Formative Evaluation of Uni Connect Phase 3: Pre-16 Attainment raising Activities

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Glossary

CPD – Continuing Professional Development

EAL – English as an additional language

EEF – Education Endowment Foundation

FSM – Free School Meals

FE – Further Education

GCSE – General Certificate of Secondary Education

HEAT – Higher Education Attainment Tracker

HEP – Higher Education Provider

HESA – Higher Education Statistics Agency

LAC – Looked After Child(ren)

OfS – Office for Students

PSHE – personal, social, health and economic

PP – Pupil Premium

SEND – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

TASO – Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education

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Executive summary

Introduction

Phase Three of Uni Connect is being delivered between August 2021 and July 2025. It introduced a new focus on raising pre-16 attainment in state secondary schools as a pilot for the 2022-23 academic year. From 2023-24, Uni Connect partnerships were expected to deliver evidence-based collaborative approaches to raise attainment at Key Stage 3 (Year 7 to 9), and into and through Key Stage 4 (Year 10 to 11), in local state secondary schools drawing on the expertise and resources of local higher education providers (HEPs). This evaluation builds on previous formative evaluations of Phase One, Phase Two and the early stages of Phase Three of the Uni Connect programme. This evaluation had a specific focus on the delivery of the attainment-raising strand during the 2023-24 academic year.

This evaluation included three stages. In Stage 1 of the evaluation, we reviewed partnerships' operating and attainment-raising plans for the 2023-24 academic year, which informed the development of our evaluation framework. As part of Stage 2, we conducted in-depth interviews with all 29 partnership leads in February 2024. Alongside interviews with partnerships, we conducted four interviews with key stakeholders. Stakeholders included representatives from the OfS, Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO), and Higher Education Attainment Tracker (HEAT). In Stage 3 we conducted six partnership case studies in April/May 2024, which involved interviews with (internal/external) delivery staff, HEP staff and school staff (n=28). We also conducted a partnership-wide school survey in May 2024, that generated responses across 24 partnerships (n=95 schools). Finally, at the end of Stages 2 and 3, we facilitated two workshops with partnership leads to present and validate findings.

Key findings

- Uni Connect partnerships sought to develop attainment-raising plans and activities to meet schools' specific needs, via the co-development of delivery plans with school staff and emphasis on addressing the local area's attainment needs.

- In general, partnerships reflected positively on the delivery of attainment-raising activities to date. While many experienced frustration and nervousness at the time of developing their attainment-raising plans, they have now settled into delivery and are making progress against their plans.

- So far, partnerships have delivered activities that centred around metacognition, study/revision skills, literacy (with a focus on reading comprehension/spelling), subject specific tutoring, and non-academic barriers to learning. Partnership leads emphasised the importance of taking a flexible and iterative approach to delivery to meet learner needs and to not interfere with teaching timetables.

- Attainment-raising activities were well received by schools, with all activities receiving a high percentage of very satisfied/satisfised ratings from survey respondents. Study skills, non-academic barriers and metacognition ranked the highest with 94%, 93% and 96% satisfaction respectively. The survey results found that amongst those staff surveyed 93% perceived learners to be satisfied/very satisfised with both metacognition and study skills activities.

- Most partnerships decided to offer higher impact activity to a few schools rather than less intensive activity with a larger number of schools. This meant partnerships often set deliberately smaller

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targets for their attainment-raising activities and, in some cases, partnerships have worked with fewer schools than planned. However, at the time of interviews, partnerships still had substantial amounts of delivery planned for the rest of the academic year, working towards their targets.

- To ensure appropriate experience and expertise in delivering attainment-raising activities, partnerships have leveraged internal expertise within the team (e.g. former teachers), brought in external expertise (via delivery partners and third-party providers) and used available resources. Engagement with HEPs has been varied, particularly in accessing academic expertise on attainment-raising. HEPs have provided resource, where possible, through granting access to their facilities and providing delivery staff.

- The most common barrier for delivery was a range of logistical challenges related to planning activities in schools. Other challenges partnerships have faced include the recruitment of delivery staff, uncertainty around long-term funding provision and the complexity of aligning attainment-raising within their wider Uni Connect strategy. The main facilitator reported across partnerships is their ability to leverage and maintain existing positive relationships with partners and schools.

- Most school staff surveyed (82%) would continue to engage with attainment-raising activities in the long term and most thought that the attainment-raising activities would contribute to positive outcomes for young people. Of those surveyed, 91% agreed/strongly agreed that it would lead to improved confidence, 76% agreed/strongly agreed it would lead to improved educational attainment and 70% agreed/strongly agreed it would reduce the attainment gap between learners.

- The majority of partnerships applied a mixed method approach utilising both quantitative pre-post surveys and qualitative interviews and focus groups to support their monitoring and evaluation of attainment-raising activities. Several partnerships have been able to access learners' grades through existing data sharing agreements and will be looking at the difference in predicted and/or actual grades to help understand the impact of attainment-raising activities.

- Challenges for monitoring and evaluation can be categorised as: 1) school-based challenges and 2) resource-based challenges. School-based challenges included issues like teaching staff struggling to find the time to support monitoring and evaluation, and some schools were reluctant to share learners' data. Resource-based challenges included insufficient evaluation expertise within partnerships and issues identifying appropriate validated surveys and questionnaires, especially for assessing continuing professional development (CPD) activities.

Conclusions

Overall, the attainment-raising activities were well-received by the schools we spoke to and surveyed (though this was subject to selection bias). This was facilitated by positive relationships between schools and Uni Connect partnerships, which were often based on existing work together in previous years and trust developed over time. Equally, schools appreciated when activities were tailored to the needs of their school and learners as well as flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances. Although it was clear that there were still barriers to securing buy-in, many partnerships appeared to have been successful in overcoming initial scepticism from schools – resulting from the shift in focus of Uni Connect – as delivery continued through the year, with intention to continue in future years within additional schools.

Partnerships and schools reflected that outreach activities are still needed to best support young people into higher education. Schools initially engaged with Uni Connect partnerships based on their

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focus on outreach activities such as campus visits, and this was still reported as a key interest for schools. Both partnerships and schools raised concerns about how the shift in focus (and reduced funding) resulted in fewer outreach opportunities that created gaps schools cannot fill themselves. Therefore, the balancing of different strands will be a key consideration for future delivery, and partnerships would welcome more clarity on Uni Connect's wider mission.

Delivering metacognition and study skills sessions tended to be more popular but links to attainment should be carefully considered. The metacognition evidence base suggests that it works best when applied to tasks rooted in the curriculum. As such, partnerships should pay careful attention to how these sessions are delivered – in terms of frequency, duration, and content – to ensure they are set up to maximise impact on attainment, and future application by teachers.

School staff played an important role in behaviour management, safeguarding, and logistics though capacity posed challenges. Partnerships and schools have gained a better understanding of the resourcing requirements from schools, which will be important to communicate to new schools.

Schools were seen as best-placed to select learners though there is scope to refine how learners are identified. In most cases, schools identified learners based on criteria provided by partnerships and were broadly considered best-placed for the task, given their knowledge of learners and their circumstances, and provided them with a degree of autonomy. However, it was clear that eligibility criteria were not always used consistently and activities might not be reaching those who could most benefit.

HEPs were less likely to be involved in attainment-raising activities relative to wider Uni Connect activities. Partnerships attributed less engagement among HEPs to the mismatch in timeframes and requirements for Access and Participation Plans, and engagement should be leveraged more moving forward.

It was too early to say how these activities will impact attainment. School staff felt that learners were showing improvements in confidence, engagement, motivation/ambition, and the development of new skills, but less clear on impact on attainment directly. More generally, the nature and quality of evaluation activities may preclude robust estimates of causal impact.

The absence of multi-year funding and funding reductions that were announced during the fieldwork period creates instability for partnerships and results in delivery challenges. Some partnerships expressed a desire to create longer-term programmes for learners to attend over more than one year, but funding made planning these programmes higher risk for partnerships and schools. Another core challenge is around staff retention and time required for planning and timetabling discussions.

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1 Introduction

Ipsos UK was appointed by the Office for Students (OfS) to deliver a formative evaluation of Phase Three of the Uni Connect programme, focusing on the delivery of attainment-raising activities during the 2023-24 academic year. The formative evaluation explored what was working well, less well and why in delivery, including capturing the views of schools and wider partners involved in delivering attainment-raising activities, as well as enablers of and barriers to effective practice. This document reports the findings from the evaluation of Phase Three's attainment-raising strand, conducted between December 2023 and June 2024.

1.1 Background

The Uni Connect programme was established in January 2017 to support the government's social mobility goals to increase the number of young people from underrepresented groups going into higher education. It is led by the OfS and delivered through 29 partnerships of universities, colleges, local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, employers and other local partners across England.

The programme has included three phases:

- **Phase One: January 2017 to July 2019** – involved delivery of targeted outreach focused on 997 specific wards in England where participation in higher education was lower than expected given the GCSE results of the young people who lived there.
- **Phase Two: August 2019 to July 2021** – building on Phase One, Uni Connect continued to deliver targeted outreach. This phase included an additional strand (outreach hubs), which enabled partnerships to develop strategic collaborations with local partners to deliver outreach in schools and colleges beyond the target wards.
- **Phase Three: August 2021 to July 2025** (with funding subject to confirmation on an annual basis) – the objectives of Phase Three shifted away from direct delivery of targeted outreach towards more collaborative strategic interventions, including new responsibilities for partnerships around developing an attainment-raising offer to be delivered from academic year 2023-24.

The attainment-raising activities and interventions developed by partnerships in Phase Three should focus on developing collaborative approaches to raising attainment at Key Stage 3 and into and through Key Stage 4 in local state secondary schools. Drawing on the expertise and resources of local Higher Education Providers (HEPs), each of these interventions should support one or more of the following aims:

1. Upskilling and supporting existing teachers.
2. Providing targeted academic support to learners.
3. Tackling non-academic barriers to learning.
4. Supporting curriculum development.

Partnerships were expected to develop their collaborative approaches to attainment-raising during 2022-23 with a view to starting delivery of these from 2023-24. There was also an expectation that a significant proportion of resources and funding for attainment-raising activity should come from regional stakeholders, with Uni Connect partnerships playing a strategic brokerage role.

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1.2 Evaluation aims

This evaluation builds on previous formative evaluations of Phase One, Phase Two, and the early stages of Phase Three of the Uni Connect programme. The Phase One formative evaluation captured the perspectives of partnership staff during initiation and early delivery of the programme, whilst Phase Two focussed on partnerships' progress in establishing the new outreach hubs and capturing the views of school and further education college staff on their experiences of the targeted outreach delivered through the programme.

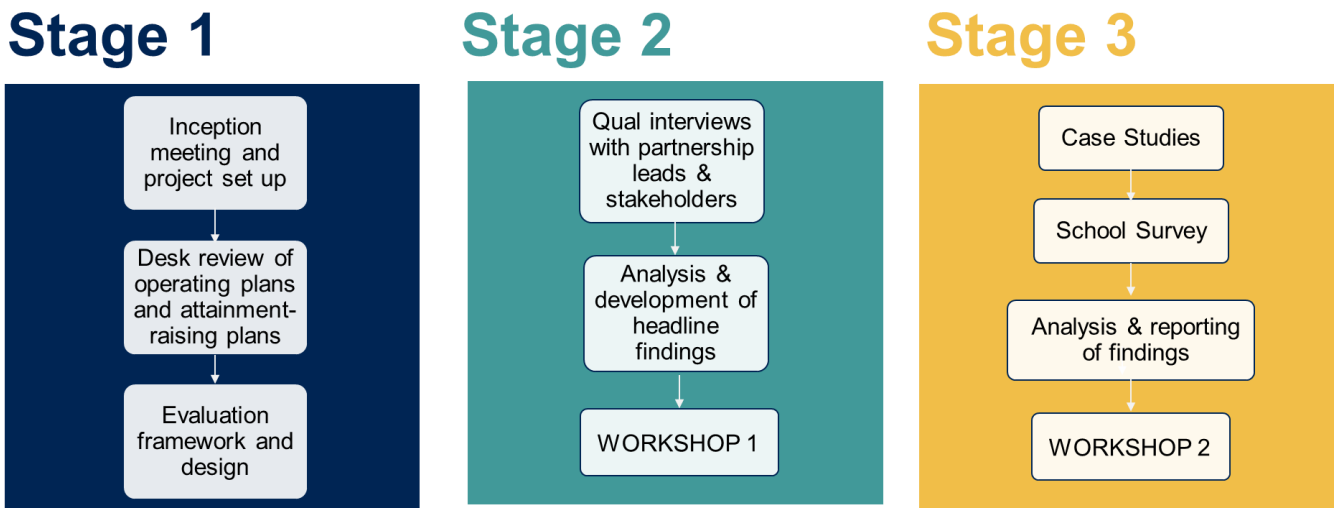
Ipsos UK also previously conducted a formative evaluation of the early stages of Phase Three between May and December 2022, which included partnerships' early plans for attainment-raising. To build on this, OfS commissioned Ipsos UK to further evaluate the delivery of attainment-raising activities in 2023-24. This evaluation is distinct from the previous three formative evaluations with its emphasis on attainment-raising, a new focus introduced under Phase Three. Specifically, the objectives of this formative evaluation are as follows:

- Understand the progress of Uni Connect partnerships with attainment-raising delivery in 2023-24.
- Understand the opportunities, challenges and any unintended consequences of attainment-raising activity, including the view of schools.
- Identify and share effective practice to enhance programme delivery and impact.
- Generate evidence to inform future policy and funding decisions in relation to attainment-raising plans.

1.3 Methodology

The methodology for this evaluation was conducted in three stages, as summarised in Figure 1.1 below. The findings included in this report draw together data collected and analysed across all three stages.

Figure 1.1: Evaluation methodology



In Stage 1, we reviewed partnerships' operating and attainment-raising plans for the 2023-24 academic year, which informed the development of our evaluation framework (see Annex A). We also reviewed previous evaluation outputs to inform the evaluation design and development of research tools. For example, the previous evaluation included development of an updated Theory of Change for the

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programme[1]. This recognised a number of assumptions underpinning the Theory of Change that we sought to explore in this evaluation. These included:

- There is an evidence base on attainment-raising that is accessible to partnerships.
- Partnerships are able to broker relationships between HEPs and schools/colleges.
- Partnerships have the capacity and expertise to develop a high quality attainment-raising offer.
- Partnerships are able to source attainment-raising provision/interventions that are applicable, impactful and informed by identified needs.
- Local partners collaborate with partnerships on delivery of Uni Connect interventions.
- Uni Connect interventions deliver intermediate outcomes for learners, which contribute to improved attainment and/or more informed choices.
- Improved educational attainment contributes to increased participation in higher education (for those who reach the required level for higher education).
- Assessment of need/targeting within each area is based on up-to-date data and insights.
- Interventions are impartial and delivered by people with the right skills and expertise.

As part of Stage 2, we conducted in-depth interviews with all 29 partnership leads in February 2024. The focus of these interviews was the following:

- The nature and types of attainment-raising activities planned for 2023-24, including how evidence and theory have been used to develop plans, which partners have been involved, who the activities will target (e.g. under-represented groups), and the intended scale of delivery.
- Progress and anticipated progress towards the intended attainment-raising activities, including the role of HEPs.
- What has worked well and less well in the planning, design and early delivery of attainment-raising activities, including key enablers and barriers, resultant lessons learned and any unintended outcomes.
- Approaches to monitoring and evaluation, including how partnerships are monitoring their delivery of attainment-raising activities and measuring whether it has been successful.
- Effectiveness of local partnership infrastructure and governance in enabling and facilitating collaborative activity across the sector with regards to attainment-raising activities.

Alongside interviews with partnerships, we conducted four interviews with key stakeholders. Stakeholders included representatives from the OfS, Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO), and Higher Education Attainment Tracker (HEAT). These interviews focused

[1] Formative Evaluation of Uni Connect Phase Three: Final Report (March 2023). Available at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/8220/formative-evaluation-of-uni-connect-phase-three-final-report.pdf

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on the wider context and ambitions for higher education involvement in pre-16 attainment-raising activities. This provided a better understanding of how the activities planned and delivered by Uni Connect partnerships fit within the wider landscape of activities and the extent to which partnerships have tapped into available resources relating to the evidence base and potential metrics for success. We also hosted a workshop with partnership leads on 6th March 2024 to review the initial findings from the interviews and provide an opportunity for discussion and feedback, offering further context and explanation. The workshop was also an opportunity to inform the next stage of the data collection (see Figure 1.1) and secure buy-in to support with case study selection.

In Stage 3, we conducted case studies with six partnerships in April/May 2024, which involved 28 interviews with internal and external delivery staff, HEP staff and school staff. Insight from delivery partners facilitated a more detailed understanding and allowed for a broader range of perspectives to be considered. Case studies were selected based on agreed criteria, ensuring variety in the funding size and intended scale of delivery across partnerships. The focus of these in-depth interviews was to explore the views and experiences of different stakeholders regarding delivery progress, including:

- Their experience of planning and/or piloting the attainment-raising activities, focussing on how partners and other organisations (e.g. schools) were involved. This also included how partnerships deviated from and adapted original plans as required for school environments.
- Progress with delivery, with a particular focus on reflections of engaging and delivering within schools. This also examined respective facilitators and barriers for different types of attainment-raising ’activities.
- Their perceptions on local partner infrastructure and collaboration, and the extent to which this enables collaborative pre-16 attainment-raising activity more widely. The range of stakeholders interviewed allowed for a broad range of opinions, particularly to further understand schools’ and HEPs’ perceptions of collaboration.
- Their approach and experience of monitoring and evaluating attainment-raising activities, particularly focussing on facilitators and barriers when working with schools to complete this and any examples of knowledge-sharing best practice across partnerships and/or partners.

We also conducted a survey of schools in May 2024 that generated 95 responses across 24 partnerships. The survey added breadth to our existing data collection methods by capturing views from a larger number of schools, extending reach beyond the case study sample. This was deemed particularly important as the attainment-raising strand placed different demands on school staff compared with previous Uni Connect engagement. The survey consisted of mostly closed question options with four open-ended questions. It sought to focus on capturing views on attainment-raising activities that had been delivered to date, focussing on satisfaction, perceived effectiveness and any lessons learned.

Following data collection, all findings were analysed and triangulated to answer the evaluation objectives specified. Finally, we hosted a second workshop on 19th June 2024 to review our Stage 3 findings with the partnership leads. The workshop involved exploring experiences of monitoring and evaluation as it developed throughout the academic year, and also capturing partnerships’ overall reflections on the successes and challenges of this new strand in the context of funding changes.

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1.4 Limitations

It is worth noting a small number of limitations of the evaluation:

- At the time of interviews in February 2024, many partnerships were still early in delivery and had substantial delivery plans for the remainder of the academic year. This reflected the careful planning and set-up that continued into the autumn term. As such, these interviews reflected earlier stages of delivery.
- Partnerships were responsible for sending the survey link to schools, and we were therefore unable to track how many schools received the link or calculate a response rate. However, based on information provided by partnerships, we estimated that they were working with approximately 225 schools – though potentially up to 350 schools. This means the survey sample of 95 schools may not provide views representative of all schools involved and should therefore be read with some caution. Furthermore, sub-group analyses were not possible due to the sample size (n=95).
- Between Stage 2 and Stage 3 of the data collection, partnerships received funding allocations for the next academic year. For some, funding was stable while others experienced notable decreases in funding. This context shifted perspectives during data collection, particularly around future delivery.

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2 How have partnerships progressed with attainment-raising delivery?

2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines findings about how Uni Connect partnerships developed attainment-raising plans and progress towards delivering these activities in schools. It covers how partnerships targeted schools and learners as well as how partnerships designed activities to meet the needs of schools and learners. It also covers what activities are currently being delivered and how delivery has been adapted from original plans.

2.2 Development, scoping and co-design

Summary: There were two main ways in which the activities have been tailored by partnerships to meet schools' specific needs:

1) The co-development of delivery plans with school staff

2) The emphasis on addressing the local area's attainment needs

2.2.1 Co-development with schools

Partnerships emphasised the importance of co-developing delivery plans with schools to ensure activities were tailored to the needs of schools and learners. This often related to the aims and content of the activities (e.g. meta-cognition, study skills) and how this fit with the school's existing curriculum approach. This was enabled when there was good alignment between the school's existing curriculum approach and the attainment-raising ambitions. Discussions about practical issues such as the school's preferences around timetabling and how learners are selected for activities often required ongoing conversations from planning stages through to delivery. Partnerships stated that by including *"what schools wanted"*, engagement was better as a result. However, the practicalities required for co-developed planning and delivery was a challenge for some partnerships in practice as this required additional time, resource and flexibility. In some cases, this also had significant impacts on partnerships' original plans, which had to be adapted in flight. This is discussed further in section 2.5

Some partnerships described the process as more co-consultation or co-agreement rather than co-development: making sure the activities were relevant and appropriate to what the schools needed and wanted, but the schools were not playing a major role in developing the delivery plans.

2.2.2 Co-development with partners

Partnerships felt that delivery plans were successfully co-developed with partners as well as schools. This was especially the case with higher education partners. Delivery staff noted that the co-development of delivery plans was particularly enabled by strong existing relationships between the core team and partners and schools. Good communication was key in maintaining these relationships which itself was enabled by staff having one consistent contact for partners.

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2.2.3 Addressing local need

Partnerships sought to prioritise the local area's specific attainment needs, either at a school or area level. For example, one partnership identified through research that their area had significantly lower literacy attainment levels than the national average and used this to inform their attainment-raising delivery. Other approaches to address local need were also taken (e.g. discussions with school senior leadership) to provide a bespoke response with genuine intentions to improve attainment:

> *"Our strategy really responds to the region, to the needs of schools, and to the needs of young people rather than it being a recruitment exercise which it can sometimes be for [higher education] institutions." (Partnership lead).*

In another example, to avoid over-saturation of activities being delivered to schools, one partnership identified that academic study support was a *"flooded market"* in their area and thus chose to take a study skills approach instead.

Some partnerships noted that often local need and national need are one and the same. The schools they worked with have similar needs to address. This was supported by findings from the school survey reporting similar activities being delivered across partnerships to similar target learners.

2.3 Selection of schools and learners

Summary: All partnerships have criteria for targeting learners, however they tended not to be rigid with applying it in practice and schools tended to lead on selecting learners to take part in the activities. However, there were some exceptions where activities had a specific target group, such as learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). Most partnerships decided to offer high impact activity to a few schools, meaning they had deliberately smaller delivery targets. At the time of the interviews, most had not reached their targets yet as there were still substantial amounts of delivery planned for the rest of the academic year.

2.3.1 Selecting schools

As this was the first full year of delivery, most partnerships decided to offer higher impact activity to a few schools rather than less intensive activity for a larger number of schools. This meant partnerships often set deliberately smaller targets for their attainment-raising activities. To select schools, most partnerships already had an established list of priority schools based on criteria such as deprivation and school-level attainment data. This was supported by the May 2024 survey of schools, where 68% of schools reported that they have previously engaged with Uni Connect prior to the introduction of attainment-raising activities. This informed an assessment of need, which was often combined with discussions with school leaders to gauge their interest. Some partnerships actively identified schools where they have strong existing relationships to help support initial buy-in and engagement. They reflected that other schools would likely want to see examples or case studies of how the delivery has worked in practice before being willing to embed the activities, meaning they leveraged relationships with high levels of existing trust.

In some cases, partnerships have worked with fewer schools than planned, as they aimed to focus on effective delivery in a select number of schools rather than more limited delivery in a larger number of schools. However, at the time of interviews in February 2023, partnerships still had substantial amounts of delivery planned for the rest of the academic year. Overall, the estimated scale of delivery can be summarised as follows:

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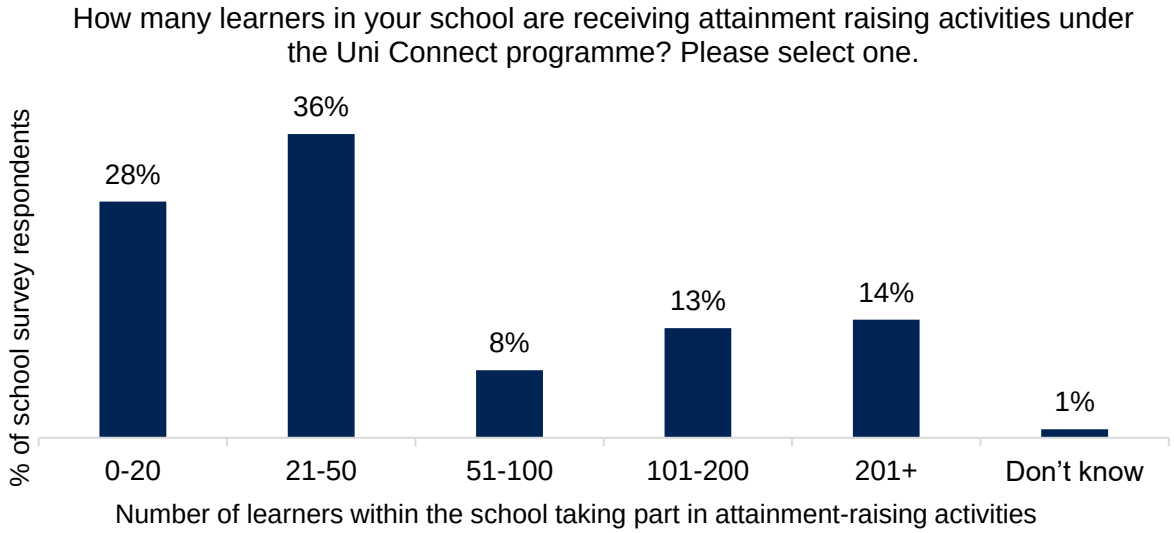
- 16 partnerships targeting under 10 schools.
- 6 partnerships targeting 10-20 schools.
- 7 partnerships targeting over 20 schools.

Case study partnerships participating in data collection activities at a later timepoint had substantially progressed delivery with most having either completed or nearly completed delivery by that time.

2.3.2 Identifying learners

As outlined in Figure 2.1 below, the number of learners within schools varied. Of the school staff surveyed, 64% reported that up to 50 learners within their school were taking part in attainment-raising activities, whereas 45% reported more than 50 learners taking part. These survey results further reflect partnerships' preference for prioritising effective delivery of activities rather than high volumes of delivery.

Figure 2.1: Reported number of learners receiving attainment-raising activities



All partnerships set at least some criteria for targeting learners, however they tended not to be rigid with applying it in practice and schools tended to lead on selecting learners. Partnerships respected that schools often felt best placed to identify which learners are the most appropriate participants in offered activities. Of those surveyed, two in three school staff (65%) reported that their school identifies eligible learners using criteria provided by their Uni Connect partnership (Annex B, Figure B3). In some cases, partnerships had staff embedded in schools, which facilitated learner selection based on their knowledge of the school and learners. According to interviews, the core criteria used for targeting typically included eligibility for pupil premium (PP), free school meals (FSM), and learners with borderline grades. This was reflected in the survey of school staff as shown in Figure 2.2 with 69% stating that PP was used as a targeting criterion, followed by other considerations such as attainment (55%), age (53%), postcode (49%), and FSM (48%). Together, these indicators were intended to identify more disadvantaged learners who were expected to benefit from attainment-raising activities. As shown in Figure 2.3, almost all survey respondents (92%) reported that learners from economically disadvantaged backgrounds were participating in attainment-raising activities. More than half of school staff also reported that learners participating in activities included those with SEND (64%) and borderline grades (57%).

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There were also instances where partnerships delivered activities targeting specific groups. For example, one partnership offered SEND continuous professional development (CPD) activities and only targeted learners with SEND. Another partnership delivering activities on ambition-raising alongside attainment-raising targeted learners based on race, socioeconomic status, and English as an additional language (EAL).

Figure 2.2: Criteria used to identify learners for attainment-raising activities

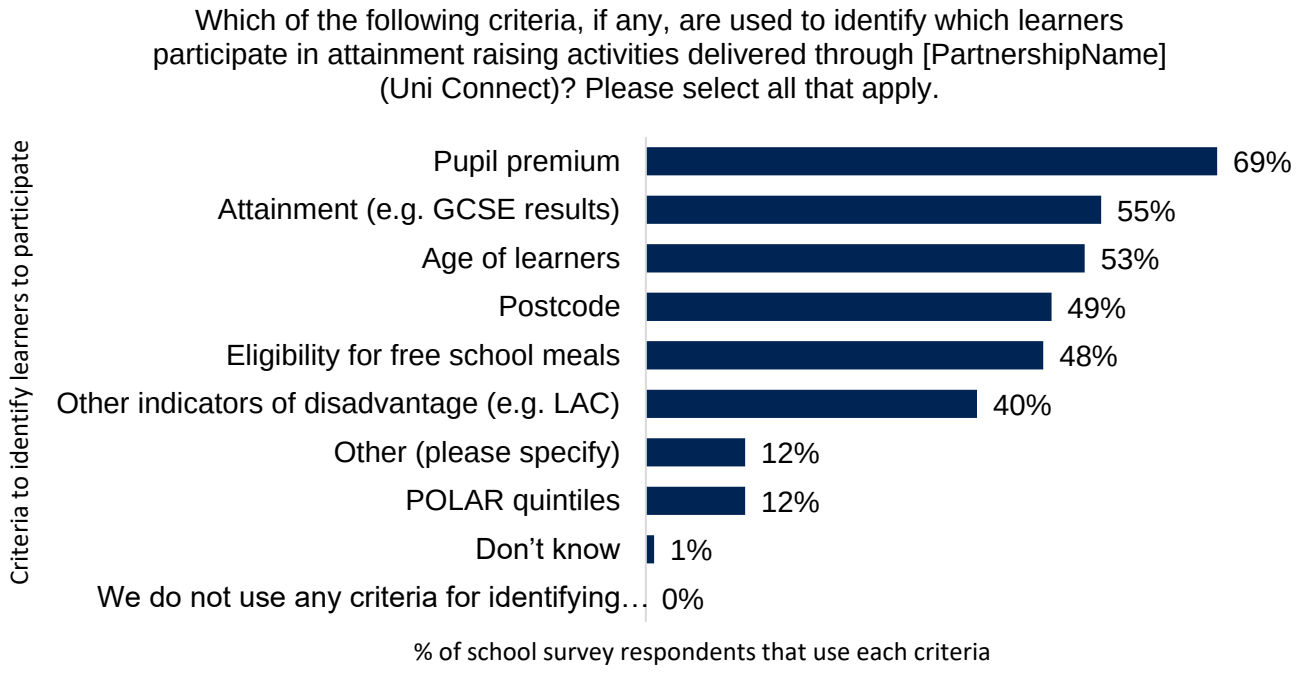
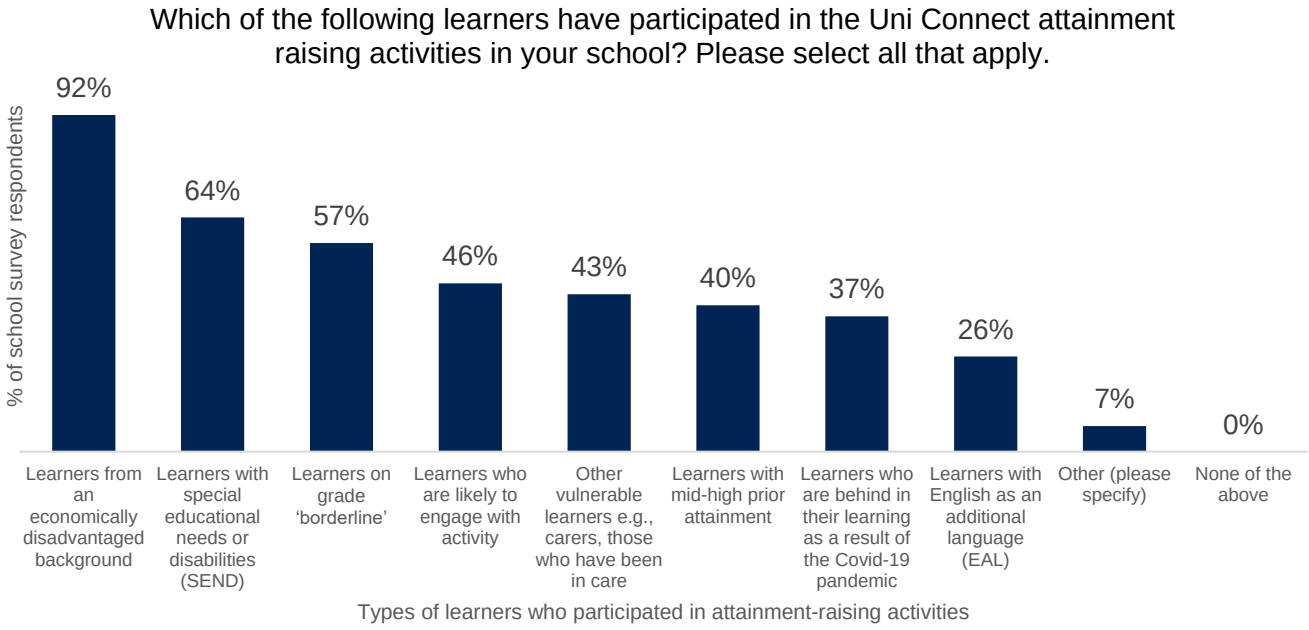


Figure 2.3: Types of learners participating in attainment-raising activities



Partnerships also reported that schools were generally protective of GSCE learners' time, which meant they targeted other year groups. One case study partnership noted that it was more challenging to

ensure that participating learners were appropriately selected when programmes are targeted for younger year groups:

> *"I think that, overall, they were appropriately selected. I think it's really difficult to ask schools to assess Year 8 learners' capabilities in terms of GCSE results. Oftentimes that's quite a large group of learners that you're trying to pick out of. A little bit of specificity could have been helpful with the younger years." (School stakeholder)*

As such, partnerships may want to provide more guidance for the selection of learners in younger year groups to support schools.

Case study example: learner selection

Partnership 'A' have taken a flexible and iterative approach for learner selection to attend their mentoring programme for learners in Year 8 to Year 10. The delivered mentoring programme consisted of ongoing sessions (relating to growth mindset, meta-cognition and other skills-based methods) that are held in either small groups or 1:1 by partnership delivery staff. School staff were considered best placed to select learners across all programmes being delivered through the attainment-raising strand, with selection especially important for the mentoring programme because it demands higher levels of learner engagement.

Initially the partnership provided schools with criteria on which to base selection, however this was revised through discussions with both delivery and school staff. Originally, the partnership requested schools select learners that were "disengaged" or lacking motivation at school. This criterion had varying effect in early delivery, working well with some of the older learners and less so with younger learners (e.g. Year 8). One school emphasised that the nature of the school's learner base (e.g. proportionately high levels of PP learners and learners with SEND) further influenced how they interpreted the criteria.

As a result, individual delivery staff continually worked with each school to adapt the criteria at a local level to ensure more suitable learners were selected. For example, one school refocussed the criteria for mentoring to select more engaged learners that were considered on "borderline" grades instead. Another school has continued to select disengaged learners, but now delivers the programme in smaller group sessions to optimise engagement. The success of learner selection largely relies on the relationship with a school and their ability to engage:

> *"The school that I'm working with doesn't necessarily provide support to the link person in school, […] but it is what it is. Schools are very busy, and teachers have a lot going on, so it's also challenging to have them engaging with what [Case Study Partnership] wants to provide. So, they might be focused on exams, they might be focused on other things, and might not necessarily want to do other things or dedicate more time to other areas. So, that also plays into how well the school engages and how well the selection process goes on in schools. I think it's down to dynamics, what happens, every school is different." (Partnership delivery staff)*

Ongoing communication with schools about learner selection within schools has been a key facilitator for more successful delivery more broadly. This example highlights the importance of considering the nature of the programme and the importance of school-partnership relationships at the local level, when selecting appropriate learners.

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2.4 Types of attainment-raising activities

Summary: Attainment-raising plans provided a 'menu' of activities that partnerships often tailored for schools on a case-by-case basis, and depended on what partnerships felt they could confidently deliver to meet school needs. Partnerships delivered activities that centered around:

- Metacognition
- Study/Revision Skills
- Literacy/Comprehension/Oracy
- Subject specific tutoring
- Non-academic barriers to learning

Attainment-raising plans provided a 'menu' of activities that partnerships often tailored for schools on a case-by-case basis, depending on what partnerships felt they could confidently deliver to meet schools' needs. Partnerships were delivering multiple attainment-raising 'projects' to offer schools a range of options. In some cases, partnership programme packages were designed to layer on top of each other. This intends to gradually develop learners' skills and knowledge as they participate in a programme each year.

> *"We chose Key Stage 3 because we recognise that if we can keep having interventions throughout their school career, if we can do something with them each year, then we can obviously help attainment at the end of Year 11. So, we try to be long sighted, rather than short sighted." (Delivery partner)*

The most common types of activities reported in interviews centred around: metacognition, study/revision skills, literacy (with a focus on reading comprehension and spelling) and subject specific tutoring. As shown in Figure 2.4, this is supported by the school survey results, which found that 58% took part in revision/study skills sessions, 28% took part in metacognition, 28% took part in subject specific tutoring and 27% took part in literacy activities (Figure 5). The main subjects that activities focused on were English (45%) and Maths (27%) (Annex B: Figure B4).

> *"We have a reading programme. We also have some metacognition workshops and study skills workshops that we've developed. We have maths online tutoring and English online tutoring, so they're the four things that we picked." (Partnership lead)*

Approximately half of partnerships planned to deliver CPD activities, however most of these were yet to be delivered with only 14% of school survey respondents reporting that they had taken part in CPD through this strand.

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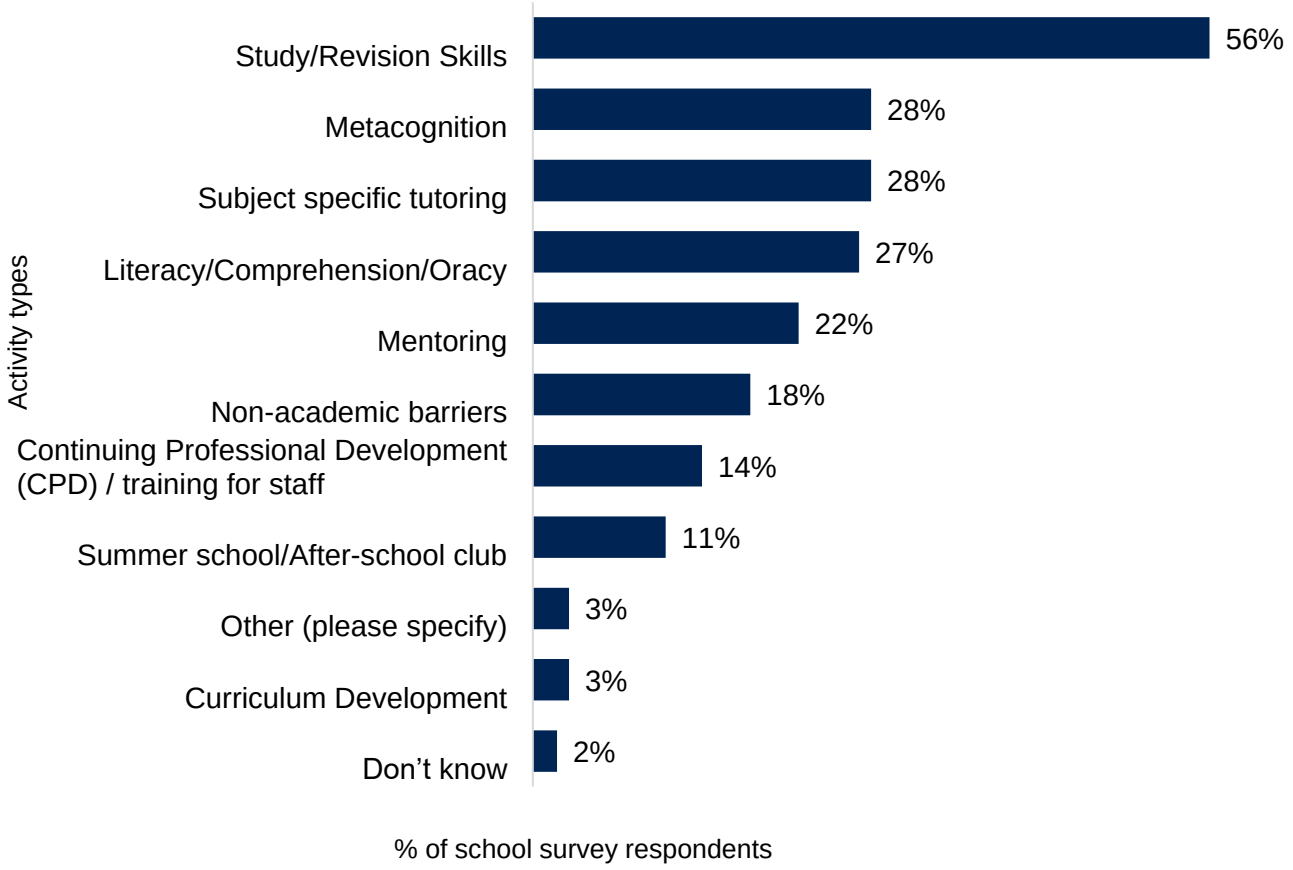
Definition: Metacognition

Metacognition looks at the ways learners can self-monitor and purposefully direct their learning. For example, a learner may see the value in trying a new cognitive strategy for memorisation. The learner will then monitor themselves to see if the strategy has been successful and will (or not) change their memorisation method based off that evidence.[2]

Figure 2.4: Overview of activities being offered

Which of the following activity types has your school participated in under the Uni Connect programme? Please select all that apply.



The greater focus on metacognition and study skills appeared to stem from apprehensiveness among schools about partnerships conducting activities that directly related to the curriculum. Some nervousness was also apparent among partnerships who did not want the introduction of attainment-raising activities to negatively impact their relationships with schools, which also recognised that attainment-raising activities often require more resource commitments from schools than previous outreach programmes. As such, partnerships often deferred to schools, seeing them as more-informed

[2] Education Endowment Foundation. Metacognition and Self-regulated learning: guidance report. Available at: https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/eef-guidance-reports/metacognition/EEF_Metacognition_and_self-regulated_learning.pdf?v=1724679040

when it comes to attainment-raising. At the same time, partnership leads reflected that these types of activities were complementary to school-led activities. For example, one partnership noted that they were surprised that schools offered very few revision/study skills sessions, and schools were keen to adopt this activity and demand was evident with waiting lists for these sessions. Other partnerships noted that their metacognition programmes – and skills-based approaches more generally – helped complement curriculum content.

The prevalence of activity delivered varied by year group, with some activities being delivered more to specific year groups (Annex B: Figure B5). This is supported by the survey findings that found:

- **Year 8:** Metacognition and literacy/comprehension/oracy were the most common. Of those surveyed 70% reported the delivery of metacognition activities and 50% reported the delivery of literacy/comprehension/oracy activities within the Year 8 group.

- **Year 9:** Metacognition, literacy/comprehension/oracy and non-academic barriers were the most common. Of those surveyed 55% reported the delivery of metacognition activities, 56% reported the delivery of literacy/comprehension/oracy activities and 57% reported the delivery of activities related non-academic barriers within the Year 9 group.

- **Year 10:** Summer school/after school clubs and mentoring were the most common. Of those surveyed 78% reported the delivery of summer school/after school clubs and 71% reported the delivery of mentoring activities within the Year 10 group.

- **Year 11:** Study/revision skills and subject specific tutoring were the most common. Of those surveyed 70% reported the delivery of study/revision skills and 50% reported the delivery of subject specific tutoring within the Year 11 group.

In addition to this, nearly all partnerships continue to deliver non-academic support (which they offered before the attainment-raising focus). Partnership leads emphasised the importance of addressing the needs of learners holistically – many felt that learner well-being, self-esteem and ambition needed to be improved to support improvements in attainment.

2.5 Deviation and adaptation from intended delivery plans

Partnerships emphasised the importance of taking a flexible and iterative approach to delivery to meet school and learner needs. Whilst most partnership leads felt this was a positive aspect of delivery and trusted delivery staff to adapt plans to support schools and learners, some partnerships were cautious to deviate extensively from original plans to ensure the Theory of Change and evaluated outcomes were still applicable. One partnership expressed that they have “little control” over delivery in schools yet still seek to keep the programme “on track” whilst allowing for the inevitable adaptations.

A common example of adaptation was activities being delivered before and/or after school (twilight hours) to ensure learners did not miss curriculum-based lessons. Another example of adaptation included the relaxation of selection criterion to enable target learners to bring their friends/peers, thus improving attendance and engagement. As mentioned, school staff tend to have more agency over learner selection and engagement. In most cases, flexibility was seen to be a facilitator for delivery:

> *“Our co-ordinators who go out and deliver, they’re really clear on the objectives of the session and what they want the young people to experience and get out of it. They have some flex and movement within how they may deliver that. What they’re delivering tends to stay the same but how that is done can sometimes adapt.” (Partnership lead).*

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Partnership leads provided insight about other deviations, though often minor, that have been made to meet learner needs. Partnerships that conducted pilots demonstrated more deviation to plans based on lessons learned. Other partnerships concurred that a pilot year would have been useful to have identified initial challenges to delivery, thus informing complete programme roll-out. Of the school staff surveyed, 84% agreed or strongly agreed that activities had been tailored to meet their school's needs (Annex B: Figure B6). In addition to this 74% felt that activities had been tailored to meet learners' individual needs (Annex B: Figure B7).

Ultimately, deviations were unique to each partnership, for example:

- Deviations have been made to the nature of delivery, with one partnership shifting online tutoring to be in-person to improve learners' engagement and relationship with their tutors.
- Deviations have also been made to the content of delivery, especially where activities were developed to target a different year group. Survey results highlighted that 54% reported that topics or subject matter had be adapted to meet learner need (Annex B: Figure B8).
- Adaptations to delivery have been made to prevent jeopardising/overlapping with lesson-time, sometimes by ensuring provision is original and unique and not duplicating pre-existing support. Survey results highlighted that 45% of school staff surveyed thought that activities had been adapted in this way (Annex B: Figure B8).
- The final area of deviation to plans relates to reaching target numbers of schools and learners. Some partnerships appeared to be reaching higher numbers than expected, but it was more common for partnership leads to describe instances where they were reaching fewer schools and learners than expected. There were also instances where strands of activity were not progressing – for example, CPD activities that did not get off the ground due to poor uptake among teachers and school staff.

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3 What are the opportunities and key challenges for partnerships?

3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines findings relating to the opportunities and key challenges partnerships are facing during the delivery of pre-16 attainment-raising activities. It covers how partnerships are accessing and developing the skills and expertise necessary for these activities, including expertise from HEPs specifically. It also includes the key barriers partnerships have faced since delivery started.

3.2 Access to and development of expertise

Summary: There were three main ways in which partnerships were both accessing and developing the expertise required for delivering and developing attainment-raising activities within secondary schools. These approaches consisted of:

1) Maximising internal partnership expertise

2) Using external providers and/or partner expertise

3) Utilising resources publicly available and/or provided by OfS and other partners

Partnerships developed and delivered attainment-raising activities by leveraging their internal expertise. Though some partnerships employed new internal staff to support the new attainment-raising strand, most leveraged existing expertise. Figure 3.1 below highlights that 61% of school staff reported that attainment-raising activities were delivered by Uni Connect partnership staff, demonstrating the importance of internal expertise across partnerships. Partnership staff (e.g. delivery officers) with subject or skill knowledge (e.g. Humanities, SEND provision) were a core form of support and, in some cases, provided localised knowledge based on previous employment as former teachers or school staff. Partnership leads expressed that teaching experience is not a requirement for an outreach-based role, recognising that this internal expertise was useful for developing and delivering materials but not expected nor essential. Nevertheless, the nature of existing expertise within the core partnership team often aligned with attainment-raising and informed the delivery approach of the partnership.

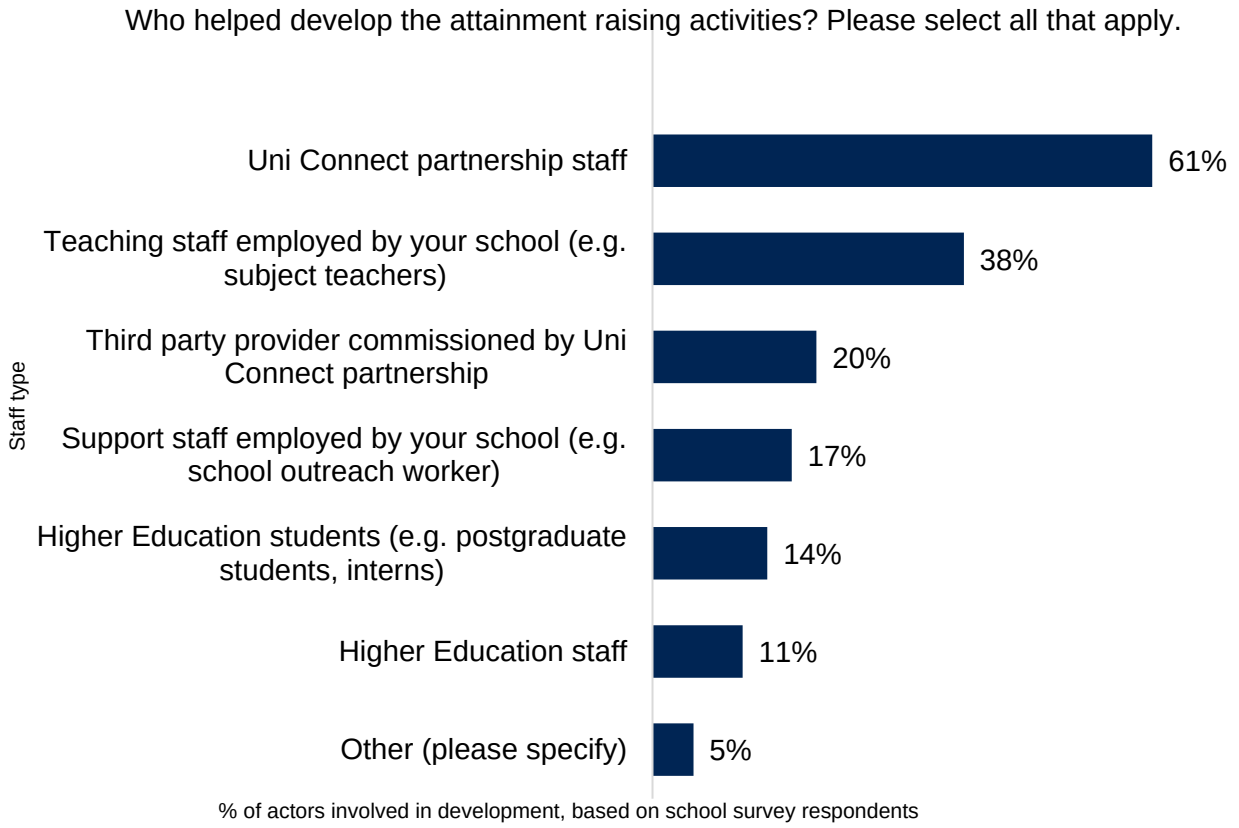
> *"We have a history graduate in our team. We have a fantastic relationship with humanities, and the Head of School is really interested in working on history academically. So, it was mapping out the strength already within the partnerships, both in terms of my team and then also the wider partnership." (Partnership lead)*

Some internal partnership delivery staff also received bespoke external training to enhance expertise and confidence in delivering attainment-raising activities, which ensured delivery staff were confident in the material, exercises and resources and had the facilitation skills for successful intervention delivery. This external training was provided by external organisations, including MADE Training who have a longstanding relationship with several Uni Connect partnerships. Staff considered this training useful, but they also felt what they learned needed adaption when in the classroom environment.

Some partnerships accessed the expertise required to deliver attainment-raising activities through external support from partners or external providers. Such expertise was accessed through either

training, or by directly commissioning external organisations to co-deliver aspects of the attainment-raising activities. Many of the external providers that were used in delivery were organisations that partnerships had previous engagement with and trusted that they would deliver high-quality activities. Some partnerships felt that the specific knowledge these providers had, particularly in relation to subject-specific support, was highly useful for a range of activities. Third-Party providers were used for delivering small-scale targeted activities and subject-specific interventions, such as an English booster session that was delivered and developed by exam board examiners. For the partnerships that relied on external provider skills to facilitate their delivery, there was consensus that this was well-received and embedded in the wider delivery approach of the strand.

Figure 3.1: Overview of actors involved in development of attainment-raising activities



The quality of delivery by third-party external providers was viewed as generally positive amongst school staff and partnership staff, particularly for programmes that had been developed specifically for the attainment-raising programme. However, the quality of external online tutors provided by third parties was sometimes considered a barrier, particularly amongst school staff. This is explored in greater depth in Section 3.4 (Barriers to delivery).

Some partnerships chose not to engage with external providers (and in some cases, partners) for a variety of reasons, including cost and engagement issues. Some partnership leads felt the attainment-raising strand limited their usual reliance on post-16 further education (FE) colleges' expertise because of its pre-16 focus. The cost implications of using external providers for delivery was also a barrier, and partnerships that had used Third-Party expertise raised concerns over sustaining this amidst unpredictable funding arrangements. In some cases, partnerships were cautious about engaging with third parties because of the added risk.

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> *"When you're reliant on a third party in some way, shape or form, you have limited control sometimes and things can change quite quickly and easily. And for me, that's sometimes not a risk I'm always interested in taking, which is why we tend to do very, very little third-party activity now." (Partnership lead)*

Utilising existing resources was another way in which partnerships could access and improve their expertise for delivering attainment-raising activities. For example, Causeway Education were commissioned by the OfS to produce a toolkit to support Uni Connect partnerships when planning attainment-raising activities, and this was used widely. The toolkit provides information on and support with planning activities and interventions to raise attainment in learners from Years 7 to 11. The Causeway Education toolkit was widely considered useful as a framework for partnerships to adapt, though many felt it was not sufficient and took additional measures. The partnerships that did not have access to internal and external support used publicly available resources, conducted their own research and had conversations seeking advice. Partnerships also referred to the OfS-commissioned support package provided by the Centre for Education and Youth (CfEY), to facilitate delivery capabilities. Though partnerships felt the resources provided by the OfS and partner organisations were useful, access to sufficient support remained a challenge for some partnerships that were unable to leverage wider partnership expertise or fund external provision.

> *"We did a lot of talking with Causeway and CfEY about how we could do this [metacognition sessions] because basically it was down to us to deliver it [...] we weren't going to get any help from the university as there was just no capacity, there's no resource. We're not teachers, we're not maths teachers, we're not English teachers, [...] we couldn't afford to pay for the postgrad or graduate ambassadors and even if we did have money, there's no capacity." (Partnership lead)*

However, there was also broad consensus among partnerships that these resources and planning conversations with CfEY could have been improved with clearer guidance and swifter communications. For example, some partnerships experienced frustrations when putting forward plans that were not deemed suitable for the attainment-raising strand, later to find out that another partnership was allowed to proceed with similar plans. In another example, one partnership decided to remove a strand of activity because they received feedback later than expected and it would have proved too challenging to address the feedback and simultaneously start planning delivery. This was particularly the case for more 'ambition-raising' activities, such as university campus visits. Partnerships reflected that they were well positioned to understand local school need and felt more flexible guidance would enhance the activities being delivered.

> *"Working with an external programme trying to upscale and talk about all the problems and challenges with partnerships over the year last year with Causeway Education. So, I think that really helped. I think having that year of thinking and plan[ning]." (Stakeholder)*

3.3 Use of local HEP expertise and resources

Summary: Partnerships drew on resources provided by local HEPs, and to a lesser extent also accessed academic expertise on attainment-raising. However, overall engagement with HEPs has been a challenge for partnerships.

Academic expertise from local HEPs was provided with varying effect. Some partnerships were able to access academics' expertise, particularly for subject-specific interventions, and felt collaboration was successful. However, partnerships more frequently reported that HEPs lacked the resource to engage

and often chose to safeguard their own academics for the development of internal attainment-raising programmes to avoid *"stretching them too thinly"* (quote sourced from partnership delivery staff interview). Leads felt that engagement from HEPs was generally low, with the misaligned timings of Access and Participation Plans one reason for this. Partnerships also recognised that HEPs face other pressures that demand significant resource. Partnership leads seemed confident that HEPs were interested in the attainment-raising strand within Uni Connect but could not commit to the development or delivery of attainment-raising as there was no "incentive" for them to do so (quote sourced from partnership delivery staff interview). Partnership teams that are based within their local HEP found this closer proximity eased communication and facilitated engagement, however HEP engagement remained a significant challenge.

> *"I'm really lucky, our university is brilliant. However, there is a massive shortfall [...] in the university's finances for the coming year. They really see our value, they want to help us, however there's just no resource there." (Partnership lead)*

> *"I think it's the interface between higher education and secondary education, because higher education doesn't see it as their role. Secondary education doesn't see it as higher education's role. It may be worth looking at where it can be of benefit to the higher education provider as well to increase buy-in." (Stakeholder)*

Despite these challenges, some partnerships developed several programmes with local HEPs that were co-delivered by the partners within university buildings. Two case study partnerships were able to adapt and expand delivery of pre-existing attainment-raising activities already run by HEPs. These examples of collaboration supported partnerships, but HEP staff also reflected that the programme content itself benefitted from collaboration and more schools were reached as a result too. Though examples of integrated collaboration were apparent, this was not the case for all partnerships.

Instead, HEP support for delivery was more commonly in the form of resources, including access to university facilities and provision of learner and/or graduate delivery staff. Access to facilities under the attainment-raising strand was for campus days, summer schools and other activities that sought to promote both attainment-raising and ambition-raising amongst learners. Activities that were delivered in university sites were popular amongst school staff and learners, and school staff particularly favoured the exposure to university environments these opportunities provided to learners. Partnerships also benefitted from HEPs providing delivery staff (e.g. undergraduate learner ambassadors, graduate interns, postgraduate and PhD learners) to support with delivery, such as small-group subject tuition and buddy mentor schemes.

Case study example: drawing on HEP expertise

University 'B' have a strong portfolio of attainment-raising outreach programmes, developed for their local area (categorised as a Priority Education Investment Area). They previously established an attainment-raising programme (Programme 'B') four years ago (2019) that was developed and researched internally. The programme has a focus on metacognition informed by Education Endowment Fund (EEF) guidance. This metacognition skills-based programme is delivered on-campus to 50 learners at a time. Schools are requested to select mid-to-high attainers that are academically engaged but lack confidence in their learning and revision skills. It was designed for

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both Year 10 and Year 12 learners, though only Year 10 learners engage with this through the pre-16 attainment-raising strand of Uni Connect.

The case study Uni Connect partnership approached University B to further expand their existing relationship following the introduction of the attainment-raising strand. Alignment with the university's Access and Participation Plan and a pre-existing focus on attainment-raising facilitated this collaboration. Programme B was selected by both teams as the most appropriate for both objectives, and adaptations were required only to refine and repurpose it for the Uni Connect context. Both teams were involved in the re-development stage, with core adaptations including: shortening the sessions to enhance engagement, increasing the amount of activities delivered in the day, and ensuring learners are seated with their peers to enable a more comfortable learning environment. Shared wider ambition was celebrated as a core facilitator by HEP staff:

> *"There's no clash there. There might be different scores and it might be different targeting that we use, but the ambition [with the Uni Connect partnership] is exactly the same. We want to ensure that these learners are not only better equipped to attend higher education, but also stay there, continue through and actually attain at the end of it, through developing these skills, because this is exactly what they will be learning." (HEP staff)*

Programme B has subsequently been co-delivered, reaching more schools as a result. Initial shadowing and handover were carried out to ensure partnership staff were confident to deliver and evaluate the programme without university support. Since this handover period, the partnership delivered the programme on-campus with their target schools, and the university have continued to deliver to their own schools too. Logistics and expenses (e.g. travel, staffing) are managed by the respective teams, though frequent communication ensures the programme remains a collaborative endeavour. They have been able to remain "always in conversation" since delivery began this academic year. Continued readjustments throughout delivery have ensured the programme meets learner/school needs and this has been a balanced approach across both parties:

> *"So, they're not only taking a lead in the delivery more and more, it's that they're not adapting the sessions, but enhancing the sessions. […] I think initially, there was concern that someone would take this session that you've created. We all have this natural inclination when you've created something to keep hold of it. […] But actually, it's been really beneficial to the session and it's been beneficial to the learners." (HEP staff)*

Both the partnership and the university have considered this a positive collaboration that has improved the programme itself and extended both the partnership and university's reach to new schools within catchments. A complete joint review will be conducted at the end of the academic year, alongside a combined approach to the evaluation.

Whilst this collaboration has been a success, both the partnership and university staff expressed concerns over the impact of funding changes moving forward. Whilst the university considers the partnership a valuable "conduit" for reaching more schools, they are sceptical about relying on the partnership to sustain these relationships because of unpredictable funding conditions. The university have been able to establish connections with "harder to reach" schools as a result of this collaboration but seek to establish their own relationships that have guaranteed longevity irrespective of the partnership moving forward. These differing funding/objective timescales across partners was considered a significant barrier for collaborative programme design and delivery.

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3.4 Barriers to delivery

Summary: There were six main barriers to delivery that were identified across partnerships, relating to:

1) Buy-in to the concept of attainment-raising under Uni Connect

2) The recruitment of delivery staff

3) Logistical barriers to delivery

4) Challenges to selecting appropriate learners

5) Learner engagement issues within schools

6) The short-term nature of the programme and funding.

Buying into the concept of attainment-raising and understanding how this requirement falls within the partnerships' responsibilities was a challenge for many during the planning and set-up stages. Most partnerships identify as outreach and ambition-raising organisations, and therefore attainment-raising was rarely approached in isolation. Many leads considered their core responsibility as outreach, and attainment-raising was considered an aspect within this. Buy-in for this new strand was therefore gradual amongst partnerships, and their understanding of how this aligns with their wider strategy continues to evolve. However, partnerships relayed more positive reflections about their role in attainment-raising relative to planning stages, suggesting many have a better understanding of how this aligns with their overall delivery. There was a strong agreement amongst partnership leads that a more "blended" approach across the strands would be preferable, where attainment-raising is not "boxed off" (quotes sourced from partnership lead workshop). Instead, leads felt attainment-raising should be embedded within the wider ambition-raising approach of Uni Connect, in which it has a naturally symbiotic relationship.

> *"It can be difficult to get that buy-in to attainment-raising work when schools are attainment-raising institutions, right. The number one thing that schools do is safeguarding, the number two thing that they'll do is attainment-raising. They are there to raise attainment." (Stakeholder)*

> *"Uni Connect was set up as an ambition-raising programme. It wasn't until two years ago that we switched […] raising attainment was to be included in our package of activities. However, that said, although the vast majority of work that we have always done was about raising ambition, we have been engaged in raising attainment by default. Decoupling those two things is really problematic and challenging." (Partnership lead)*

The recruitment of delivery staff was a challenge for partnerships, and this meant that some lacked sufficient staff to deliver the planned attainment-raising activities within schools. This was particularly the case for tutoring staff, with one partnership stating the recruitment of graduates to deliver a literacy-based programme was "one of the biggest challenges" they faced during delivery. Partnerships stated that some third-party providers have identified a local shortage in tutor availability, and recruitment challenges are more acute in rural areas that lack sufficient public transport provision. School staff also expressed concerns that the quality of external online tutors was inconsistent and difficult to monitor:

> *"The quality of service from some tutors on the [tutoring] platform was not as good as it was with others and what we are used to. The platform has been quite difficult to work with after Easter*

and support has been poor. The support system is normally brilliant but since Easter, we were not able to change some tutors as the support system did not work as it should have, leaving some learners with tutors who could not provide adequate or engaging sessions." (School staff, survey response)

The logistical and practical demands of delivery within schools was another barrier for partnerships. The nature of the attainment-raising strand has meant partnerships have required more communication with subject teachers, who are not their "normal contacts" (quote sourced from interview with partnership lead). Communication issues with teachers have been a barrier to delivery as they are often time-poor and lack the capacity to facilitate delivery. At times, a lack of school senior leadership buy-in has also limited wider school buy-in to facilitate and embed activities within the school day.

"It's sometimes really difficult to pin them [subject teachers] down and to organise things, or sometimes a Year 11 geography teacher might not have the clout within the school to say, 'Right, we're taking four lessons out of the curriculum [...]'' so, the appetite's there for them to do it but sometimes the mechanics of making it happen are quite tricky." (Partnership lead)

There is also a greater burden on school staff and more significant logistical barriers to delivery. For example, responsibilities for school staff included learner selection, provision of classroom space and timetabling. Schools often plan for the upcoming academic year in the spring term around Easter, and therefore Uni Connect engagement was not fully embedded in timetables for 2023-24. This resulted in clashes for some learners and required school staff to help partnerships in overcoming timetabling challenges to ensure learners did not miss curriculum content. As a result, there were instances where some programme content was not covered due to the constrained timings allocated to delivery staff within the school day. Partnerships had to compromise between delivery within the school day around tight timings that secured attendance, and delivering programmes after school that naturally had lower attendance levels.

Most schools have selected learners based on the criteria provided by partnerships, but this process of selecting learners needs refining to ensure the most suitable learners attend. Partnership leads commonly reported that schools choose to protect learners in exam years (Year 11) from external interventions. Although less frequently mentioned, it was interesting to note that partnerships also found instances where schools did not want to offer activities to disadvantaged learners and learners with 'borderline' grades. They explained that schools in areas with low attainment levels and disadvantaged learners are receiving many forms of support already, which can have an exclusionary impact on learners (as well as taking them out of lesson time) and can be difficult to manage for some schools.

"I think schools are uncomfortable, particularly with the students we want to work with being those borderline students missing curriculum time. There is that challenge there, they become unaligned with their peers in the classroom and that becomes a problem in itself. We don't want to create more challenges for those young people." (Partnership lead)

"Attainment levels in [area redacted] are dire, but as a result, they've got so much being thrown at them and schools have fed that back. They cannot commit to all the support they're being given, which sounds crazy, but they'd have to hire staff to manage the support they're being given, and they haven't got the money to do that." (Partnership lead)

As mentioned, schools have largely been considered as best placed to select learners. Schools and delivery staff recognised that there is a gap between learners that could benefit most from the

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programme, and learners that will benefit most from the programme who are more engaged with school and their attainment levels. Schools have also expressed that they would like more learners to be included in the programme, and for criteria to be expanded to include other groups of learners that are often overlooked or not captured by traditional measures:

> *"Lack of aspiration is not confined to students from FSM/PP/LAC/PLAC [Free School Meal/Pupil Premium/Looked after children/Previously looked after children] backgrounds. EAL [English as additional language] students, for example, tend to work hard, but are often confused by a new and different education system and need to understand pathways. Students from other backgrounds may not receive as much parental support as they should and wander into jobs that are beneath their capabilities because their family has low aspirations. Too many students have a very narrow world view which PSHE [personal, social, health and economic] and citizenship lessons alone cannot address." (School staff, survey response)*

Partnerships also expressed the desire to reach more learners in need of attainment-raising support but felt they would need significantly more resource to do so.

Some partnerships reported engagement issues amongst learners. Poor attendance and disengagement were reported by some partnerships, and feedback from third-party providers also recognised some behavioural issues. Delivery staff and partnership leads expressed some concerns that behaviour levels are particularly low in some schools following the pandemic, which has impacted delivery of some activities and means that most partnerships are reliant on school staff shadowing activities for behaviour management and safeguarding purposes. Though this was identified as another time-consuming aspect for schools to manage, school staff also identified behaviour as a barrier to delivery:

> *"Some visiting staff had pre-Covid behaviour expectations of students which led to some vulnerable students quitting. While we are all working hard to get back to pre-Covid behaviours, an understanding of the struggles schools have been through and the massive impact this has had on students would be really helpful." (School staff, survey response)*

Nevertheless, many partnerships reported positive engagement amongst learners, particularly during engaging sessions that were delivered in-person and outside of the school site (e.g. campus visits). Delivery staff and school staff emphasised the importance of selecting the correct learners for activities to ensure engagement is sustained. This would have been further enabled by ensuring that all activity content was tailored to these learners, particularly relating to their ability and age when including complex or new concepts (e.g. learning theory). The challenge of appropriately tailoring content to age and ability was identified amongst school staff, across both case study interviews and school survey respondents. Though most considered the activities to be accessible and engaging, some school staff found that some programmes took a 'blanket' approach to programme delivery and did not differentiate content when it was delivered to a range of year groups. As a result, school staff felt that the younger learners (e.g. Year 8) were less likely to understand and thus fully engage with sessions. This challenge was further exacerbated if appropriate learners were not selected for attendance by schools, further demonstrating the need for transparency between partnerships and schools in the learner selection process. Acquiring parental consent was also flagged as an initial barrier, though this is considered a wider challenge across all strands.

The short-term nature of funding has been a barrier for partnerships, as leads emphasised the importance of longevity in securing buy-in from schools and partners and achieving longer-term outcomes. The nature of attainment-raising demands a longer-term approach to provide learners with

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sustained intervention throughout the academic year. As a result, some partnerships stated that the short-term funding of this strand misaligned with the long-term outcomes associated with attainment-raising. This shorter timeframe was also considered a barrier to buy-in from schools and partners, as well as to general relationship-building and maintenance with schools and partners.

3.5 Facilitators to delivery

Summary: There were six core facilitators identified across partnerships, relating to:

1) Leveraging existing relationships with schools

2) Taking a flexible approach to delivery

3) Knowledge sharing across partnerships

4) Taking a sequential approach across the programme

5) Building rapport with learners

6) Providing engaging activities outside of the school environment

Leveraging existing relationships was identified as a core facilitator that has supported delivery. Most partnerships selected schools that they had strong existing relationships with to deliver new attainment-raising programmes, which facilitated communication and logistical requirements (e.g. data sharing agreements). The majority (68%) of school staff surveyed reported their school having been involved in the Uni Connect programme prior to the attainment-raising strand. This facilitated a more adaptive approach to delivery as the partnerships had enhanced knowledge of school and learner needs, and trusted schools to appropriately select learners. Existing relationships were also leveraged amongst partners and third-party providers, with many partnerships expressing concern over the risk of relying on new providers.

Relationship maintenance and building was a core facilitator that partnerships prioritised to support delivery at all levels. Partnerships sometimes had coordinators based in schools, which helped to facilitate delivery and address the challenges being faced. These coordinators can also improve engagement while understanding the needs and priorities of schools. Their existing knowledge of the school and learners helped them to develop relationships with learners themselves:

> *"It's all about relationship-building with young people and it's really hard to do that in a very short space of time [...] So, we would have the same coordinator going out to the school so there is a consistency with the person young people are seeing and we will say at the beginning of our sessions what the purpose is of us being there and the bigger idea of it." (Partnership lead)*

The most effective examples of positive relations with schools were when partnerships had early communication with schools. This early communication enabled partnerships to understand the nature and extent of the school's needs related to attainment-raising, which in turn facilitated greater engagement amongst school senior leadership and curriculum staff.

As noted previously, partnerships felt that taking a flexible approach was important for successful delivery. For example, many delivery officers moved delivery to out-of-school hours and school holidays. This included learning generated through piloting (for those that did conduct pilots), which was applied iteratively to adapt delivery approaches. Delivery staff also recognised that adaptation was required during term-time delivery around ad-hoc commitments (e.g. mock examinations, school trips, revision days), so pre-existing plans were changed accordingly.

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Partnerships seek advice from one another across the Uni Connect programme, which supports knowledge sharing and examples of best practice. Partnerships regularly meet with other partnerships to discuss delivery, which helps them understand what is going well and less well and potential solutions to challenges. Examples of both pre-established working groups and Uni Connect-level meeting opportunities were evident, however knowledge sharing was more apparent through informal, self-initiated collaboration.

Programmes were particularly successful when they had a sequential approach that was designed to gradually build on learners' skills and knowledge throughout the individual activity. Some partnerships had developed their programme provision from Year 8 up to Year 11 (Key Stage 3 through to Key Stage 4) so younger learners were able to develop and advance their skills (e.g. revision skills, oracy skills, metacognition) as they approach Year 11. Some school staff thought this was effective forward planning:

> *"We feel as though the longer the students engage with the programme, the more they will take from it. Those that have taken part in Year 8 and Year 9 [activities] will be able to further cement the skills learnt this year and make them part of their working practices." (School staff)*

Though schools received the content's buildable approach well, some staff felt that more guidance on how to consolidate and embed this learning into the curriculum moving forward would be useful. This could be a potential opportunity for partnerships to ensure the activities' impacts have greater longevity in learners' academic journeys.

Taking steps to develop rapport with learners was a key facilitator, particularly for small group and 1:1 activities. Delivery staff across partnerships and school staff emphasised the importance of consistent delivery staff for building rapport and ensuring that a relationship can be developed to improve engagement with learners. This was particularly important for mentoring activities and other programmes that demand open communication.

In some partnerships, teachers attended activity sessions to manage learner behaviour, which allowed delivery staff to focus fully on activity delivery. Amongst school staff surveyed, over half attended attainment-raising activities either for behavioural management purposes (59%) or to support with delivery (55%), as demonstrated in Figure 3.2. Having school staff present in these sessions also acted as an informal CPD, as it enabled school staff to learn about the attainment-raising techniques and consider how they could incorporate them into their lessons. Amongst school staff interviewed and surveyed, some suggested that more guidance on how to repurpose and apply attainment-raising approaches into their own curriculum lesson time would add additional value to the programmes.

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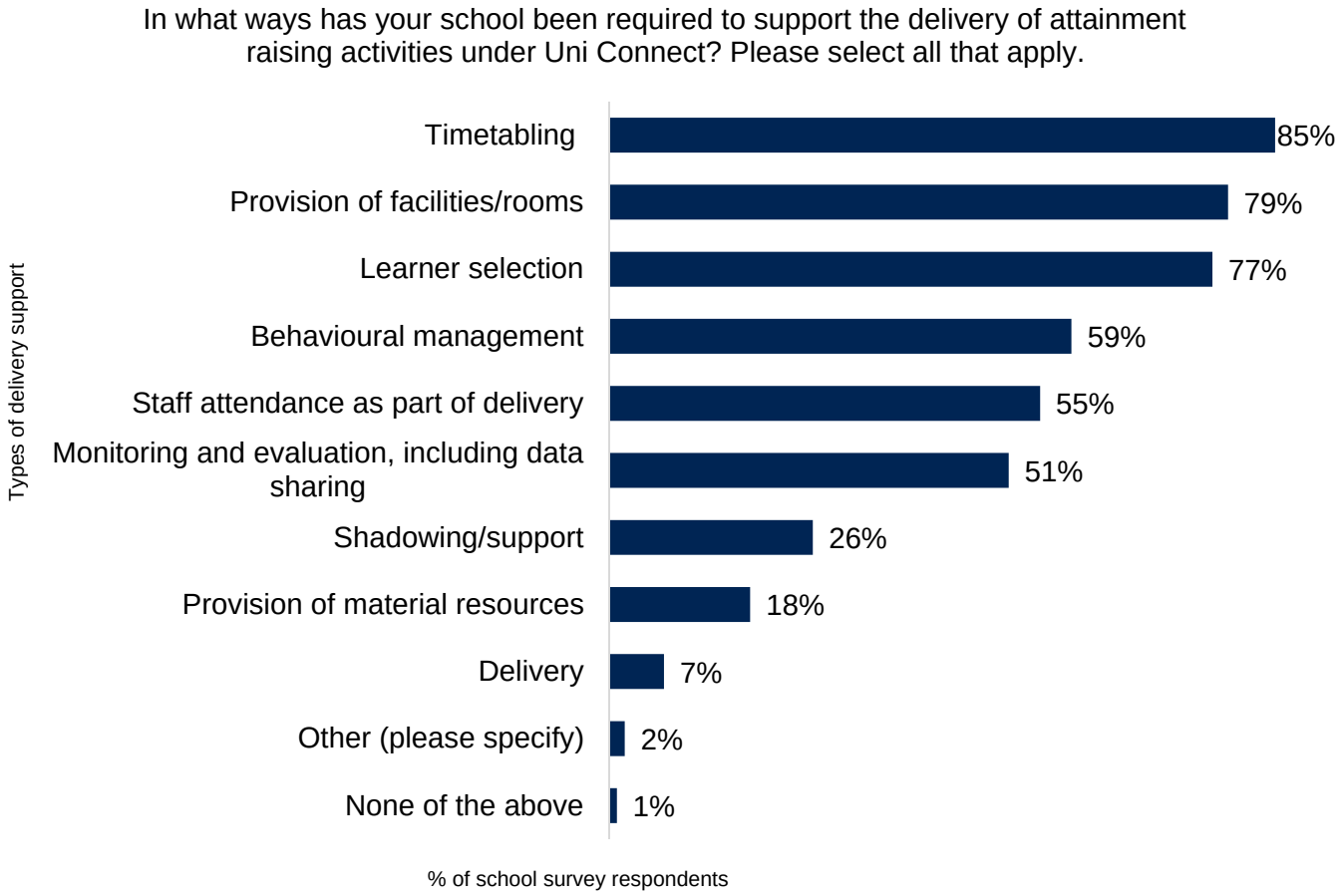
Figure 3.2: Overview of ways in which schools have supported delivery



Campus-based activities were considered highly engaging amongst school staff, and important for both attainment and ambition raising. Many partnerships embedded campus days/visits into attainment-raising activities, often offered at the end of a programme to consolidate and celebrate learning. School staff felt there were additional benefits to hosting activities outside of the school environment and emphasised that the opportunity to visit university campuses would not be possible for some learners without this opportunity. The change in environment and exposure to new, engaging delivery staff was a facilitator for learners (as perceived by school staff), particularly those that struggle with concentration and/or motivation at school. More broadly, in-person activities (compared to online) were more engaging for learners:

> *"The students were particularly inspired by funded trips out of school, which they do not often have the opportunity to participate in otherwise. University visits have inspired students who had not previously considered this to be an option to actually consider this as a realistic pathway." (School staff)*

> *"Being in the school building has not worked as well as when we have taken students off-site. They have seemed more engaged when taken to a new environment. The online webinar lost a lot of the students' focus as there was limited communication between individual students and the speaker. They could communicate with me (their teacher) or through me when I typed to the speaker." (School staff, survey response)*

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Partnerships also value the relationship with HEPs and the use of their facilities, however many partnership leads stated that these activities are often costly for partnerships/HEPs (most notably through travel) and thus have limited spaces as a result.

> *"Our preference is more for the ambition raising, where we could have more connection with the universities. […] So, if I want to run an ambition-focused visit to a university, previously, [partnership name] could help with the cost of the coach. They no longer have that funding, and they can't help with something which isn't part of this particular programme. So, I do miss that support." (School staff)*

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4 How are partnerships approaching their evaluation practice?

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the findings relating to the evaluation and data collection activities being carried out by partnerships. It covers how partnerships are accessing and collecting data and the barriers and facilitators partnerships face in doing so.

4.2 How are attainment-raising activities being evaluated?

Summary: The majority of partnerships applied a mixed method approach utilising both quantitative pre-post surveys and qualitative interviews and focus groups. Several partnerships have been able to access learners grades and will be looking at the difference in predicted and or actual grades after attainment-raising activities.

Most partnerships are conducting pre-post surveys or assessments to capture outcomes. Partnerships use a number of validated scales and surveys. Examples include:

- Attitude to learning scores
- Attitude to higher education surveys
- Oracy surveys
- Revision technique knowledge
- Self-efficacy surveys
- TASO attainment-raising surveys
- TASO student success questionnaire
- CfEY attainment surveys
- Star Assessment data (a tool that measures reading age)

Partnerships are conducting these surveys before attainment-raising activities and intend to conduct them again at the end to see if there has been a change. Some schools have provided partnerships with access to a comparison group so the outcomes can be compared. For example, the surveys are being collected from whole year groups, capturing those actually engaged in activities and providing comparison group data. This is supported by school survey results that found that most teaching staff surveyed reported that they were collecting data via learner surveys (75%) (Figure 4.1). In addition to this a third of those surveyed (33%) reported they were using staff surveys.

Others conduct assessments before and after activities. Assessments focus on:

- English – reading age (but also ability to comprehend text across different subject areas, so assessing improvements across wider subject areas)
- Maths – decimals, fractions, percentages
- Science, literacy, history, geography – developing arguments and critical analysis

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Figure 4.1: Overview of evaluation activities

In some cases, these assessments are carried out by the school in its own development activities, so learners were not required to take part in additional data-collection activities. Some programmes also assess learners on more general skills such as improved listening or improved speaking skills. Several partnerships are using work or assignments that learners are completing as part of their usual curriculum and will compare the two pieces of work to assess any difference in marks.

> *"Then we also have the assessments pre and post, and hopefully with the literacy, a comparator group as well so we can measure impact clearly in terms of reading age. That will be the same for the maths, although we won't have a comparator group, we'll do pre and post surveys. We'll do pre and post assessments, and then we'll measure the difference in ability linking to decimals, fractions in maths." (Partnership lead)*

Finally, several partnerships are attempting to access predicted GCSE grades to examine whether there is a difference in predicted and/or actual grades after attainment-raising activities. For example, some aim to use Year 11 baseline and endline data for GCSE attainment, including predicted, mock and exam grades. For others, Year 10 predicted grades will be compared with actual GCSE Year 11 grades.

Most partnerships are also conducting qualitative data-collection activities to better understand the mechanisms of change. Some partnerships are having conversations around not being so reliant on pre/post surveys to be more creative. This included:

- Reflective journals
- Focus groups
- Interviews
- Feedback from both teachers and young people taking part in attainment-raising activities

In particular, CPD activities with teachers will mostly be evaluated with qualitative techniques.

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Prior to attainment-raising, several partnerships developed experience examining long-term outcomes as a result of their outreach activities. Several delivery partners access Higher Education Statistics Agency data (HESA data) via HEAT and also get data from a university within their partnership. They then match the HESA data with HEAT data outcomes. At present, there are plans to conduct similar analysis relating to attainment-raising activities.

4.3 What has worked well?

Summary: Nearly all partnerships that conducted pilots found that this was a useful step (in relation to the evaluation in particular) as it enabled them to identify data-collection limitations and develop mitigating solutions. Partnerships also collaborated with HEP academics and evaluation experts either in their core team or through third-party support.

Piloting the evaluation enabled programmes to identify potential problem areas. Most partnerships found that pilots provided a useful opportunity to assess research protocols, data-collection instruments, data-collection strategies and other research techniques in preparation for full delivery and evaluation. For example, this helped one partnership decide between two competing study methods, such as using interviews rather than a self-administered questionnaire. It also highlighted where schools were unable to share data such as predictive and actual grades. This allowed for partnerships to adjust accordingly e.g. setting up pre/post surveys when unable to access grade data.

Third parties, HEP academics and evaluation leads functioned as a valuable resource. Nearly all partnerships utilised evaluation experts. Most importantly, having an evaluation lead or consultant within the partnership team was very valuable as this individual has the necessary the skills, experience and dedicated capacity to oversee the evaluation process.

> *"We are retaining two of the evaluation staff. Not actually because of attainment activity delivery, but as part of the wider need to ensure the core evaluation comes through. Two full-time evaluation staff, which I always like to point out because it's quite a big proportion of our staffing and rightly so." (Partnership lead)*

In some cases, academics or subject experts from HEPs helped partnerships select and develop appropriate data-collection tools and validated surveys. Wider support included working with HEAT for tracking and monitoring outcomes and evaluation plans, using TASO resources (especially learner success criteria), and NEON (an organisation that supports widening access to HE) evaluation training.

> *"Giving access to the data is really important for us to be able to provide the service that we do. What Uni Connect, I think, have done really well has been able to in some cases establish that link with the school or college so that they are getting the data easily at the beginning of an academic year every year; that helps with sustaining the service." (Stakeholder)*

The role of teachers in evaluation was clearly communicated. Most schools reported that the information about their role in supporting evaluation and monitoring of attainment-raising activities was clear (51%) or very clear (34%) (Annex B). In addition to this, 68% were satisfied with the data-sharing agreements and processes set up with partnerships (Annex B). This could be a result of schools having worked with partnerships prior to the attainment-raising strand of work and already having data-sharing agreements in place.

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4.4 What has worked less well?

Summary: Challenges for monitoring and evaluation can be categorised as:

1) School-based challenges. These included issues like teaching staff struggling to find the time to support, and some schools were reluctant to share learner data

2) Resource-based challenges. These included insufficient evaluation expertise within partnerships, and issues identifying appropriate validated surveys and questionnaires, especially for assessing CPD activities

School staff have limited time to support data-collection activities**.** As previously noted, some teachers are often time-poor with limited capacity to support logistical tasks such as helping delivery staff book rooms for programme activities. Despite data-monitoring requirements being clearly communicated to teachers, additional requests for their time to support data collection has been challenging.

> *"The reality of teachers fitting these projects into their busy school week and staffing them and getting the surveys completed and getting the data, is a lot trickier in practice than the principle. A lot of it is dependent on teachers replying to emails, because they're very busy people of course. That's a bit of a challenge but making that really clear at the beginning when they sign up is obviously really important to try and overcome that." (Partnership lead)*

Often schools that partnerships had not worked with before were unable to share data, and partnerships had to work on setting up data-sharing agreements. In some cases, existing data-sharing agreements had to be revised to reflect attainment-raising, which was a highly time-consuming process – for example, when the terms of the agreement had to be escalated to the Academy Trust level. Some partnerships also experienced circumstances where schools would not share data even with data-sharing agreements. For example, some partnerships have requested predicted grades for the learners they work with but were unsure whether schools would grant them access.

> *"Data-sharing and obtaining pre-16 data (that demands parental permission) is challenging and, so far, only 6% of students have been tracked compared to usually 50% in previous years. The relationship with the school is vital for anything in terms of the quantifiable data, so anything to do with assessments, which is going to be dependent on the relationship with the schools. That's why it's so important to build those up before you start doing it. If you don't have that relationship, you might hit a brick wall in trying to access the data that's required to demonstrate impact." (Partnership lead)*

> *"I think we're still questioning about getting any exam data. So, we're still having conversations about that even now." (Partnership lead)*

Some partnerships struggled to identify appropriate validated surveys. Key issues relayed included:

- Partnerships were typically able to find validated scales, tools and surveys to use to measure outcomes for learners, though some noted issues in sourcing validated tools to measure metacognition
- Some partnerships felt that the validated tools available to them do not capture the marginal gains often exhibited by learners

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- Partnerships offering CPD activities need more support developing evaluation questions, outcomes and validated tools for teachers

> *"We've got some lovely, validated scales and things that we're going to be using to measure confidence levels, But I said, 'Oh, I do want to do some questions for the teachers too.'" (Partnership lead)*

> *"We were doing some work around developing a validated survey, [with] scales or some kind of questionnaire scales to be able to measure intermediate outcomes. Things like metacognition, kind of cognitive study strategies to a degree, even like academic self-efficacy and sense of belonging have some predictive value over attainment from what we're finding in the data… robust ways of measuring the intermediate outcomes that are linked to attainment and be able to build kind of plausible theories of change and evaluations where they can measure impact." (Stakeholder).*

Partnerships are taking care to tackle issues with data quality in completed surveys. Ensuring learners fill out forms properly (in order to collect good quality data) was a priority for partnership leads. However, pre/post surveys can prove challenging, especially if they are lengthy. Equally, partnerships have had more success when administering these face-to-face in an activity session, but in some cases they must rely on teachers administering these outside of school time. Electronic online surveys (with paper as a backup) helps provide flexibility but introduces other challenges as schools sometimes do not permit phone use while on site.

> *"We physically went to every school to collect paper copies of the pre/post questionnaire and bring them back or utilised our iPads. We didn't leave it to the risk of, 'If teachers get them, we'll come and collect them at some point',' or 'You [students] do this online form', then we open it and half of them haven't done it right or, you know, said they were James Bond, which is quite a common one." (Partnership lead)*

Some partnerships had no evaluator within their team and struggled to recruit one. Approximately half of the partnerships have a staff member with evaluation expertise within the delivery team. Programmes without evaluation leads rely on delivery staff and other programme staff to conduct evaluation activities. This can be somewhat detrimental to progress with evaluation because at times these staff do not have the necessary skills or time to effectively run evaluation activities.

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5 How have schools responded to the Uni Connect attainment-raising activity?

5.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the findings relating to satisfaction with delivery of attainment-raising activities based on data from the school survey. It covers teacher satisfaction, perceived learner satisfaction and perceived outcomes for learners.

5.2 School satisfaction with attainment-raising activities

Summary: The majority of schools surveyed were satisfied with the delivery of Uni Connect attainment-raising activities and would continue to engage with attainment-raising activities in the long term.

Overall attainment-raising activities were well received, with all activities receiving a high percentage of very satisfied or satisfied ratings from survey respondents (see Figure 5.1). Study skills, non-academic barriers and metacognition ranked the highest, with 94%, 93% and 96% respectively of respondents reporting that they were satisfied or very satisfied with delivery. In addition, staff who also received feedback from learners suggested a good level of satisfaction in activities, specifically metacognition, study skills and literacy/oracy based activities.

> *"I think they delivered it fantastically. They adapted to changing circumstances if it was the case. They've adapted to working with a high-quality group of learners. They're across both years, Years 10 and 11. I wouldn't change anything, really. I think it has been 100% worthwhile doing this." (School staff)*
>
> *"For example even students who are going into higher education, yes, they have the specifically the qualifications on the face of it, but actually often they don't have the underlying literacy skills." (Stakeholder)*

School staff in case studies highlighted that metacognition was particularly well received as it was viewed as an area of learning that schools themselves could not deliver due to lack of expertise and experience. Metacognition (and to a certain extent study skills) were viewed as particularly beneficial activities because they were seen as value-adding as they were something that most teachers did not have the skills to teach themselves. In addition, school staff felt that these activities taught young people how to think and how to approach work and challenges in a new way. For example, school staff described how they gave young people transferable skills that can be used across multiple subjects, enabling them to improve attainment in a range of subjects, not just one specific subject.

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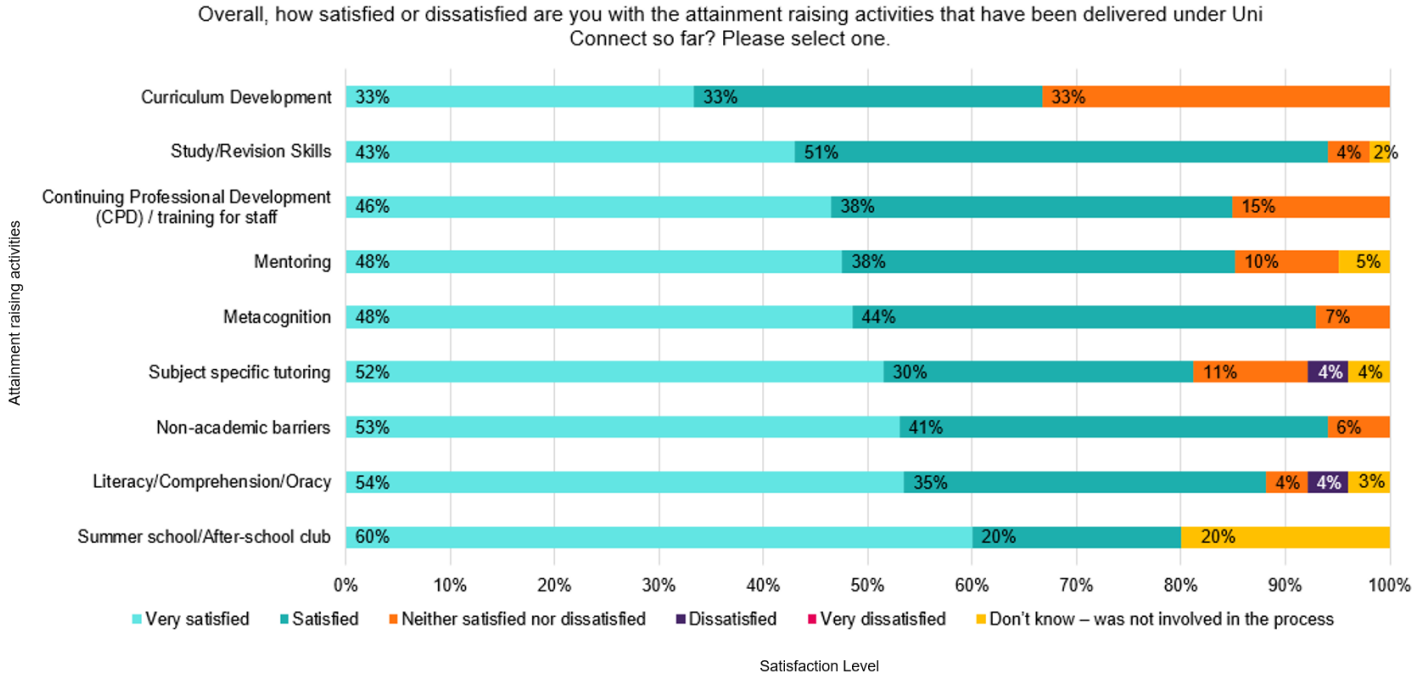
Figure 5.1: School staff satisfaction with attainment-raising activities[3]



Most teaching staff surveyed would continue to engage with attainment-raising activities in the long term. Survey results showed that 82% of school staff were very likely or certain that would continue to engage in attainment-raising activities. Despite the evaluation being ongoing some teachers have already begun to see the positive impacts on outcomes for young people.

> *"It depends on the outcome of our attainment outcomes evaluation, but […] I want to book in another one for July." (School Staff)*

Case study example: school engagement

School 'C' had engaged with Uni Connect previously, but decided to disengage for a number of years as they felt the activities being delivered were not sufficiently engaging and that the school could deliver the activities in house.

However, when offered the opportunity to take part in the attainment-raising strand, they decided to take part and expressed they were pleased with their decision to do so. Teaching staff at this school found that this time the delivery partners involved them early on, listening to the school's concerns and tailoring activities to meet the school's and learners' needs. What this school found particularly beneficial was that the activities gave learners the opportunity to learn in smaller groups than they would have in a lesson and also gave learners the experience of repeated support that was more personalised. They also thought that the activities being structured in an extended six-week programme was not only unique, but very beneficial as it allows time for skills to be embedded and practiced.

[3] It is important to note that only three schools took part in curriculum development activities and 11 schools surveyed took part in summer school or after-school clubs, thus the high satisfaction levels may be a result of the small sample size.

"I've reengaged this year and have found that actually it's been really good…. The content, I think that the content is good. It's different. It suits coming into a school of high disadvantage and talking to them about it. Because it's not telling them to go out and buy things. It's not telling them to go out and get a tutor, it's telling them what things that they can do by themselves." (School staff)

Teaching staff at this school also thought the way in which activities were delivered was engaging for learners. Staff remarked that activities were delivered in different ways ranging from presentations, small group work or working with place cards. This gave learners the opportunity not only to learn in different ways, but also kept them engaged. The school staff felt that the activities fit well into the learner's curriculum, learner development plans and the school's overall careers programme. Staff shared that although learners may miss an English, maths or science lesson they learn skills in attainment-raising that will still enable them to progress with the syllabus at a good pace and eventually complete it.

"I think it also links well with our personal development curriculum where we have a number of drop-down days across the year, which are personalised in terms of personalised curriculum in personal development for our students, looking at the wider experience as well for them." (School staff)

5.3 School views on delivery staff

The majority of teachers surveyed thought that delivery staff were well placed to deliver activities. Of teachers surveyed, 84% thought that delivery staff had the necessary skills and experience to deliver attainment-raising activities (Figure 5.2). This result could reflect partnerships utilising existing resources leveraging their internal expertise to enhance programme delivery. One school staff member shared that they were particularly impressed with the learner ambassador's delivery of the activities within their school. School staff remarked that not only did the ambassadors have a good understanding of the course contents they also delivered activities in an engaging and dynamic way and adapted the language and tone in order to meet learner needs. They also felt that having the same ambassadors regularly deliver sessions to young people provided an opportunity for relationship building between young people and the ambassadors. This relationship helped foster learner engagement and also provided opportunities for ambition-raising as ambassadors were often university learners themselves.

"They've been very proactive. Previously delivery people have sort of come along and were not really engaged with learners, but the ambassador we have had delivering attainment-raising has been really good quality." (School Staff)

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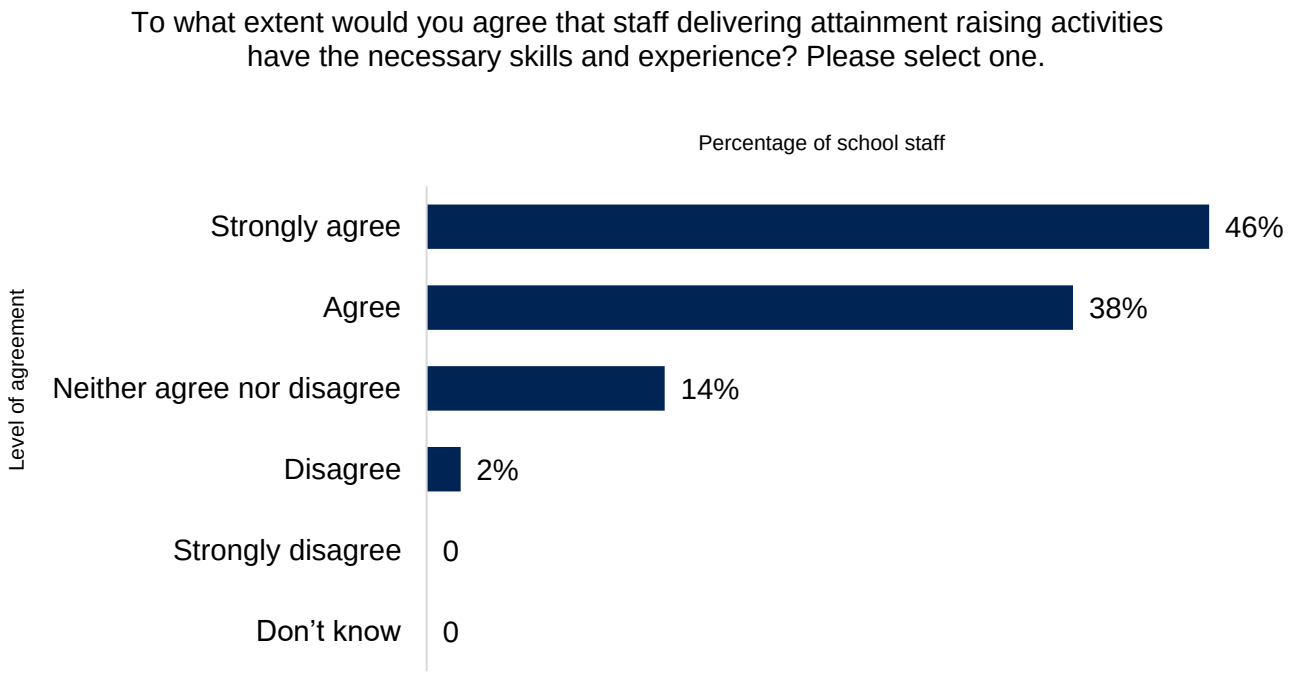
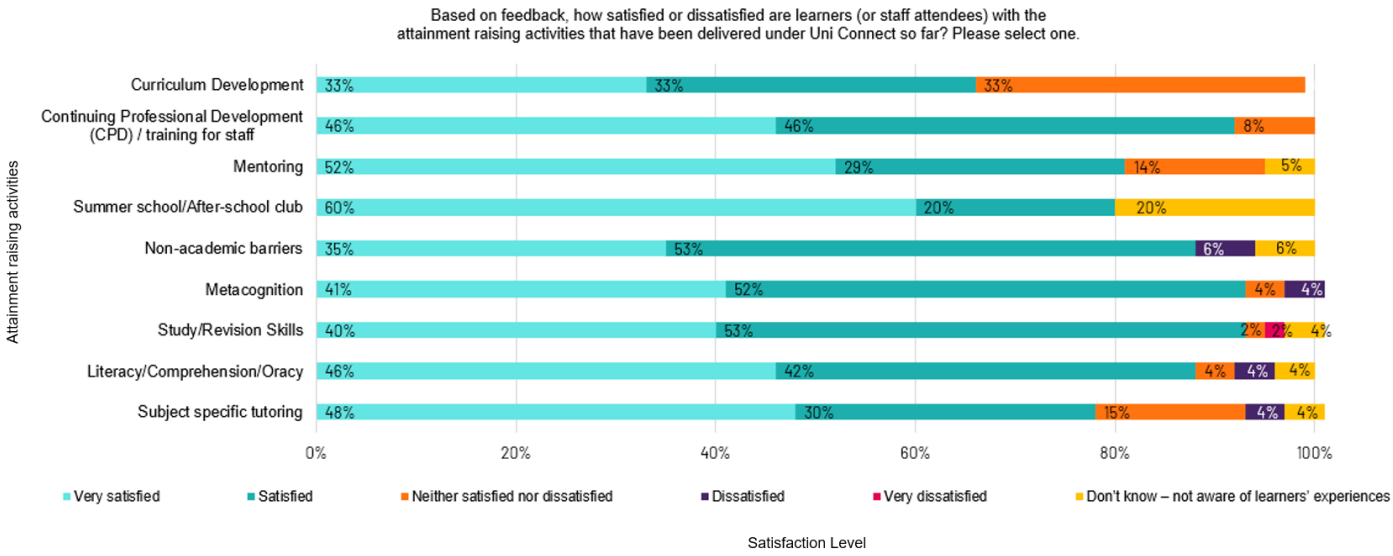
Figure 5.2: Overview of teachers' perceptions of delivery staff skills and experience



5.4 Perceived outcomes for learners

Teachers were confident that activities would result in improved outcomes for young people. Teachers surveyed thought that the attainment-raising activities would contribute to positive outcomes for young people. Of those surveyed 91% agreed/strongly agreed that it would lead to improved confidence, whilst 76% agreed/strongly agreed it would lead to improved educational attainment and 70% agreed/strongly agreed it would reduce the attainment gap between learners. Figure 5.3 further demonstrates the perceived outcomes for learners based on activity type, with net satisfaction amongst learners and school staff highest in relation to CPD for staff, metacognition activities, and study/revision skills.

Figure 5.3: Overview of outcomes for learners



Although teachers felt it was too early to assess the impact on learner's attainment, they did think activities were factors with a positive impact that lead to improved attainment. Teachers reported that they had seen an increase in learner confidence and found that learners were more engaged and vocal in lessons. This is reflected in the school survey results that found that 91% of school staff surveyed said that they agree/strongly agree that activities lead to improved confidence. In addition to this 78% surveyed thought that learners exhibited an increase in motivation to learn. One partnership also found that it had improved some learners' resilience in regard to failure. Some learners now understand that it is 'OK to get something wrong', and rather than feeling upset and disengaging in the lesson, learners instead started viewing mistakes more as an opportunity to learn. Activities have also improved how some learners approach studying and revision. Learners are aware of the different techniques and are able to evaluate what works best for them, which approaches to apply to different subjects and what techniques they can apply during lessons to help them better understand what is being taught. Other teachers noted that learners were also better able to identify their own needs and request support from teaching staff.

> *"I think it's quite empowering for them to have that experience, it makes them think about themselves and think about their approach to things, in a way that they wouldn't necessarily do in normal lessons…. Immediately, what I see in the learners is a huge impact on their confidence, especially their oracy skills, and their willingness to engage with adults in conversation, I think is improved. But I think they feel more confident to just be in their lessons." (School staff)*

> *"So, you know, we don't expect to see the impact on attainment immediately. But I believe it's going to be there, especially this year. The students have been fantastic, and the staff have really been on board with it." (School staff)*

> *"Our Year 8 students have performed a ten-week literacy intervention that has developed their literacy and oracy skills. I believe that this has been extremely beneficial to students who lost two years due to the lockdown, and this has aided a small number of students to reduce the gaps in their learning. Year 11 mentoring was used to identify students who had high effort and lower progress. We found that some of these students improved as a result of half termly sessions with Uni Connect staff." (School staff)*

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6 Conclusion

This chapter summarises the key messages based on the findings of this formative evaluation of the attainment-raising activities of Uni Connect Phase Three. It also includes a brief discussion on future delivery and evaluation.

6.1 Key messages

Overall, the attainment-raising activities were well-received by the schools we spoke to and surveyed (though this was subject to selection bias). The good reception was facilitated by positive relationships between schools and Uni Connect partnerships, which were often based on existing work together in previous years and trust developed over time. Equally, schools appreciated when activities were tailored to the needs of their school and learners as well as flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances. Although it was clear that there were still barriers to securing buy-in, many partnerships appeared to have been successful in overcoming initial scepticism from schools – due to the shift in focus of Uni Connect – as delivery continued through the year. In turn, partnerships reflected more positively on their remit to continue attainment-raising activities in future years, compared to when the new focus on attainment-raising was announced. Equally, partnerships recognised the value of now having examples of delivery that they can share with new schools.

Partnerships and schools reflected that outreach activities are still needed to best support young people into higher education. Schools initially engaged with Uni Connect partnerships based on their focus on outreach activities such as campus visits, and this was still reported as a key interest for schools. Both partnerships and schools raised concerns about how the shift in focus (and reduced funding) resulted in fewer outreach opportunities that created gaps schools cannot fill themselves. At the same time, attainment-raising activities were seen as a valuable addition that could make their offer more holistic. While partnerships relayed initial frustrations about the new focus on attainment-raising, many reported that this had eased now that delivery was in progress. Finding the right balance between the different strands of activities will therefore be a key consideration for future delivery, and partnerships would welcome more clarity on this to ensure Uni Connect's mission is clear.

Delivering metacognition and study skills sessions tended to be more popular but links to attainment should be carefully considered. Preference for these sessions occurred for several reasons. First, these types of activities were seen as a more natural transition from previous Uni Connect activities. This also meant that they could often be delivered through existing resourcing within partnerships, providing a practical option. Second, partnerships relayed that these activities complemented curriculum without overstepping so they could be delivered with relatively minimal burden on school staff. Third, the EEF evidence base for metacognition suggests it can have high impact for low costs. However, the evidence base also suggests that it works best when applied to tasks rooted in the curriculum. As such, partnerships should pay careful attention to how these sessions are delivered – in terms of frequency, duration and content – to ensure they are set up to maximise impact on attainment. Equally, more could be done to support teachers in understanding how it can be applied in the classroom.

School staff played an important role in behaviour management, safeguarding and logistics though capacity posed challenges. Schools reflected on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on learner behaviour, including negative impacts on attendance and engagement. This was also seen to affect some of the Uni Connect attainment-raising activities so teachers and other school staff (e.g. in

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pastoral roles) helped manage these issues. In many cases, this involved school staff who had previously supported Uni Connect activities, but the new focus on attainment-raising also required input from different staff members that sometimes resulted in capacity challenges. Overall, there appeared to be an important link between schools investing resource and understanding the value of activities. Partnerships and schools have gained a better understanding of the resourcing requirements from schools, which will be important to communicate to new schools.

Schools were seen as best-placed to select learners though there is scope to refine how learners are identified. In most cases, schools identified learners for participation based on criteria provided by partnerships. This recognised that schools were best-placed given their knowledge of learners and their circumstances and provided them with a degree of autonomy. However, it was clear that eligibility criteria were not always used consistently and activities might not be reaching those who could most benefit.

HEPs were less likely to be involved in attainment-raising activities relative to wider Uni Connect activities. Partnerships attributed less engagement among HEPs to the mismatch in timeframes and requirements for Access and Participation Plans. Now that HEPs will have a greater focus on attainment-raising, partnerships should leverage more opportunities for collaboration, including sharing their lessons learned so far.

It was too early to say how these activities will impact attainment. School staff felt that learners were showing improvements in confidence, engagement, motivation/ambition and the development of new skills. While they felt these were positive short-term indicators, for many it was unclear whether and how much they would impact attainment over time and how this might vary across learners. More generally, the nature and quality of evaluation activities may preclude robust estimates of causal impact, for example, due to the lack of comparator groups and small sample sizes. Some Uni Connect partnerships have invested heavily in evaluation resource (e.g. hiring dedicated staff members) and have detailed approaches for evaluation, but this is not consistent across partnerships.

The absence of multi-year funding and funding reductions that were announced during the fieldwork period creates instability for partnerships and results in delivery challenges. For example, attainment-raising activities require considerable planning and timetabling discussions with schools. As a result, many activities did not take place in the autumn term. Equally, some partnerships expressed a desire to create longer-term programmes for learners to attend over more than one year, but funding made planning these programmes higher risk for partnerships and schools. Another core challenge is around staff retention.

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Annex A: Evaluation framework

Table 6.1: Uni Connect Phase 3 evaluation framework

Research questions	Sub questions	Operating plans	Partnership lead interviews	Wider stakeholder interviews	Case study interviews			Survey of schools
					HEPs	Delivery partners	School Staff	
Q1: How have partnerships progressed with attainment-raising delivery in 2023-24?	What activities have been delivered, and how have activities varied based on education providers' characteristics?							
	How do partnerships assess that the programme is having the intended effect?							
	How are partnerships engaging other stakeholders in this work (HEPs, third sector, local authorities)?							
	What is the intended and current scale of delivery of attainment-raising activities?							
	How have under-represented groups and other learner populations been targeted and supported?							
Q2: What are the opportunities and key challenges for partnerships in delivering pre-16 attainment-raising in state secondary schools?	How are partnerships accessing or developing the skills/expertise to deliver attainment-raising activity?'							
	What are the key barriers to delivering attainment-raising activities?							
	What are the key barriers and facilitators to high quality							

Research questions	Sub questions	Operating plans	Partnership lead interviews	Wider stakeholder interviews	Case study interviews			Survey of schools
					HEPs	Delivery partners	School Staff	
	delivery?							
	How has the programme been tailored to address education providers' specific needs?							
	Has there been a deviation from original plans for attainment-raising activity as delivery has progressed? If so, what adaptions have been made and why?							
	To what extent are they drawing on the expertise and resources of local HEPs?							
Q3: How have partnerships strengthened evaluation practice across the sector?	How is attainment-raising being evaluated?							
	How are partnerships sharing their evaluation practice and capability outside Uni Connect?							
	What are the key barriers and facilitators to improving evaluation practice?							
Q4: How have schools responded to the Uni Connect attainment-raising activity?	How and in what ways have Uni Connect partnerships identified, engaged and recruited schools to attainment-raising activities? What have been the enablers/barriers?							
	What role have schools played in supporting delivery?							

Research questions	Sub questions	Operating plans	Partnership lead interviews	Wider stakeholder interviews	Case study interviews			Survey of schools
					HEPs	Delivery partners	School Staff	
	What has gone well and less well in implementation and early delivery in schools? And why?							
	How do schools balance competing programmes of support?							
	How does the programme fit into education providers' wider educational strategy?							

Annex B: School survey results

Figure B1. Proportion of learners with free school meals

Please provide your best estimate of the proportion of learners eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) at your school? Please select one.

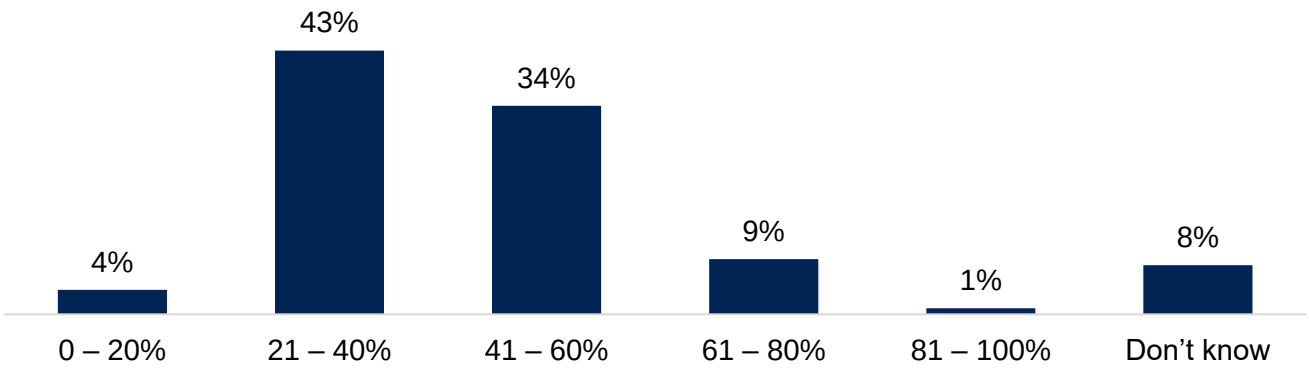

Figure B2. Overview of year groups receiving attainment-raising activities

Which of the following year groups are receiving attainment raising activities under the Uni Connect programme in your school? Please select all that apply.

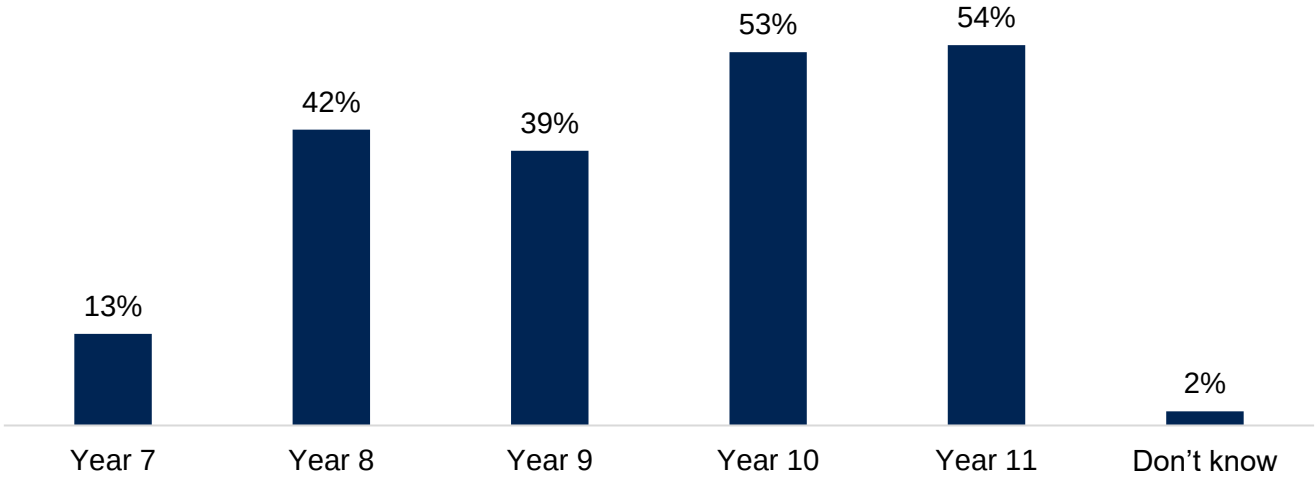

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Figure B3. Overview of how learners were selected

How were learners selected to take part in activities delivered under the Uni Connect attainment raising programme in your school? Please select all that apply.

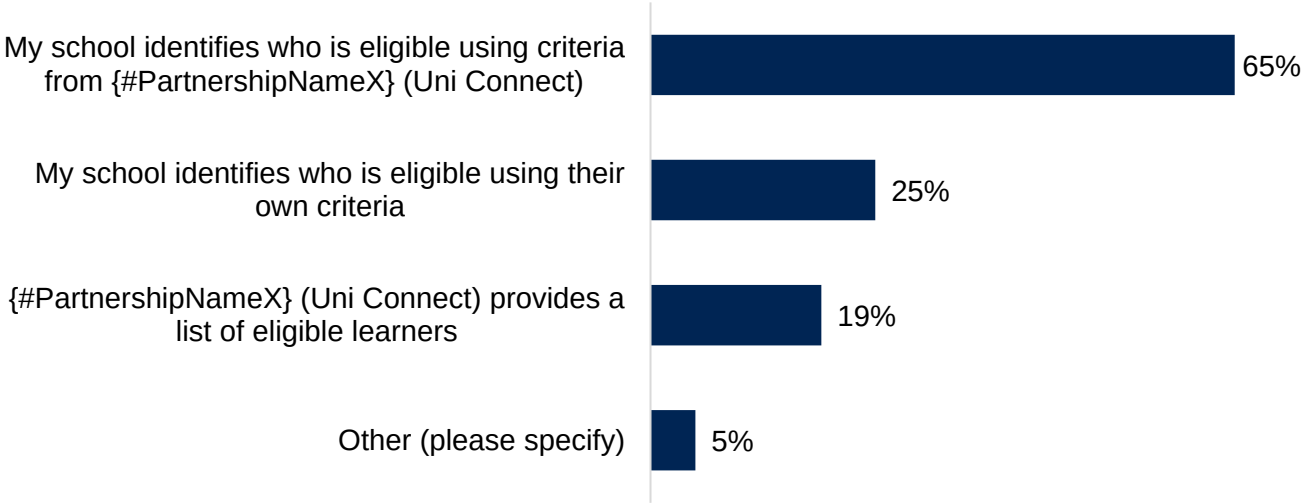

Figure B4. Overview of curriculum activities covered

Which of the following subjects are covered in activities under the Uni Connect attainment raising programme in your school? Please select all that apply.

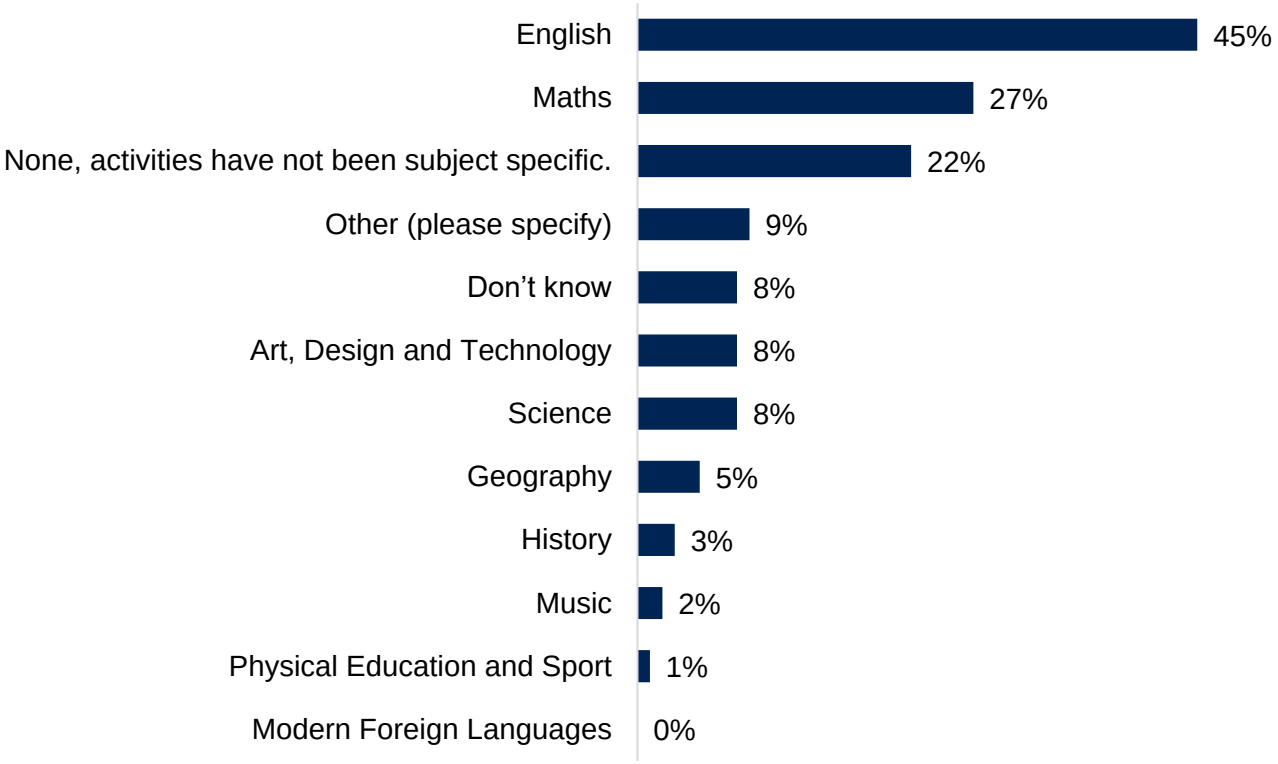

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Figure B5. Overview of attainment activity by year group

Which of the following activities are being delivered within each year group under the Uni Connect programme? Please select all that apply.

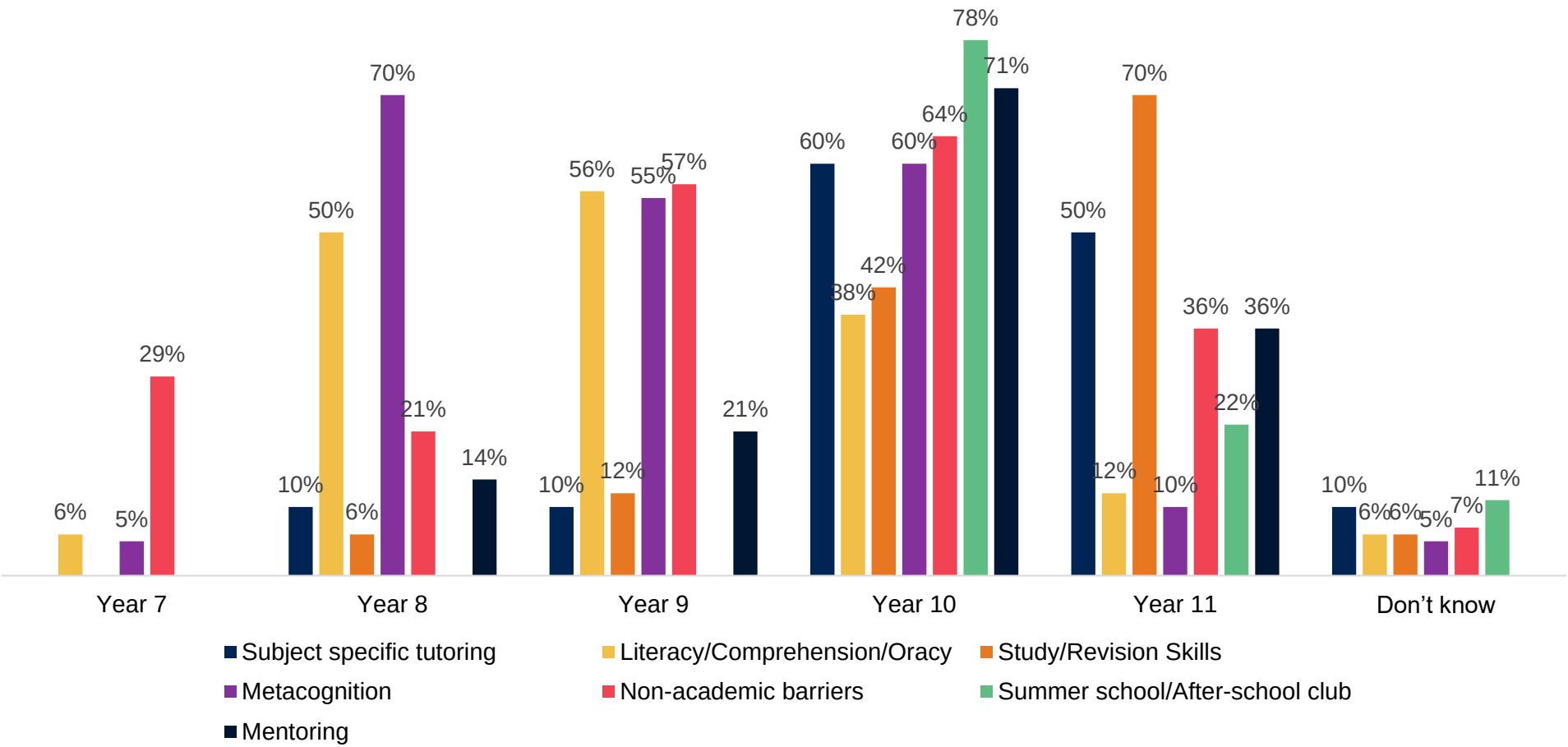

Figure B6. Extent to which activities have been tailored to school needs

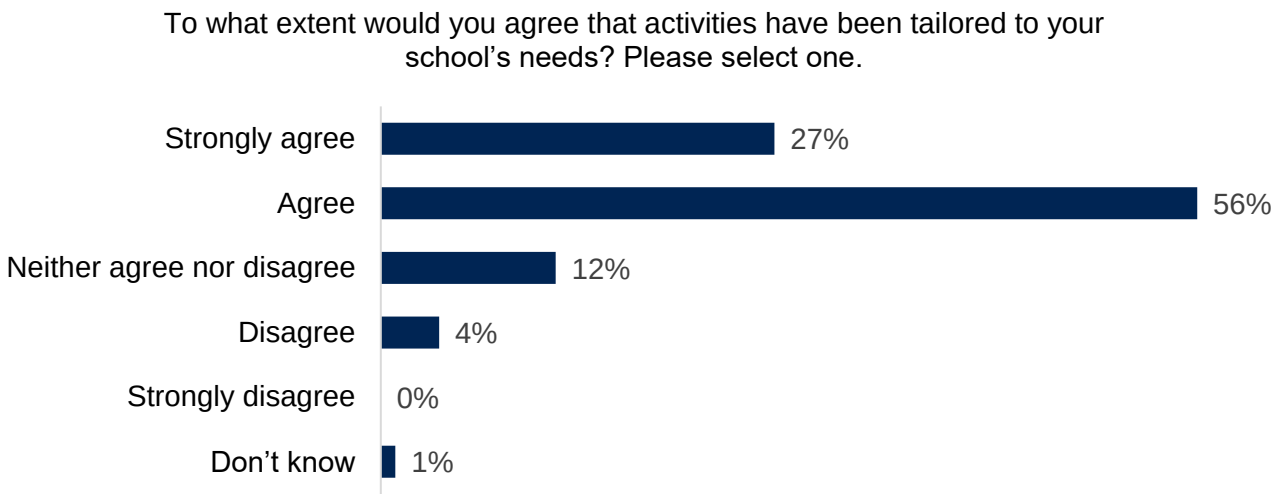

Figure B7. Extent to which activities have been tailored to learner needs

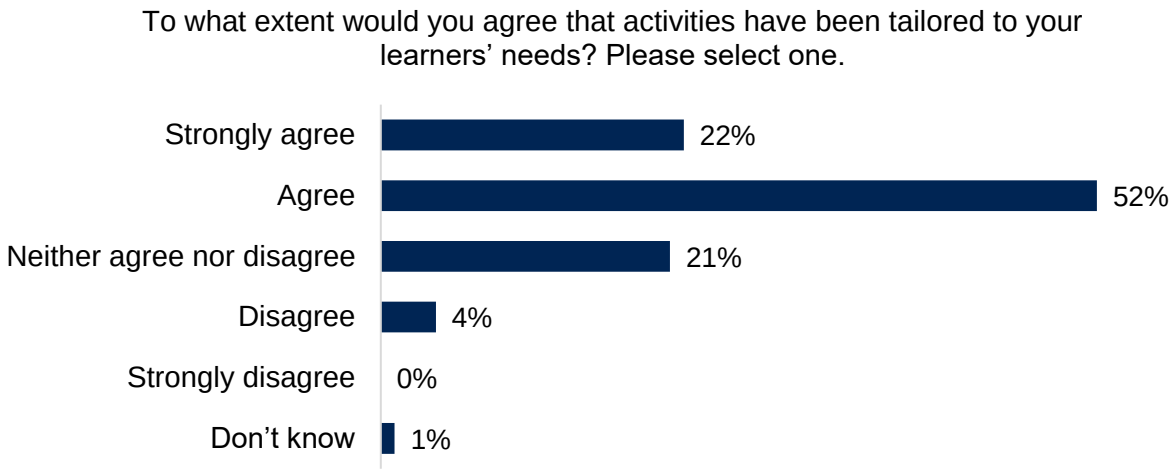

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Figure B8. Overview of the ways in which activities have been tailored

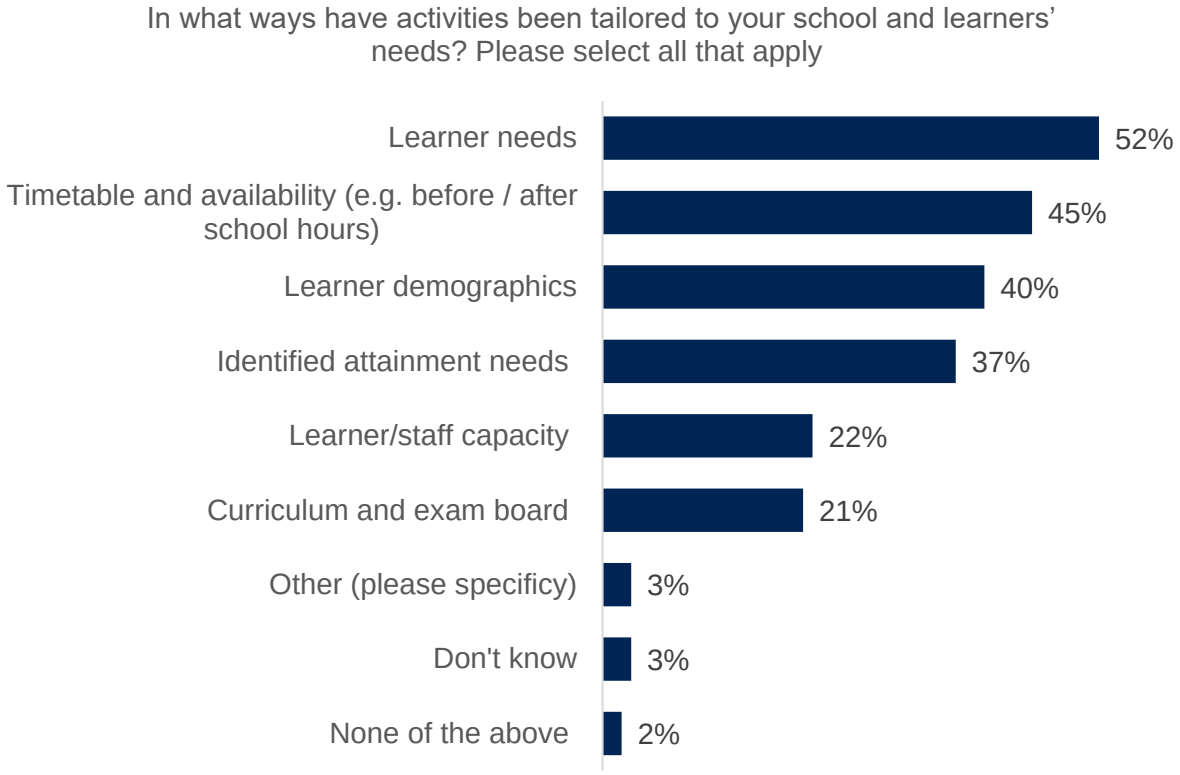

Figure B9. Overview of clarity of information in relation to monitoring activities

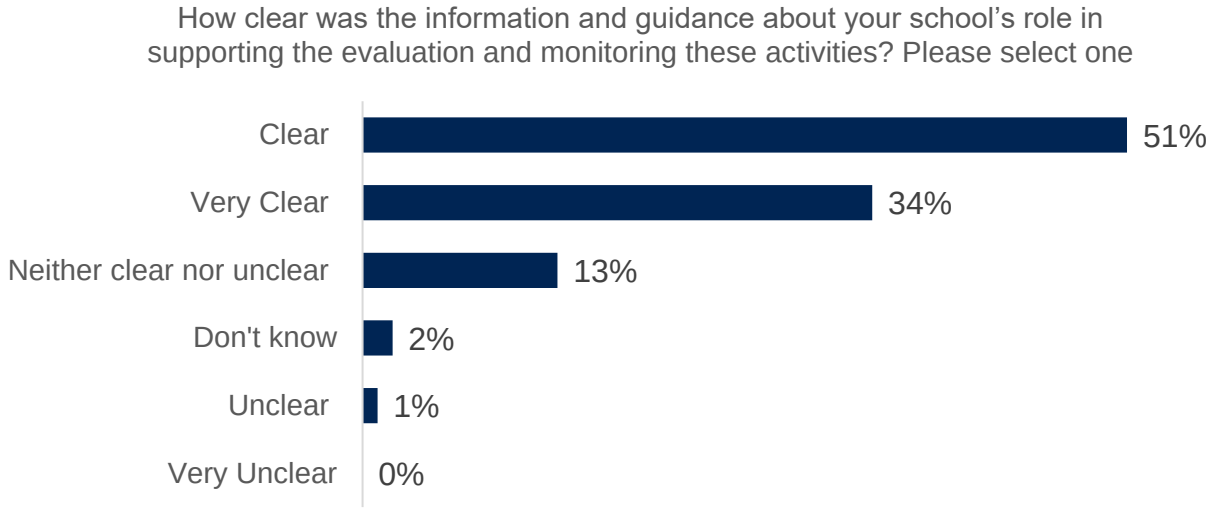

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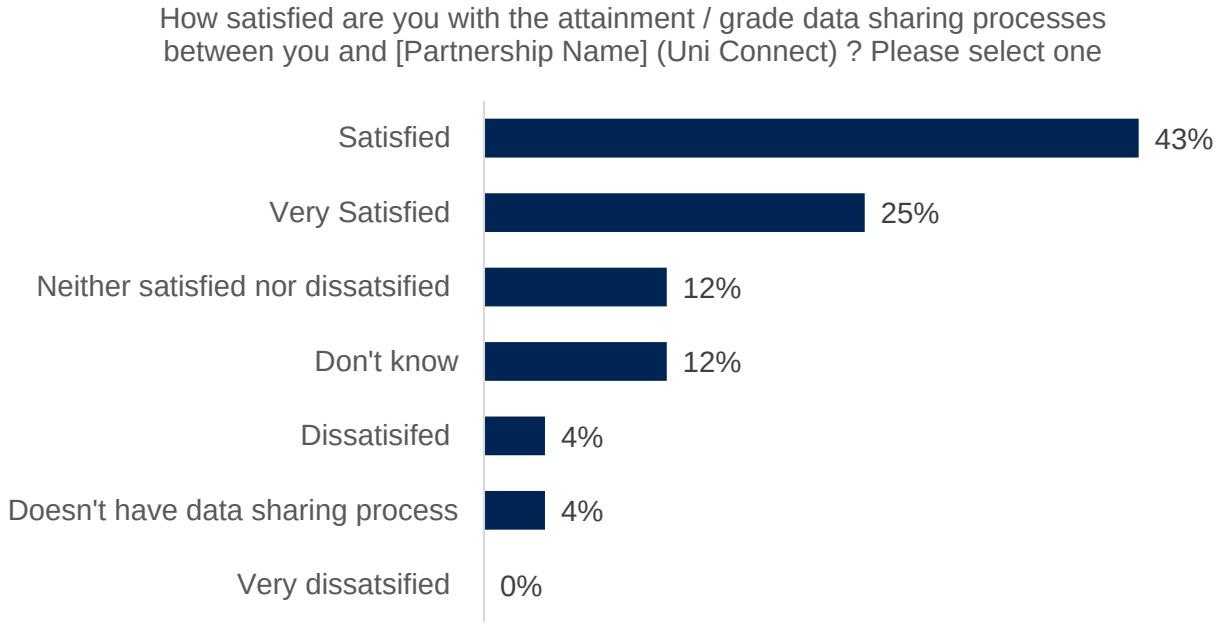
Figure B10. Teacher satisfaction with data-sharing processes



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