and not just the Uni Connect learner responses. In this way gaps identified through the survey data (i.e. scores that are in the lowest quartile) can be tackled by appropriately mapped activities. For example, Uni Connect target learners in a specific year group within a given school might have a group average score for confidence and resilience within the lowest quartile of scores (shown as red in the summary table). In this case these students might benefit from activities that specifically address this issue.

As part of the evaluation, learners that participated in both Wave 1 and Wave 2 will hopefully be tracked in follow-up surveys longitudinally. At the beginning of Phase 2 six schools from different parts of the county were identified as case study schools. When schools can be visited again, a series of focus groups will be convened with a number of students from each location but specifically with a sample of those for whom longitudinal data are available. Originally, these were planned for the beginning of the summer term to capture students' views of the outreach activities

they had participated in throughout the school year and explore the impact. As the focus groups have been postponed for now, they can also be used as an opportunity to help understand the impact the Covid-19 outbreak on these learners. There is uncertainty whether a Wave 3 follow-up survey will run in the Autumn of 2020, but if it does this will be followed up with the same students again.

There are some limitations to the overall analysis presented. Data collection took place in the Autumn term and could be seen to be out of date as the school year progresses. However, there are observable patterns in the data between Wave 1 and Wave 2, which suggests that the findings can be used as a template – or a starting point – for a school which helps LiNCHigher plan outreach activities due to take place in the next academic year. In addition, the depth of data relies on the number of responses from a school to enable reporting for sub-groups. However, providing feedback on students' responses is popular with schools and supports collaboration. In practice, it has meant that schools have been more inclined to participate in the survey and this has translated to an increased response rate.

References

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