

# **Third independent review of impact evaluation evidence submitted by Uni Connect partnerships**

A summary of the local impact evidence to date for the Office for Students

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Authors:

Dr Rupal Patel  
Lindsey Bowes

With support from the research team:

Michelle Hansel  
Dr Guy Birkin  
Dr Jatinder Sandhu  
Dr Sarah Tazzyman

For more information about this report please contact:  
Lindsey Bowes, Research Director

CFE Research  
Phoenix Yard  
Upper Brown Street  
Leicester  
LE1 5TE

Tel: 0116 229 3300  
Email: [lindsey.bowes@cfe.org.uk](mailto:lindsey.bowes@cfe.org.uk)

[www.cfe.org.uk](http://www.cfe.org.uk)

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# 01. Executive summary

Uni Connect is a national outreach programme designed to reduce the gap in higher education (HE) participation between the most and least represented groups. This report provides insights into the impact of activities funded by Uni Connect drawing on partnerships' local evaluation evidence to date. This body of work adds substantially to the volume, as well as the quality, of evidence on the impact of outreach. As a result, a significant step towards the achievement of the OfS's objective of enhancing the evidence base has been made through Uni Connect.

## Key findings

- There is a high volume of strong evidence that multi-intervention approaches have a positive impact on short, medium and long-term outcomes for learners, particularly when they engage in seven to eight sessions for a minimum of three hours in total over the course of an academic year.
- From the evidence submitted, all interventions are shown to have a positive effect on learners' knowledge of HE and their confidence to make informed decisions – a key aim of Uni Connect. In addition, particular interventions appear to support the achievement of specific outcomes: workshops and masterclasses are effective for developing study skills and confidence; mentoring and summer schools support the development of self-efficacy and interpersonal skills; and campus visits are an effective way to convey the benefits of HE and what student life is like.
- Evidence on the impact of individual activities on learners' intentions towards HE is more equivocal, but the stronger evidence suggests that most activities have a positive effect. There is evidence that some target learners, including some of those who previously expressed an intention to apply to HE, change their mind after taking part in Uni Connect activities. This still represents a positive outcome if the decision not to progress is well-informed as a result of their engagement in the programme. Furthermore, analysis of the longitudinal learner survey for the national impact evaluation<sup>1</sup> demonstrates that learners' intentions towards HE fluctuate over time. As a result, it is possible that some of those who go from being likely to unlikely to apply to HE, will change their intentions again at a later stage in their journey and progress.

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<sup>1</sup> CFE (2021) [An independent evaluation of Uni Connect's impact on intermediate outcomes for learners: A report on the first three waves of the longitudinal survey of Uni Connect target learners.](#)

## Recommendations

The following recommendations for delivery emerge as a result of the additional evidence:

- Deliver multi-intervention programmes which engage learners in a minimum of seven sessions over three to six hours over the course of an academic year.
- Explore whether an online or blended approach to delivery could offer efficiencies and extend the reach of interventions.

The following recommendations for evaluation emerge as a result of additional evidence:

- Explore the impact of staff development and parent activities on learner outcomes.
- Analyse the differential impacts of multi-year group interventions by year group and on under-represented groups (where sample sizes allow) to identify fluctuations in attitudes and intentions towards HE.
- Assess whether online approaches developed in response to COVID-19 are as effective as traditional methods at achieving outcomes for learners.

## 02. Introduction

Uni Connect is a national outreach programme, funded by the Office for Students (OfS), that supports 29 partnerships of universities, colleges and other local partners across England. Since January 2017, the programme has been working to: reduce the gap in higher education (HE) participation between the most and least represented groups by supporting young people to make well-informed decisions about their future education; and contribute to the development of a stronger evidence base around ‘what works’ in HE outreach. Areas where HE participation is lower than might be expected given the GCSE results of the young people who live there provide the focus for the partnerships. They deliver a range of outreach activities designed to help learners understand the benefits and realities of going to university and realise their ambitions.

This summary is one in a series of outputs produced by CFE Research exploring the impact of Uni Connect. It has been produced following the third call for partnerships’ local evaluation evidence, which closed in January 2021. It presents a synthesis of the evidence submitted to date on the impact of the range of outreach activities being delivered through Uni Connect. The findings are intended to support partnerships in their ongoing planning and delivery of Uni Connect, and the OfS to develop guidance for the upcoming Phase Three of the programme.

### Understanding the impact of Uni Connect

Since the outset of the programme, work has been underway to understand the effectiveness and impact of Uni Connect at a local and national level. Evidence of the impact of partnerships’ activities is regularly collated and independently reviewed by CFE in its role as the independent national evaluator. These evidence reviews, along with a longitudinal survey tracking changes in learners’ knowledge, attitudes and intentions towards HE and the extent to which they can be attributed to Uni Connect, form two key strands of the national impact evaluation.<sup>2</sup>

### The meta-review of local evaluation evidence

Through Uni Connect, and other initiatives such as TASO<sup>3</sup>, the OfS is seeking to strengthen evaluation practice within the sector and enhance the evidence base around ‘what works’ in HE outreach. To support the achievement of these aims, each

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<sup>2</sup> Further information on the evaluation Uni Connect and the previous reports published by the national evaluation team are available on the OfS’s [website](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in HE](#) (TASO) is a new affiliate What Works Centre funded by the OfS on an initial grant until 2023.

partnership is responsible for evaluating the effectiveness and impact of its Uni Connect activities at the local level. Partnerships have been encouraged to share their evidence with CFE throughout the programme and three formal calls for evidence<sup>4</sup> have been conducted in April 2019<sup>5</sup>, March 2020<sup>6</sup> and January 2021.

After each call, CFE analyses and synthesises the evidence<sup>7</sup> in order to provide a fuller understanding of the impact of different interventions on a range of outcomes for learners. Partnership activities are categorised within the programme as:

- multi-intervention approaches
- subject masterclasses
- skills and attainment
- mentoring
- summer schools
- information, advice and guidance (IAG)
- campus visits
- parents and carers
- staff development

The evidence is then used by the national evaluation team to inform recommendations for the development of programme guidance and delivery, and to support the analysis and interpretation of the longitudinal learner survey findings. Feedback to partnerships on ways to further strengthen their evaluation evidence is also provided by the national evaluation team to help build capacity and enhance practice.

### **Evidence submitted in response to the third call**

Partnerships submitted **108** sources of evidence in response to the latest call for evidence:

- **36** sources were screened out during the initial sift because they did not meet the criteria for the review (see Appendix 1).

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<sup>4</sup> A fourth call is planned for July 2021. The findings will be incorporated into the end of Uni Connect Phase Two<sup>4</sup> report in autumn 2021.

<sup>5</sup> The findings are published in the [End of Phase One report](#)

<sup>6</sup> The findings are published in [An independent review of the evaluation evidence submitted by Uni Connect Partnerships](#).

<sup>7</sup> Process evaluation to understand the effectiveness of programme delivery at the local level is out of the scope of the review which focuses only on the results of local impact evaluations.

- 72 submissions were reviewed in more detail; a further 2 were screened out at this stage.

A total of 70 sources of evidence have therefore been added to the evidence base in the latest review. After every call, each source of evidence that meets the inclusion criteria is assessed and classified according to the OfS’s Standard of Evidence<sup>8</sup> (Table 1).

**Table 1: Classification of the evidence submitted**

Number and type of evidence sources submitted at each formal call				
	April '19	March '20	January '21	Total
Type 1 – narrative	15	4	6	25
Type 2 – empirical	23	46	62	131
Type 3 – causal	5 <sup>9</sup>	2	2	9
<b>Total sources</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>165</b>

These sources are then analysed in more detail to identify:

- the outcomes being measured
- the strength of the evaluation approach adopted
- any evidence of impact - positive or negative.<sup>10</sup>

As a result of the evidence submitted in response to the latest call, further insights into the impacts of sustained and progressive outreach on outcomes for learners and the effectiveness of some individual interventions are now available. There remains an important note of caution – the evidence is still largely empirical and therefore *indicative* of impact; it is not possible to claim that the outcomes achieved are *attributable* to the interventions in the majority of cases. However, given the challenges of implementing the most robust methods required to isolate the effects of

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<sup>8</sup> [Standards of evidence and evaluating impact of outreach](#)

<sup>9</sup> This includes papers based on 3 randomised control trials (RCTs) undertaken as part of the national evaluation with support from the Behavioural Insights Team.

<sup>10</sup> Further details of the methods used to code and assess the strength of evidence are provided in Appendix 1



Uni Connect at the activity, local and programme levels,<sup>11</sup> confidence in the findings increases as the weight of evidence that Uni Connect is having a positive effect grows.

## Impact of COVID-19

In March 2020, the UK Government began introducing measures to limit the spread of COVID-19. To date, these have included the closure of schools and colleges to the majority of pupils for large parts of the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years. The closures have caused considerable disruption to the education system as well as programmes, such as Uni Connect, which are designed to be delivered primarily face-to-face and largely through schools and colleges. In response, Uni Connect partnerships have adapted their approaches by moving much of their activity online.

Given the disruption to the programme and the potential implications for the outcomes achieved by learners, the OfS commissioned CFE to undertake a separate review of research and evaluation by Uni Connect partnerships into how COVID-19 has affected learners and outreach practice. The information was collected alongside evidence from local impact evaluations during the latest call for evidence in January 2021. A total of 16 sources of information were submitted by 11 partnerships. The findings are summarised in an Emerging Insights Report<sup>12</sup> which is published alongside this summary report. These insights, along with the evidence of impact summarised here, are designed to inform the programme guidance and contextualise future analysis of the longitudinal learner survey for the national impact evaluation.

## Synthesis of evidence

The evidence on the impact of individual Uni Connect-funded activities<sup>13</sup> on intermediate learner outcomes is synthesised in the next section. The ‘key findings’ on each intervention focus on where the evidence submitted in response to the latest call corroborates and adds weight to previous analyses as well as where it offers new insights and a more nuanced understanding of impact. Evidence that challenges earlier findings is also highlighted.

Details of the extent and nature of the impact of each intervention is synthesised in a series of tables ordered from strongest to weakest evidence. Uni Connect was at a relatively early stage for a sustained and progressive programme when the first call

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<sup>11</sup> The limitations of the available data and the implications for findings on the impact of Uni Connect are discussed in detail in the [technical annex](#) that accompanies the latest report on the longitudinal survey.

<sup>12</sup> CFE (2021) [The effects of COVID-19 on the delivery of Uni Connect](#)

<sup>13</sup> A mapping of the outcomes by intervention is presented in Appendix 2.

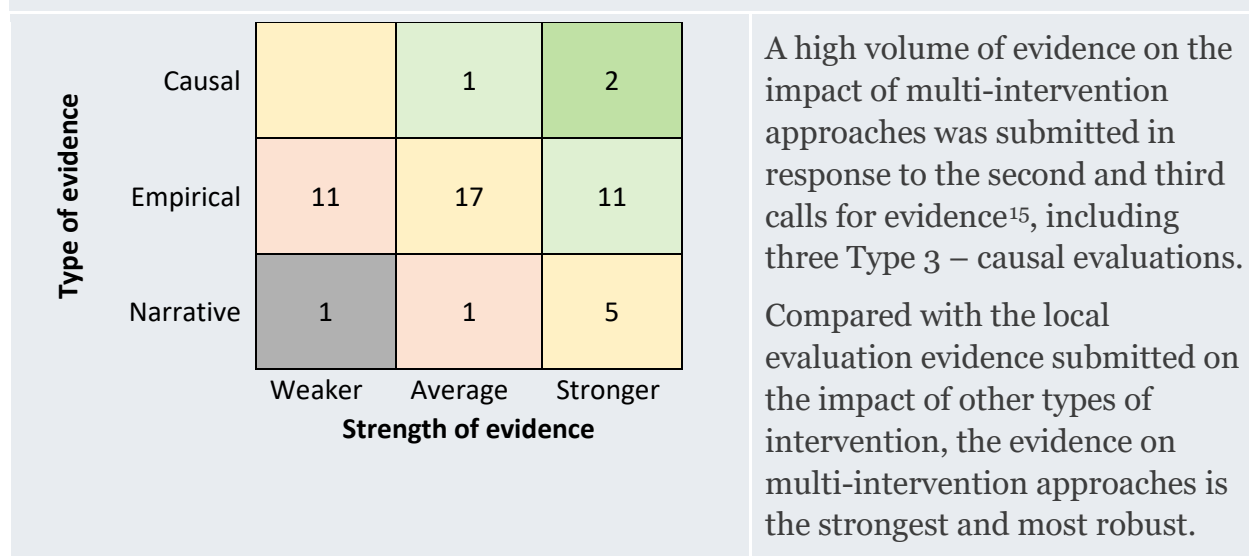
for evidence was conducted. The impacts of the programme were only just starting to emerge at that point and the evidence was limited and relatively weak. While some findings from the most robust evaluations (including the three RCTs conducted with the support of the national impact evaluation team) are included in the synthesis tables, they primarily draw on evidence from the second and third calls.

# 03. Synthesis of evidence

## Multi-intervention approaches<sup>14</sup>

*A multi-intervention approach combines two or more activities into an ongoing programme of support for the same cohort of learners.*

**Figure 1: Number of sources and strength of evidence in the impact of multi-intervention approaches**



## Key findings

- There is now further strong evidence to demonstrate that a multi-intervention approach increases learners’ **knowledge of HE and other post-18 options** and has a positive impact on **confidence** and **interpersonal skills**, particularly presentation skills and teamworking. Older learners who are closer to the transition to HE or other post-18 options show the greatest shift in their knowledge of HE.

<sup>14</sup> Interventions of this type are sometimes referred to as ‘black box’ interventions.

<sup>15</sup> No evidence on the impact of multi-intervention approaches, as defined here, was submitted in response to the first call.

- In the main, there is also further evidence to suggest that multi-intervention approaches have a positive influence on learners' **intentions towards HE** and the **likelihood they will apply**. However, a couple of comparatively weaker sources indicate no or a marginally negative impact on the likelihood learners will apply to HE.
- Although evidence on the most effective combination of multi-intervention activities is still limited, causal and strong empirical evidence is emerging on the optimum number and length of sessions. The likelihood of a learner **being accepted on to a HE programme** appears to increase as the number of sessions and hours of engagement increases.
- Strong evidence is also starting to emerge that the **rate of progression to HE** from schools where multi-intervention activities are delivered is higher than from those where they are not.

**Table 2: Evidence of the impact of multi-intervention approaches**

Outcomes measured	Impacts achieved
<p><b>Short term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased knowledge of HE and other post-18 options</li> <li>• Increased understanding of the benefits of HE</li> <li>• Development of interpersonal skills</li> <li>• Attainment raising</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All studies that measured knowledge of HE indicated a <b>positive</b> shift. There is evidence to indicate that the shift is greater for older learners (Year 13). This is important as this cohort are closet to the post-18 transition point and at the stage in their journey when final decisions about HE are made.</li> <li>• There is evidence that indicates a <b>positive</b> shift in learners' understanding of the benefits of HE relative to other progression routes.</li> <li>• The evidence on the impact of multi-intervention approaches on interpersonal skills was almost all <b>positive</b>. Of the 16 studies that measured this outcome, all but one (average empirical) found skills <b>increase</b>. Key skills developed by learners include presenting, teamwork and self-confidence.</li> <li>• Only one study (average empirical) measured impact on attainment and found an average grade <b>increase</b>. However, it cannot be directly correlated to the intervention.</li> </ul>

Outcomes measured	Impacts achieved
<p><b>Medium term:</b> Increased intentions/likelihood of applying to HE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The evidence on the impact of multi-intervention approaches is mainly <b>positive</b>. The majority of studies report upward shifts in attitudes and intentions towards HE.</li> <li>• One empirically strong source found a moderate <b>positive association</b> between activity contact hours and the likelihood of applying to HE. Those who received 3–6 hours were 1.7 times more likely to apply than those who received less than 3 hours.</li> <li>• There were two outlier studies. One (weak empirical) found <b>no change</b> in learners' self-reported intentions and attitudes towards HE. A strong empirical evaluation of the impact of a multi-intervention approach on a cohort of White males from lower socio-economic groups identified a <b>slight decline</b> in the proportion who strongly agreed they would be likely to apply to HE from pre to post intervention.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Long term:</b> • Increase in number/percentage of Uni Connect learners who accept a place at HE</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Both strong causal papers found that those who participate in a greater number of activities are <b>more like to apply and accept a place</b> at HE: learners who engage 7-8 times in multi-intervention activities are <b>more likely to be accepted</b> on to a HE programmes than those who engage less frequently or not at all.</li> <li>• All three causal studies found intervention schools have a higher rate of progression to HE than comparator schools suggesting a <b>positive</b> effect, but this was <b>not statistically significant</b> in one study.</li> <li>• The cumulative evidence suggests that when outreach activities are integrated in multi-intervention programmes, the <b>positive impact</b> is sustained into the medium and long-term.</li> </ul>

## Summer schools and residential

*These consist of two or more days of intensive activity aimed at providing a real insight into university life and all that it entails. They include Easter Schools and can be residential and non-residential.*

**Figure 2: Number of sources and strength of evidence on the impact of summer schools and residential**

Type of evidence	Strength of evidence		
	Weaker	Average	Stronger
Causal		3	1
Empirical	4	11	1
Narrative	3	4	

Early evidence that emerged in Phase One of Uni Connect on the impact of summer schools was primarily narrative and relatively weak. Although further evidence submitted in response to the second and third call is more limited in volume, it is strong and includes one causal study. As such, the evidence on the impact of this intervention is amongst the most robust, second only to multi-intervention approaches.

## Key findings

- The majority of evidence continues to support the assertion that summer schools and residential have a positive effect on **learners' knowledge of HE**, including student finance (which is identified as a gap for disadvantaged and Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups in particular in the latest analysis of the longitudinal learner survey for the national impact evaluation<sup>16</sup>) and their **confidence to make informed decisions**.
- Qualitative feedback suggests this type of intervention helps to develop **interpersonal skills** including teamwork and communication but has no impact on **study skills**.
- There is empirically strong evidence to suggest that summer schools and residential can have a positive impact on learners' **intentions towards HE**

<sup>16</sup> CFE (2021) [An independent evaluation of Uni Connect's impact on intermediate outcomes for learners: A report on the first three waves of the longitudinal survey of Uni Connect target learners](#)

and the **likelihood they will apply**. However, the RCT in Phase One found this type of intervention had no significant effect on Year 10 learners' intentions.

**Table 3: Evidence of the impact of summer schools and residentials**

Outcomes measured	Impact achieved
<p><b>Short term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased knowledge of HE and other post-18 options</li> <li>• Increased confidence in ability to make informed choices</li> <li>• Development of interpersonal skills and/or study skills</li> <li>• Attainment raising</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three studies (average empirical) indicate that summer schools or residential activities have a <b>positive</b> impact on learners' knowledge of HE, including student finance, and their understanding of post-18 options.</li> <li>• One of the six studies (average empirical) reported a slight <b>decrease</b> in learners' knowledge of HE.</li> <li>• Increased knowledge is shown to have a <b>positive</b> impact on learners' ability to make informed decisions.</li> <li>• While one average empirical study found <b>limited impact</b> on the development of learners' study skills, another strong empirical study demonstrates <b>improvements</b> in learners' study skills as well as attainment in English and Maths, when actual grades were compared with predicted grades.</li> <li>• Qualitative feedback from learners suggests that summer schools and residentials can have a <b>positive</b> influence on the development of soft skills and attributes such as teamwork, communication skills and personal confidence.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Medium term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased intentions/likelihood of applying to HE</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A Phase One RCT of a summer school for Year 10s run by three partnerships showed <b>no significant impact</b> on likelihood of applying to HE. Participants were <b>less likely</b> to perceive that university is for 'people like me' but <b>more likely</b> to perceive that 'university will broaden my horizons' and that university will 'help me to get a better job' compared with the sample as a whole, but these findings were not significant.</li> <li>• Two subsequent empirical studies that measured changes in learners' intentions to apply to HE found summer schools and residentials have a <b>positive</b> impact. However, one average empirical study reported a slight <b>decrease</b> in this outcome.</li> </ul>

## Subject masterclasses and skills and attainment workshops

*A masterclass is an activity designed to provide an insight to a subject(s) or to increase awareness of a subject(s) at HE. It can be a structured subject-specific event.*

*A skills and attainment workshop is an activity designed to increase knowledge, skills and understanding. Workshops have a clear aim and can be used to help, for instance, students with their Key Stage curriculum, contribute to increasing attainment or personal development.*

**Figure 3: Number of sources and strength of evidence on the impact of subject masterclasses and skills and attainment workshops.**

Type of evidence	Strength of evidence		
	Weaker	Average	Stronger
Causal			
Empirical	5	7	5
Narrative	3	1	

The volume and strength of the evidence on the impact of masterclasses and workshops has increased substantially. Ten empirical studies were submitted at the third call, two of which were rated 'strong' and six as 'average'. Although evidence on the impact of these interventions is not as strong as the evidence for multi-intervention approaches and summer schools, it is stronger than current evidence for other interventions and equivalent in strength to face-to-face mentoring.



## Key findings

- The cumulative evidence continues to demonstrate that workshops and masterclasses can have a positive impact on learners’ **knowledge of HE and other post-18 options** and their **confidence to make informed decisions**. An improved understanding of the options available can lead some learners to change their mind about their post-18 destination, including some who previously intended to progress to HE.
- Evidence from the previous calls indicated that workshops and masterclasses can have a positive impact on the development of learners’ **study skills**. New evidence on the impact on **interpersonal and transferable skills** is more mixed, with some (weaker) evidence suggesting that confidence declined among some learners.
- Although one new study suggests that some learners may be less likely to **consider HE** after their engagement with a workshop/masterclass, the majority of local evaluation evidence (and the analysis of the longitudinal learner survey for the national evaluation<sup>17</sup>) suggests these interventions have a positive influence on learners’ intentions to progress to HE.

**Table 4: Evidence of the impact of subject masterclasses and skills and attainment workshops**

Outcomes measured	Impacts achieved
<p><b>Short term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased knowledge of HE and other post-18 options</li> <li>• Greater confidence in ability to make informed choices about future education</li> <li>• Attitudes to HE</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most evidence including one strong empirical study suggests that workshops / masterclasses are associated with <b>increased</b> knowledge of HE.</li> <li>• One study identified a <b>decrease</b> in students’ self-reported knowledge of HE but the evidence is rated weak. The workshop was delivered online and so the mode of delivery could have been a factor.</li> <li>• Masterclasses and workshops also appear to have a <b>positive</b> influence on learners’ confidence in their ability to make an informed decision about their future education. One study (average empirical) found nearly two-thirds of learners felt they had enough information to decide which HE option would suit them best following an intervention.</li> </ul>

<sup>17</sup> CFE (2021) [An independent evaluation of Uni Connect’s impact on intermediate outcomes for learners: A report on the first three waves of the longitudinal survey of Uni Connect target learners.](#)

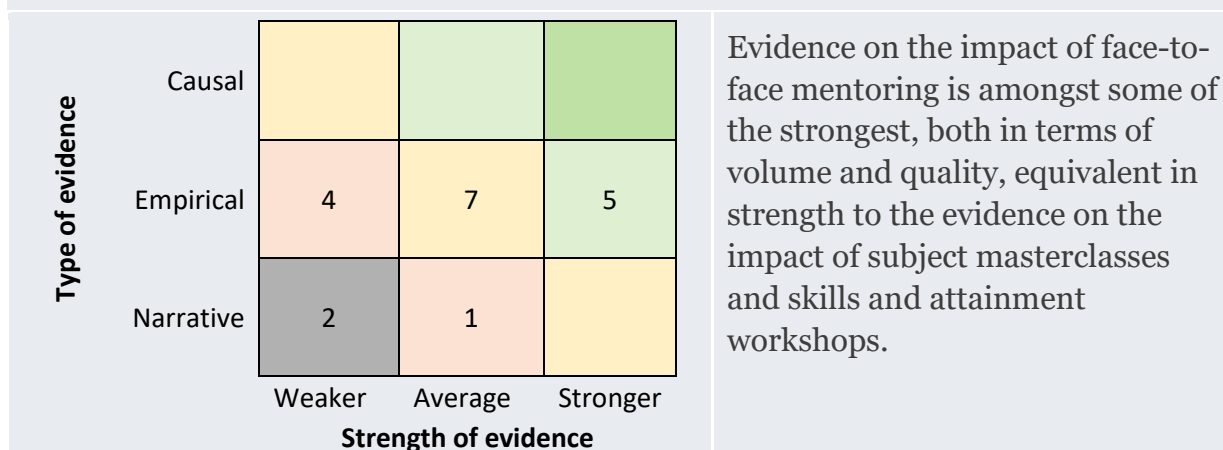
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of interpersonal skills</li> <li>• Development of study skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Two strong empirical evaluations report <b>increases</b> in learners' preparedness for exams and confidence.</li> <li>• An average empirical study reported <b>negative</b> shifts in learners' listening skills and confidence, while another reported a <b>decrease</b> in learners' confidence in their transferrable skills.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Medium term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased intentions/likelihood of applying to HE</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seven studies reported intentions to progress to HE <b>increased</b> for some learners, including those in Year 11 according to one average empirical study.</li> <li>• Two studies (average and weak empirical) found learners changed their minds about HE following a workshop/masterclass.</li> <li>• One study (average empirical) reported a fifth of learners who attended a masterclass were <b>less likely</b> to agree that HE is for people like them.</li> <li>• Masterclasses and workshops are often pitched to whole or multiple year groups with a range of education and career plans. The non-targeted nature of some of these interventions could reduce their effect.</li> </ul>

## Mentoring

*Mentoring is an activity with repeat interactions and sustained engagement designed to achieve a range of outcomes. It Involves a dedicated relationship between a mentor and student mentee(s). Activities can be face-to-face and/or online.*

### Face-to-face mentoring

**Figure 4: Number of sources and strength of evidence on the impact of face-to-face mentoring**



### Key findings

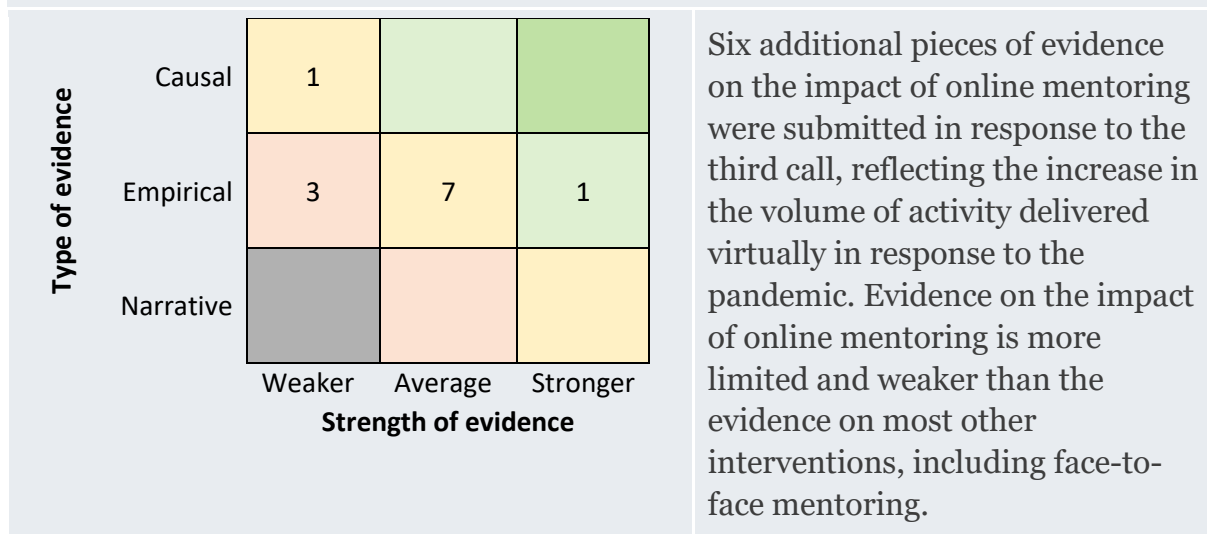
- Mentoring appears to be particularly effective when delivered by student ambassadors or other role models who learners can relate to.
- The cumulative evidence demonstrates that mentoring has a positive impact on learners' **knowledge of HE and other post-18 options** and their **confidence to make informed decisions**.
- Although evaluation of the impact of mentoring on learners' **confidence in their ability to succeed in HE** and **interpersonal skills** is currently limited, it provides strong evidence to suggest it can have a positive effect.
- Evidence from the first call on the impact of mentoring on learners' **intentions towards HE** was mixed; however further collective evidence has emerged to demonstrate it can have a positive impact on this outcome. That said, there was one empirically strong study that reported a negative change in the **likelihood of applying to HE**.

**Table 5: Evidence of the impact of face-to-face mentoring**

Outcomes measured	Impacts achieved
<p><b>Short term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased knowledge of HE and other post-18 options.</li> <li>• Increased knowledge about the benefits of HE</li> <li>• Increased confidence in ability to make informed choices.</li> <li>• Increased confidence in ability to succeed in HE</li> <li>• Development of interpersonal skills and/or study skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mentoring is <b>positively</b> associated with an increase in knowledge and awareness of HE as well as an increase in learners' confidence in their decision-making abilities.</li> <li>• A strong empirical study reported statistically significant <b>positive</b> shifts in knowledge of the benefits gained from pursuing courses in HE.</li> <li>• Two studies measured skill-related outcomes. One strong empirical paper found that mentoring was associated with <b>statistically-significant positive</b> change in learners' confidence in their ability to succeed in HE. A second reported an <b>increase</b> in learners' communication skills after mentees had been given an opportunity to present.</li> <li>• One mentoring project (strong empirical) targeted white males from lower socio-economic groups. The aim was to help them to recognise their strengths and develop their skills and attributes. The pre- and post-activity survey results for the face-to-face intervention suggest that this particular activity was an effective way to increase the self-awareness, motivation, resilience, and confidence of this group, which contribute to increased intentions to progress to HE.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Medium term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased intentions/likelihood of applying to HE</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The evidence on the impact of mentoring on learners' intentions to apply to HE is mostly <b>positive</b>. Four of the five evaluations that measured this outcome reported an <b>increase</b>.</li> <li>• One evaluation (strong empirical) reported a <b>negative</b> change in the likelihood that learners will apply to HE, in both target and non-target learners.</li> </ul>

## Online mentoring

**Figure 5: Number of sources and strength of evidence on the impact of online mentoring**



## Key findings

- Evidence submitted in response to the second call suggested that mode of delivery could be a factor influencing the effectiveness of mentoring and that online interventions achieved less positive impacts than those delivered face-to-face.
- Further evidence on the impact of online mentoring has been submitted in response to the third call. This suggests that online approaches could be as effective as face-to-face mentoring for increasing learners' **confidence in their ability to make informed decisions**.
- Evidence on the extent to which online mentoring increases learners' **intentions to towards HE** is limited and weak, so it is not yet possible at this stage to determine whether or not online mentoring has a positive impact on the likelihood that learners will apply to HE.

**Table 6: Evidence of the impact of online mentoring**

Outcomes measured	Impacts achieved
<p><b>Short term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased knowledge of HE and other post-18 options</li> <li>• Greater confidence in the ability to make informed choices about future education</li> <li>• Development of interpersonal skills and/or study skills</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There is empirical evidence to indicate that online mentoring <b>increases</b> learners' knowledge of HE and student finance and the application process in particular.</li> <li>• Five studies reported that online mentoring has a <b>positive</b> impact on learners' confidence to make informed decisions about their future education.</li> <li>• One study (weak empirical) measured the impact on interpersonal skills and reported an <b>increase</b> in learner confidence; another weak empirical study found it had <b>no impact</b> on study skills and confidence, albeit from a high baseline.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Medium term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased intentions/likelihood of applying to HE</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• One weak empirical study found online mentoring <b>increased</b> the proportion of learners who were planning to apply for university or higher-level apprenticeships by 15%.</li> <li>• In contrast, one weak causal study targeting Year 12 learners found <b>no evidence</b> online mentoring has a significant impact on students' self-reported intentions to progress to HE.</li> </ul>

## Information, advice and guidance (IAG)

*This refers to light touch events for students, usually lasting a day or less, which tend to involve university staff visiting schools or colleges to give information and advice on university life, how to apply, course choices and student finance. Such events include fairs and exhibitions. They can be broadly subject specific and aimed at a group or an open audience with very limited interaction.*

**Figure 6: Number of sources and strength of evidence on the impact of IAG**

Type of evidence	Causal		3	
	Empirical	12	8	
	Narrative	1	4	
		Weaker	Average	Stronger
<b>Strength of evidence</b>				

The existing evidence on the impact of IAG sessions was limited in volume and strength. The volume increased significantly following the latest call (an additional 16 sources were submitted resulting in 21 in total), Although most sources are relatively weak, there is some causal evidence of impact.

## Key findings

- The majority of evidence suggests that IAG effectively achieves its primary objectives to increase learners' **knowledge of HE and other post-18 options** and their **confidence to make informed decisions**.
- Evidence on the impact of IAG on learners' **intentions towards HE** has emerged in response to the third call. Although the majority of studies found IAG has a positive influence, the causal study submitted in the third call suggests the effect on the **likelihood a learner will apply to HE** is not statistically significant.

**Table 7: Evidence of the impact of IAG**

Outcomes measured	Impacts achieved
<p><b>Short term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased knowledge of HE and other post-18 options</li> <li>• Greater confidence in the ability to make informed choices about future education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All ten studies that measured the impact on knowledge of HE and other post-18 options reported that IAG can have a <b>positive</b> effect.</li> <li>• Learners who participate in IAG activities that are coupled with tailored career guidance are <b>more confident</b> in their ability to make informed choices about their future education.</li> <li>• A RCT of a text-based nudging intervention for Year 11 students found that it had <b>no statistically-significant</b> impact on any outcomes. Mean scores on learners' knowledge of different education and/or training options were <b>lower</b> for the text messaging group compared with the control group.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Medium term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased intentions/likelihood of applying to HE</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Three of the four average and strong empirical studies that measured the impact of IAG on learners' intentions to apply to HE found some <b>positive</b> change.</li> <li>• The RCT of a text-based nudging intervention found that it had <b>no statistically-significant</b> impact on the likelihood of learners in Year 13 applying to HE.</li> </ul>



## Campus visits

*Learners visit a university campus for a tour where they meet university students and staff, and find out about university. This category includes activities related to HE in further education (FE) on a FE campus.*

**Figure 7: Number of sources and strength of evidence on the impact of campus visits**

Type of evidence	Strength of evidence		
	Weaker	Average	Stronger
Causal			
Empirical	6	2	1
Narrative	1	1	

Evidence on the impact of campus visits from the previous calls was limited, weak and equivocal. The volume and strength of evidence has increased following the third call, with the addition of four empirical studies. However, evidence of impact is still limited and weaker when compared with most other activity types.

## Key findings

- The evidence continues to show that campus visits can have a positive impact on **learners' knowledge of most aspects of HE and student life.**
- Campus visits effectively signpost learners to **sources of further information** to inform their decision making.
- Evidence on effect of campus visits on **learners' intentions towards HE** is still mixed, although further evidence of a positive impact has emerged, including for younger learners.
- Although not targeted at teachers, one strong empirical study provides evidence that their knowledge of the **benefits of HE** is enhanced as a result of attending campus visits with their learners.

**Table 8: Evidence of the impact of campus visits**

Outcomes measured	Impacts achieved
<p><b>Short term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased knowledge of HE</li> <li>• Increased understanding of the benefits of HE relative to other progression routes</li> <li>• Increased confidence in the ability to make informed choices about future education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The evidence suggests campus visits have a <b>positive</b> impact on learners' knowledge of HE, particularly, aspects such as student finance, what student life is like and the range of courses on offer.</li> <li>• There is also evidence to suggest that campus visits are <b>an effective way</b> to ensure learners know where to find out more information about HE.</li> <li>• All the studies that measured the impact of campus visits on learners' understanding of the benefits of HE found a <b>positive</b> effect.</li> <li>• In contrast, there is <b>no evidence</b> that campus visits are having an impact on learners' subject knowledge.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Medium term:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased intentions/likelihood of applying to HE</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The effect of campus visits on learners' intentions towards HE remains <b>mixed</b>.</li> <li>• Evidence that campus visits can have a <b>positive</b> impact, particularly for learners in Year 10, has emerged in response to the third call for evidence.</li> <li>• However, one strong empirical study found a slight <b>decrease</b> in learners' intentions to apply to HE and one found <b>no impact</b>.</li> </ul>

## Parents and carers

*This category refers to activity aimed at parents/carers where students are not directly involved.*

**Figure 8: Number of sources and strength of evidence on the impact of activities targeted at parents**

Type of evidence	Causal				Two partnerships submitted empirical evidence on the impact of this kind of activity – one for parents and carers of learners in Years 9 to 11 and one for foster carers - in response to the third call for evidence.
	Empirical	1	1		
	Narrative				
		Weaker	Average	Stronger	
		<b>Strength of evidence</b>			

## Key findings

Analysis of the longitudinal learner survey for the national impact evaluation demonstrates that many Uni Connect learners seek advice from their parents/carers about HE and the important influence that this has on their subsequent decisions. According to monitoring data, all 29 partnerships have delivered targeted interventions for parents/carers during Phase Two of Uni Connect.

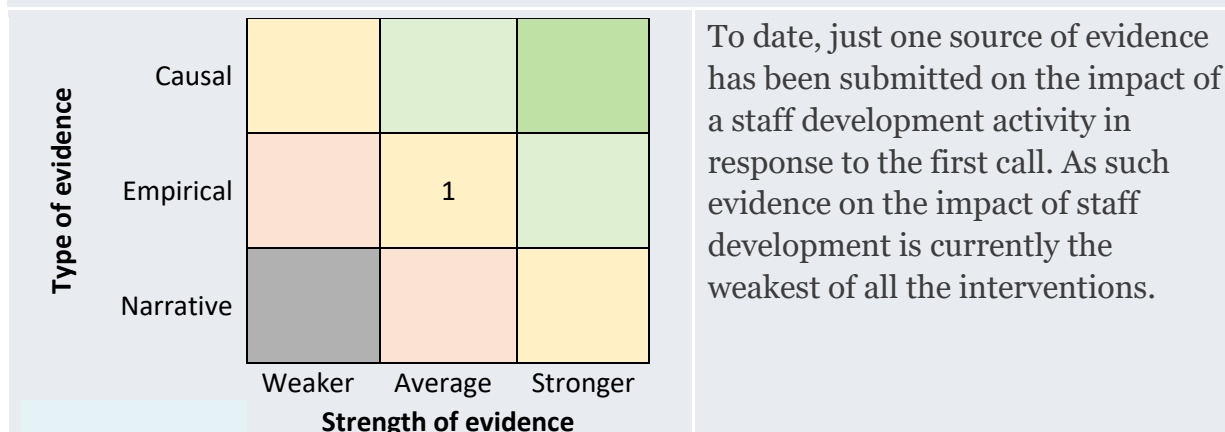
Based on the limited evidence available, there are early indications that these activities can have a positive influence on:

- Parents’/carers’ knowledge of **where to find information** about qualifications and career options and their **confidence** to look for and use this information
- Foster carers’ **knowledge of HE** and its **potential benefits** for care-experienced young people.

## Staff development

*This is activity aimed at staff in HE, schools and colleges where students are not directly involved.*

**Figure 9: Number of sources and strength of evidence on the impact of staff development**



## Key findings

Analysis of the longitudinal learner survey for the national impact evaluation<sup>18</sup> demonstrates the important influence that teachers and careers advisers have on learners' decisions. The staff development activity consisted of a three-hour course designed to support teachers, advisers and other staff within target sixth forms and FE colleges to develop their understanding of the UCAS application process and strategies for engaging learners in it. The pre- and post-survey analysis demonstrates that the course had a positive impact on the majority of participants'

- Staff **knowledge of the HE landscape** and the **UCAS application process** improved.
- Staff **confidence** to support learners with their HE applications improved.

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<sup>18</sup> CFE (2021) [An independent evaluation of Uni Connect's impact on intermediate outcomes for learners: A report on the first three waves of the longitudinal survey of Uni Connect target learners](#)

## 04. Recommendations

Based on our analysis of the additional evidence, the conclusions and recommendations set out in our previous report<sup>19</sup> remain largely unchanged.

### Recommendations to inform planning and delivery

It is recommended that partnerships:

- deliver multi-intervention programmes linked to progression frameworks which engage learners in a minimum of seven sessions over three to six hours over the course of an academic year
- continue to integrate high quality, impartial IAG into activities and multi-intervention programmes
- deliver workshops and masterclasses as a series rather than as ‘one-off’ sessions to maximise impact
- add value and enhance the impact of mentoring through the use of role models, such as student ambassadors
- explore whether an online or a more blended approach to delivery could offer greater efficiencies and extend the reach of Uni Connect to a larger number of learners.

### Recommendations to inform future evaluation

Through their local evaluations, it is recommended that partnerships:

- evaluate the impact of staff development and parent activities on outcomes for learners
- analyse the impacts of interventions that are delivered to multiple year groups by year group (where sample sizes allow) to understand the differential impacts as well as fluctuations in attitudes and intentions towards HE at different stages in the learner journey
- continue to track learners to establish whether the immediate, positive impacts are sustained in the longer term and lead to progression to HE
- measure the impact of interventions on under-represented and other sub-groups which the longitudinal learner survey suggests are not achieving as positive outcomes as other learners, including disabled learners, learners from

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<sup>19</sup> CFE (2020) [An independent review of evaluation evidence submitted by Uni Connect partnerships](#)

minority ethnic groups and those who would be the first in their family to go to HE if they successfully applied

- examine whether online approaches developed in response to COVID-19 are as effective as traditional methods at achieving outcomes for learners
- establish the causal relationship between outreach interventions and outcomes for learners where it is feasible and proportionate to do so.

# Appendix 1: Methods of analysis

The evidence submitted was initially assessed against the following criteria.

 Included in the evidence review	 Out of scope for the evidence review
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Submissions with a focus on the <b>impact</b> of individual outreach interventions or programmes of activity on outcomes for Uni Connect learners.</li><li>• Quantitative or qualitative evidence of <b>impact</b>.</li><li>• Evidence that an outreach intervention or programme has a <b>positive</b> impact, <b>negative</b> impact or <b>no effect</b>.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Submissions with a focus on the effectiveness of <b>systems and processes</b> associated with the delivery of Uni Connect, such as student or teacher feedback on what they liked or disliked about an activity, what worked well, and what could be improved</li><li>• Submissions with a focus on <b>operational issues</b>, e.g. the effectiveness of governance arrangements or partnership membership and collaborative working practices.</li></ul>

The strength of evidence was determined using the Standards of Evaluation Evidence developed by the University of Exeter on behalf of the OfS. The evidence was classified as either ‘Type 1 – narrative’, ‘Type 2 – empirical’ or ‘Type 3 – causal’ as summarised in Table 9

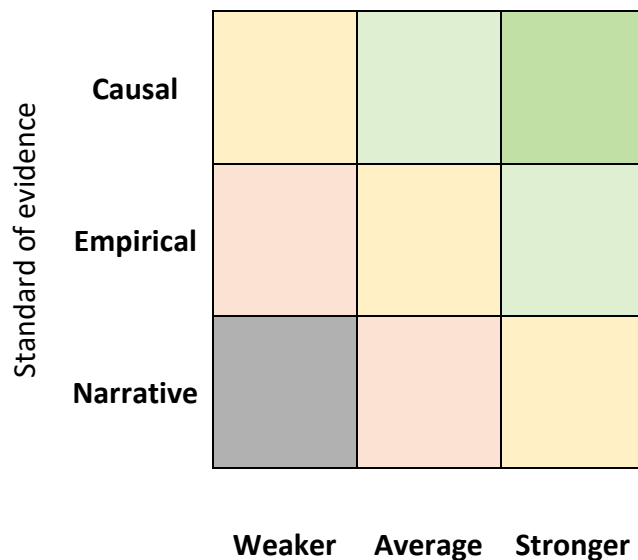
**Table 9: Classification of the standards of evidence**

Type 1: Narrative		Type 2: Empirical Enquiry (includes Type 1 and the following)		Type 3: Causal Claims (includes Type 2 and the following)	
Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Coherent strategy	Disjointed activities	Clear aim of what activities seek to achieve	Aims developed after activity	Have a target as well as a control or comparison group	Using groups that are not comparable
Approach and activities underpinned by evidence from literature or other evaluations	No rationale for developing approach and activities	Select indicators of impact	No concept of measuring success	Could use an experimental or quasi-experimental design	Selection bias in comparator groups
Shared understanding of processes involved	The model of change is not shared	Quantitative and/or qualitative data – triangulation is good!	Information not systematically collected	Think about selection bias and how to avoid it	
Reasons for activity	Ad hoc activities	Pre- post-activity data (minimum of two time points)	Only collect information once		
Clear conception of why the changes you seek to make are important	No understanding of needs of target group	Analysis competently undertaken	Data not related to the intervention		
Programme reviews	No review of evaluation	Sharing of results and review of activity	Results not used to inform decisions		



The overall quality of the evidence of impact was then assessed taking account of the type as well as the appropriateness and application of the method. Each item was then plotted on the graph (Figure 10). Evidence classified as ‘stronger causal’ is represented by the dark green square and is regarded as the highest quality; ‘weaker narrative’ evidence represented by the grey square is classified as the lowest quality in this context. ‘Average causal’ and ‘stronger empirical’ are considered equivalent in strength and quality and are therefore both represented by pale green squares. Other equivalent sources of evidence are ‘weaker causal’, ‘average empirical’ and ‘stronger narrative’ evidence (pale yellow squares) and ‘weaker empirical’ and ‘average narrative’ (pink squares).

**Figure 10: Assessing the strength of evidence and evaluation**



The evidence was then coded using a framework aligned to criteria developed by TASO as part of its evidence review. In addition to the standard of evidence and overall quality score, the following information was recorded for each source of evidence:

- Partnership
- Date and timeframe for evaluation
- Format of material
- Activity type and description
- Length & intensity of activity
- Mode of activity delivery
- Target group
- Outcomes evaluated
- Type of evaluation approach
- Rational for approach
- Data collection methods
- Total no. participants in intervention
- Total no. participants in evaluation sample
- Total no. respondents and response rate
- Attrition rate (pre- and post-activity studies)
- Data analysis
- Results
- Impact achieved
- Notes on demonstrable impact
- Challenges/limitations of evaluation

# Appendix 2: Mapping of outcomes to interventions

Figure 11a and 11b illustrate where there is *any* evidence, *irrespective of strength*, that an intervention does (or does not) contribute to the achievement of short-, medium- and long-term outcomes for learners.

**Figure 11a: Short-term outcomes**

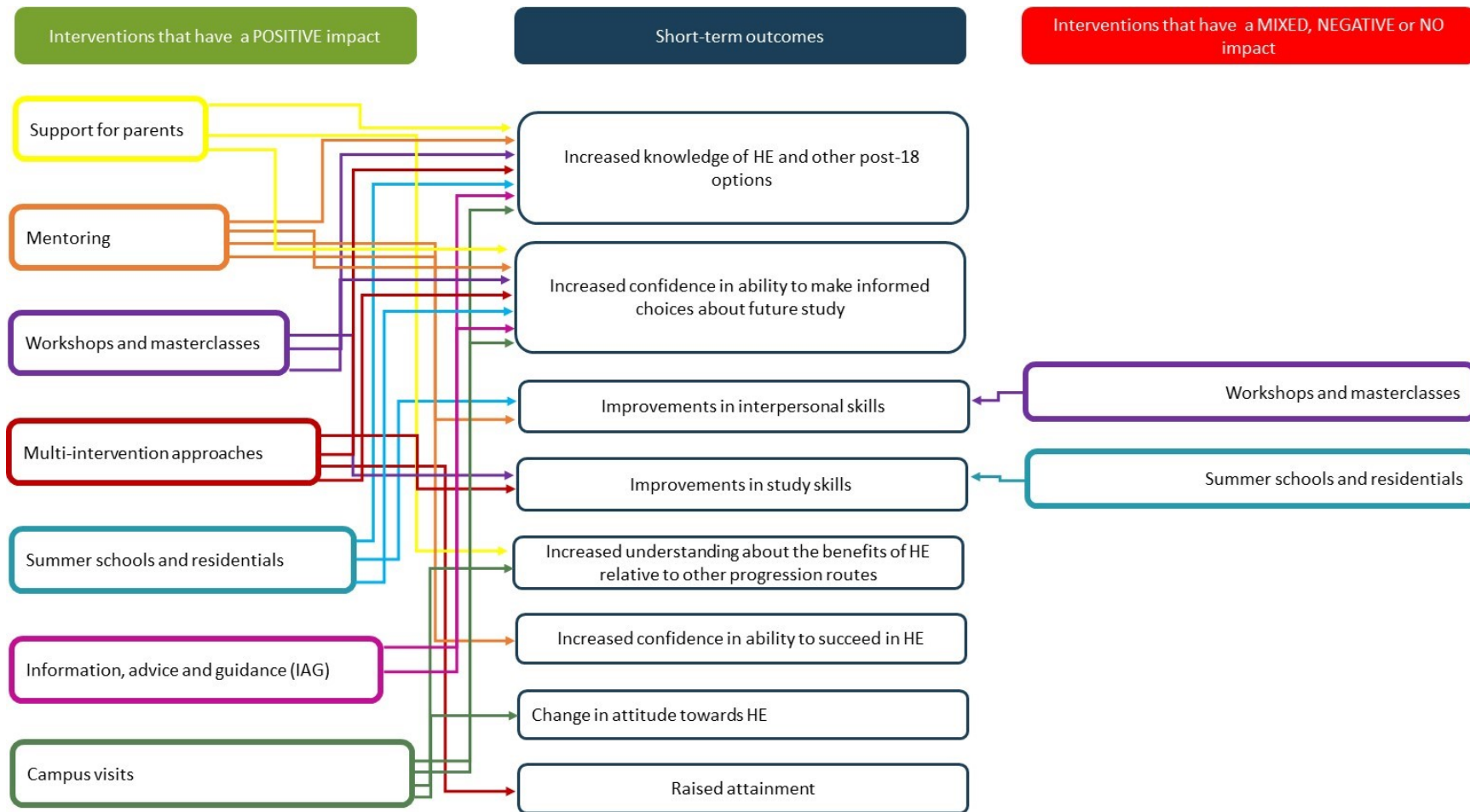


Figure 12b: Medium- and long-term outcomes

