

Contextualised HE Entry Track Impact Report

2019 and 2020 Expected HE Entry Year Cohorts

In this report, we explore the impact of an intensive package of outreach delivered by higher education providers and Uni Connect partnerships on participants' progression to higher education at age 18 and 19. Making use of a new dataset containing linked outcome data from the National Pupil Database and the Higher Education Statistics Agency, we control for prior attainment and disadvantage in a quasi-experimental matched comparator group design.

Acknowledgments

We would like to thank the HEAT Research Group for their valuable feedback and input as a critical friend, and the HEAT Governance Group and HEAT Steering Group for their continued encouragement and support.

This work was produced using statistical data from the Office for National Statistics (ONS). The use of ONS statistical data in this work does not imply the endorsement of the ONS in relation to the interpretation or analysis of the statistical data. This work uses research datasets which may not exactly reproduce National Statistics aggregates.

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Key Findings

1

Intensive outreach boosts higher education entry by up to 29%

Students who took part in an intensive outreach package* were up to 29% more likely to enter higher education than a matched group of peers who received minimal outreach.

2

Impact was strongest for the most disadvantaged

Students eligible for free school meals engaging in intensive outreach were up to 48% more likely to progress to higher education compared to matched peers.

3

Uni Connect delivers the biggest gains for free school meal learners

The largest relative increase in higher education entry for students eligible for free school meals was seen amongst those who participated in Uni Connect-funded outreach.

4

Intensive outreach increases access to selective higher education providers

Students receiving intensive outreach from high tariff universities were up to 19% more likely to enter a high tariff higher education institution than similar students who received minimal outreach.

5

Compelling evidence for sustained outreach across Key Stages 4 and 5

Higher education provider outreach has the highest impact when delivered to students eligible for free school meals across multiple Key Stages.

These key findings strengthen the case for long-term, multi-stage outreach — especially for supporting learners eligible for free school meals.

These results build on our existing [HESA Track impact research](#), triangulating findings of positive impact of outreach participation whilst including previously unavailable controls for student-level prior attainment as part of a quasi-experimental matched cohort design.

* An intensive package of outreach is defined as engagement in at least 11 hours of outreach activity, out of which at least eight hours are of a high-intensity activity content (Activity Types: HE Campus Visit, HE Subject Insight, Mentoring, Skills & Attainment, Summer School). Find out more about the definition of an 'intensive package of outreach' and 'minimal outreach' in the [Methodology](#) section.

Introduction

HEAT's Track datasets provide the largest and most complete longitudinal tracking datasets of outreach participants available. Of all large outreach providers delivering access interventions in England, 87% record their data on the HEAT system, enabling us to draw high-level trends about the efficacy of outreach delivery in England.

In this report, we take a look at the newest element of the [HEAT Track](#), the Contextualised HE Entry Track, which in its first iteration, links educational outcome data from Key Stage 4 (KS4) and Key Stage 5 (KS5) to higher education (HE) entry data for three cohorts of outreach participants tracked by HEAT member organisations.

This new element of the HEAT Track allows HEAT members to investigate the relationship between participating in outreach and HE entry, while controlling for socio-economic disadvantage and, crucially, prior attainment – both of which are key factors influencing access to HE.

In this report, our analysis builds on and strengthens our existing [HESA Track Impact reporting](#) by including prior attainment variables which have previously been unavailable.

We focus on two of the three cohorts in the first iteration of the Contextualised HE Entry Track. These cohorts comprise of over 280,000 students who have received outreach by providers across the HEAT membership. The analysis aims to generate evidence and insight into the impact of HE outreach, specifically examining:

- (1) The extent and timing of the delivery of an intensive package of outreach (monitoring data, descriptive statistics);
- (2) The impact of taking part in an intensive package of outreach on progression to HE at age 18 or 19 (impact data, matched comparator group design); and
- (3) The impact of an intensive package of outreach being received across multiple Key Stages on progression to HE at age 18 or 19 (impact data, matched comparator group design).

Given the variations in outreach delivery, students and institutions targeted, and selection techniques across HEAT members, we further disaggregate the analysis by three provider types: high tariff HE providers, non-high tariff HE providers, and Uni Connect partnerships¹.

Students in the analysed cohorts may have received outreach as early as primary school and up to the end of Key Stage 5. Whether this engagement occurred pre-16 (typically up to Year 11), post-16 (Years 12 and 13), or spanned both stages is likely to influence progression to HE. While recent policy directions have placed greater emphasis on pre-16 attainment-raising outreach, the impact of increased pre-16 delivery as a result of these changes will only be observable in future cohorts. Although these younger cohorts fall outside of scope for this analysis, it remains valuable to examine whether students in the current dataset who received intensive outreach over a longer period of time show any differences in their likelihood of entering HE.

We conclude this report by reflecting on the key results and how we can develop and further strengthen the methodology used for future evaluations.

¹ A full list of current HEAT members can be found on [our website](#). As of June 2025, we have 138 members, out of which 97 are higher education providers (including 27 high tariff providers) and 26 are Uni Connect partnerships.

Methodology

Descriptive statistics

In the first part of this analysis, we explore **the extent and timing of the delivery of an intensive package of outreach** using monitoring data. This provides essential context for the impact analysis in the second part of the report. We draw on descriptive statistics based on all students in cohort 1 and cohort 2 of the Contextualised HE Entry Track² who participated in at least one outreach activity – approximately 110,000 students in cohort 1 and 150,000 students in cohort 2 – along with the activities they engaged in.

Cohort 1 consists of outreach participants tracked by HEAT member organisations who are 18 years old at the start of the 2019/20 academic year, and cohort 2 includes those who were 18 at the start of 2020/21³. Table 1 below illustrates the timeline for each cohort with regards to possible outreach engagement, educational milestones, and potential HE entry points. It should be noted that while the Covid-19 pandemic did not impact exam schedules and assessments for these two cohorts, it may have influenced students' decisions regarding application to and entry into HE. As a result, comparisons with cohorts unaffected by the pandemic are not appropriate.

Cohort 3, greyed out in Table 1, is not included in this analysis due to the unavailability of outcome data to assess HE entry age 19. It is included in the table for completeness.

Table 1: Contextualised HE Entry Track cohort timeline

	<2016/17	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Cohort 1	< Year 11	Year 11 End of KS4	Year 12	Year 13 End of KS5	HE entry age 18	HE entry age 19	
Cohort 2	< Year 10	Year 10	Year 11 End of KS4	Year 12	Year 13 End of KS5	HE entry age 18	HE entry age 19
Cohort 3	< Year 9	Year 9	Year 10	Year 11 End of KS4	Year 12	Year 13 End of KS5	HE entry age 18

Quasi-experimental design

For the second part of this analysis, we **explore the impact of taking part in an intensive package of outreach on entering HE age 18 or 19**. We adopt a quasi-experimental approach, comparing the HE entry rates between two groups: a participant group who received an intensive package of outreach and a closely matched comparator group, who took part in minimal outreach. By controlling for variables known to influence HE entry, we attempt to isolate the effect of outreach engagement and establish what impact the difference in the levels of outreach has on HE entry.

This approach builds on similar designs used in previous HEAT Impact Reports, benefitting from additional variables accessed from linked KS4 data, such as GCSE attainment and free school meal (FSM) eligibility. These improvements allow us to more robustly examine whether participating in intensive outreach activity is associated with increased progression to HE, whilst controlling for these key variables known to impact progression to HE.

² The underlying data for this analysis is considered secondary data, i.e., it has already been collected by the HEAT membership and additional data collection is not feasible.

³ At HEAT, we refer to this academic year as their 'Expected HE Entry Year'.

Levels of outreach engagement

The participant group, or participants of an intensive package of outreach, are students who engaged in at least 11 hours of outreach activity, out of which at least eight hours are of high intensity content (HEAT Activity Types: HE Campus Visit, HE Subject Insight, Mentoring, Skills & Attainment, Summer School). Note that this group is specific to each outreach provider type, for example, the participant group for high tariff providers contains only students who participated in an intensive package of outreach with high tariff providers. They may have also engaged with an intensive package of outreach with another provider type.

The comparator group, or participants of minimal outreach, are students who engaged in only one single outreach activity with low intensity content (Activity Types: General HE Information, Exhibition) or received more than zero but less than two contact hours of outreach activities overall. Note that this group is also specific to each outreach provider type, for example, the comparison group for high tariff providers contains only students who were added to HEAT by a high tariff member and participated in only minimal outreach, but across all types of HEAT members.

Owing to the difficulty of collecting student data for true non-participating students, those who engaged in only minimal outreach are used as a proxy for the counterfactual group of non-participants.

For more details on high and low intensity activity content, please refer to our paper on [Classifying Packages of Outreach by their Levels of Intensity](#).

Matching variables

Matching variables were selected based on research into factors impacting HE entry, student characteristics likely to be related to risks concerning equality of opportunity (informed by Office for Students (OfS), 2023a) and data availability.

Following the testing of multiple matching scenarios including different variable combination and tolerance levels, to balance similarity between groups and meaningful matched group sizes, matching was conducted based on the following matching parameters:

- Sex (Source: HEAT member data)
- Ethnic group (Source: HEAT member data)
- Region (Source: HEAT Postcode Profiler)
- IMD Decile (Source: HEAT Postcode Profiler)
- Free school meal (FSM) status (Source: National Pupil Database (NPD) KS4 pupil data)
- Attainment 8 Decile (Tolerance of 1 applied, source: NPD KS4 pupil data)

Matching was conducted separately for each outreach provider type (high tariff HE providers, non-high tariff HE providers and Uni Connect partnerships) to create specific comparator groups for participants each provider type engaged in intensive packages of outreach. Where we refer to 'Uni Connect outreach', we mean outreach activities wholly or partially funded by the Uni Connect programme. Delivery may be by the Uni Connect partnership or by a partner HE provider. Where delivery was delivered in partnership across multiple member types – for example a Uni Connect partnership funding activity delivered by a non-high tariff provider – it is attributed to both types in this analysis.

For the purpose of analysing differences in impact based on the timing of intensive outreach engagement, matching was repeated for sub-groups who engaged in outreach across both pre and post-16 stages.

Students are excluded from the matching process if one or more of the above matching variables are unknown, with the exception of ethnic group. Due to not all HEAT members recording ethnicity data, excluding students with unknown ethnicity may introduce a bias to the cohort. Taking into consideration this potential bias and the reduction in cohort sizes resulting from the exclusion of those without ethnic group, it was decided to proceed without excluding these students.

In future iterations of this analysis, we plan to request additional variables, such as sex and ethnic group, from the NPD's KS4 pupil tables, which will contribute to the quality and quantity of possible matches.

While additional variables provided by the NPD will support us to fill gaps for certain variables, limitations will remain regarding a degree of variation in the cohort that cannot be explained by the variables above. These further influencing factors may include participants' motivation, engagement in their education, and parental influence. This also poses a problem in relation to selection bias as students who are more motivated, or more inclined to improve their attainment, may also be more willing to participate in HE outreach.

The disaggregation of this analysis by three outreach provider types (high tariff HE providers, non-high tariff HE providers and Uni Connect partnerships) does to some extent mitigate this bias as selection techniques and targeting practices are more consistent within these groupings. We are also exploring selection bias in outreach engagement data as part of the OfS-funded ['Outreach Metric' project](#) and hope to address this issue through additional data collection in the future.

Matching outcomes

The matching process was conducted in SPSS using case control matching. Table 2 shows the outcome of the matching process for all outreach provider types, which resulted in 10,735 matched participants in cohort 1, and 14,360 matched participants in cohort 2.

Table 2: Matching outcomes for cohort 1 and 2, all member types

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
Participant group (pre-matching)	21,085	31,215
Comparator group (pre-matching)	24,455	30,290
Successful matches	10,735	14,360
Match rate achieved	50.9%	46.0%
Maximum possible match rate	100.0%	97.0%

Table 3 shows the matched group sizes (i.e., successful matches) and match rates by outreach provider type. Both the match rates and the number of successful matches varied across the three types. The highest match rates were achieved for non-high tariff HE provider HEAT members and Uni Connect HEAT members at between 70% and 83%, while the match rates for high tariff HE providers were comparably low at 38% and 29% for cohort 1 and cohort 2, respectively.

This lower match rate for high tariff providers is largely due to the smaller size of the potential comparator group prior to matching, which was less than half the size of the participant group. This reflects the smaller number of students who met the minimum outreach engagement criteria for inclusion in the comparator group (i.e., those who received minimal outreach).

Detailed matching outcomes, including pre-matching figures and maximum possible match rates for each provider type, are available in the [Appendix](#).

Table 3: Matched participants and match rates by outreach provider type

	Cohort 1		Cohort 2	
	Matched Participants	Match Rate	Matched Participants	Match Rate
High tariff HE providers	3,685	38.0%	3,730	27.7%
Non-high tariff HE providers	4,700	82.9%	5,510	70.4%
Uni Connect partnerships	4,115	75.6%	7,665	76.5%

Outcome variables

The primary outcome variable used in this analysis is HE entry at age 18 or 19. A student is considered to have entered HE if they are found by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) in their HE population in the academic years they turn 19 or 20. This includes entry to level 4 or higher at [HE education providers who submit data to HESA](#). As of June 2025, this list contains 486 HE providers including 163 further education colleges. We use this outcome to calculate a HE entry rate, which is the proportion of students in the tracked cohort who entered HE at age 18 or 19.

For high tariff outreach providers, we calculate an additional HE entry rate for entry at selective HE institutions⁴ at age 18 or 19. High tariff providers are more likely to engage students who are already on a trajectory for HE entry, due to their entry requirements targeting students with higher attainment. Therefore, participant and comparator groups will naturally be more likely to enter HE than participant and comparator groups for other outreach provider types, and potential differences between groups will likely be very small. We therefore consider HE entry at a selective provider to be a more meaningful metric for evaluating the impact of taking part in outreach with a high tariff provider. This metric is presented in parentheses alongside HE entry at a provider of any tariff.

For both, HE entry at providers of any tariff and selective providers, we are particularly interested in the difference in HE entry rates in relative terms (also referred to as ‘relative risk’), between the participant and matched comparator groups. This measure captures the proportional likelihood of entering HE for one group compared to the other. While absolute differences (in percentage points) show the size of the gap, relative risk provides insight into the scale and significance of that difference.

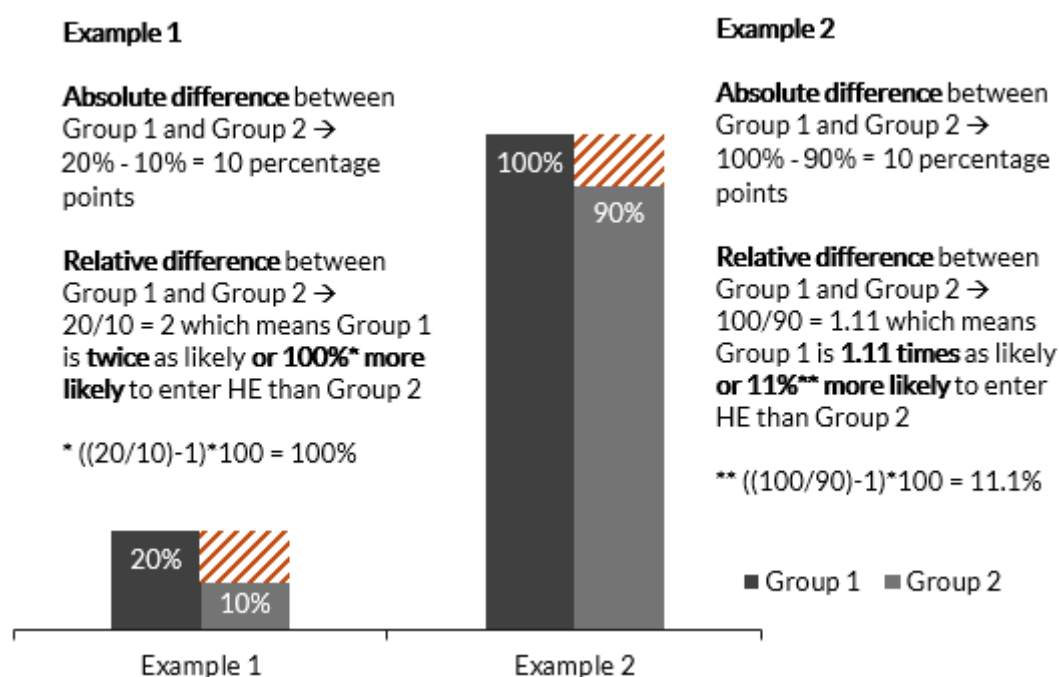
⁴ We use the term ‘selective’ for high tariff outreach providers in the context of this outcome variable to distinguish between ‘high tariff HE providers’ who deliver outreach and high tariff HE provider destinations. The assignment of providers to tariff levels is based on the groupings used by the Department for Education for their [Widening participation in Higher Education statistics](#).

For example, Figure 1 shows a 10-percentage point (pp) difference, or gap, between two groups in Example 1 and Example 2, highlighted by two diagonally striped boxes. These boxes represent the absolute difference in HE entry rates (10pp) between the two groups in each example. The boxes' equal size suggests that the difference in HE entry rates in Example 1 is the same as the difference in HE entry rates in Example 2. However, if you compare the size of each box to the columns representing the HE entry rates in each example, the relative size difference, within the context of each example, is very different.

Example 1 shows the 10pp gap being observed between a group with a HE entry rate of 20% and another group with an entry rate of 10%. In relative terms, we observe a relative risk of 2, which means one group is **twice as likely** to enter HE. Another way to express this relative difference is as a percentage: a relative risk of 2 means one group is 100% more likely to enter.

In **Example 2**, the 10pp gap is observed between one group where 100% entered HE and another group with a HE entry rate of 90%. The relative 'risk' of entering HE is now much lower, with the first group being **1.11 times, or 11%, more likely** to enter HE. Two quite different results and implications for decision making, based on the same absolute difference in our outcome measure.⁵

Figure 1: Visualisation of an example of absolute versus relative difference in percentages



Results and discussion

Cohort outreach engagement

In the first part of this analysis, we explored the extent and timing of outreach delivery to students in cohorts 1 and 2. In particular, the extent of outreach delivery, and the extent to which students engaged in intensive packages of delivery, directly impact the number of students available for the participant and comparator groups in the quasi-experimental matched design element of this report.

⁵ More details and a calculation example at Education Policy Institute (2024).

The cohorts included in this report received a substantial amount of outreach activities from all three outreach provider types, from as early as primary education through to HE entry, as illustrated in Table 4. Although the Uni Connect programme only launched in 2017 – and its funded delivery to these cohorts has therefore been concentrated post-16 – Uni Connect HEAT members recorded the highest volume of outreach activity among all provider types. Since the aim of Uni Connect is to target learners both pre- and post-16, we anticipate that future iterations of the Contextualised HE Entry Track will reflect increased delivery to these younger cohorts.

For the two cohorts examined, outreach delivery to post-16 learners exceeded pre-16 delivery, not only from Uni Connect, but also from HE providers. However, recent emphasis from the OfS on addressing attainment now expects HE providers to take a greater role in raising pre-16 attainment⁶. We are confident that this shift will lead to increased outreach delivery to pre-16 learners in future cohorts by HE providers.

A detailed breakdown of outreach activities delivered by activity type, academic year and type of outreach provider can be found in the [Appendix](#).

Table 4: Number of outreach activities delivered by provider type and timing of engagement (full cohorts, pre-matching)

	Cohort 1			Cohort 2		
	Pre-16	Post-16	Total	Pre-16	Post-16	Total
High tariff HE providers	936	2,603	3,539	1,525	2,832	4,357
Non-high tariff HE providers	1,446	6,686	8,132	2,615	6,725	9,340
Uni Connect partnerships	112	19,221	19,333	2,894	20,262	23,156

Table 5 provides a breakdown of students engaged by provider type and cohort. Across both cohorts, approximately 260,000 students participated in at least one outreach activity, with cohort 2 being larger across all three provider types. The highest number of students was engaged in Uni Connect-funded outreach activities. We expect cohort sizes to increase across all provider types, as we transition to future cohorts, reflecting the changes in OfS steer mentioned earlier.

Table 5: Number of students engaged in outreach delivered by provider type (full cohorts, pre-matching)

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
High tariff HE providers	38,550	48,690
Non-high tariff HE providers	44,575	54,185
Uni Connect partnerships	39,355	65,810
Total⁷	110,085	148,850

⁶ See OfS 2018, OfS 2022a, OfS 2022b for more details.

⁷ Sums of student counts by provider type may exceed totals as students may have engaged in outreach with more than one provider type.

Table 6 shows the number and proportion of students engaged in different levels of outreach: ‘intensive’ referring to the key criterion for being considered part of the participant group for the next stage of the analysis; and ‘minimal’, referring to the key criterion for being considered for the potential comparator group.

Table 6: Number and percentage of students engaged by outreach intensity and provider type (full cohort, pre-matching)

	Cohort 1		Cohort 2	
	Intensive	Minimal	Intensive	Minimal
High tariff HE providers	11,220 29% ⁸	8,522 22%	15,070 31%	9,445 19%
Non-high tariff HE providers	4,730 11%	20,204 45%	6,875 13%	22,695 42%
Uni Connect partnerships	6,535 17%	18,455 47%	11,630 18%	29,427 45%

High tariff providers engaged the largest proportion of its students in an intensive package of outreach; at the same time, they engaged the smallest proportion of students in minimal outreach only. Non-high tariff providers and Uni Connect partnerships recorded relatively more students with minimal outreach compared to those engaged in intensive outreach.

For Uni Connect partnerships, we expect an increase in the number and proportion of learners who participate in intensive outreach, as new cohorts who have been exposed to sustained and progressive outreach (a key characteristic of the programme) will be examined.

For high tariff and non-high tariff providers, differences in levels of engagement may reflect the extent of outreach delivery, but these differences are also influenced by the amount and types of outreach activities being recorded on HEAT⁹. For example, we know that some providers find it difficult to collect tracking data for low-intensity activities, such as assemblies, and therefore invest more time and resource in ensuring data are collected for their intensive programmes. Although this is sensible, it does limit the availability of records for comparison in order to assess the counterfactual, which is critical to any Type 2 standard of evaluation. If primarily more intensive outreach programmes and their participants are recorded on HEAT, this will result in a smaller pool of potential comparator students to match with participants of an intensive package. This will also directly impact who can be included in the matched comparator group analysis of this report.

We further disaggregate the subgroup of students who participated in an intensive package of outreach in Table 7, investigating what proportion of students received this intensive package pre-16 (up to and including Year 11), post-16 (after Year 11) or across both time periods.

⁸ The percentage value refers to the percentage of students who received either an intensive package of outreach, or only minimal outreach, out of all students in the cohort engaged by the provider type.

⁹ In contrast, Uni Connect partnerships are required to work with a tracking service (such as HEAT) to track all learners who participate in activity which is paid for, either wholly or partly, using Uni Connect funding (OfS 2022c).

Table 7: Number and percentage of students engaged in an intensive package of outreach by timing of engagement and by provider type (pre-matching)

	Cohort 1			Cohort 2		
	Pre-16	Post-16	Both	Pre-16	Post-16	Both
High tariff HE providers	1,035 9% ¹⁰	8,085 72%	2,100 19%	1,865 12%	9,620 64%	3,590 24%
Non-high tariff HE providers	1,205 25%	2,775 59%	755 16%	1,390 20%	3,210 47%	2,275 33%
Uni Connect partnerships	20 0%	6,050 93%	470 7%	1,110 10%	5,965 51%	4,555 39%

Across all member types, students who participated in an intensive package of outreach predominantly engaged either only post-16 or spread across both pre- and post-16. Engagement in Uni Connect-funded outreach was limited to mainly post-16, in particular for cohort 1, due to the project having not launched until 2017. This is in line with the extent of post-16 outreach delivery we observed in Table 4 above.

Engagement across both pre-16 and post-16 year groups is growing from cohort 1 to cohort 2 across all provider types, and we expect further growth in the future as outreach providers increase delivery to pre-16 learners in line with new OfS priorities.

Outreach participation and HE entry

In the second part of this analysis, we focus on students who participated in an intensive package of outreach, examining the impact of this participation on HE entry, as part of our quasi-experimental design. We established the rate of HE entry by age 18 or 19 for our [matched groups](#), and further investigated the relative differences in likelihood of HE entry, first for each type of outreach provider, and then broken down further for participants where the intensive engagement took place across both pre- and post-16. For reference, Table 2 above shows final matched groups for all member types, and group sizes for specific outreach provider types can be found in the [Appendix](#).

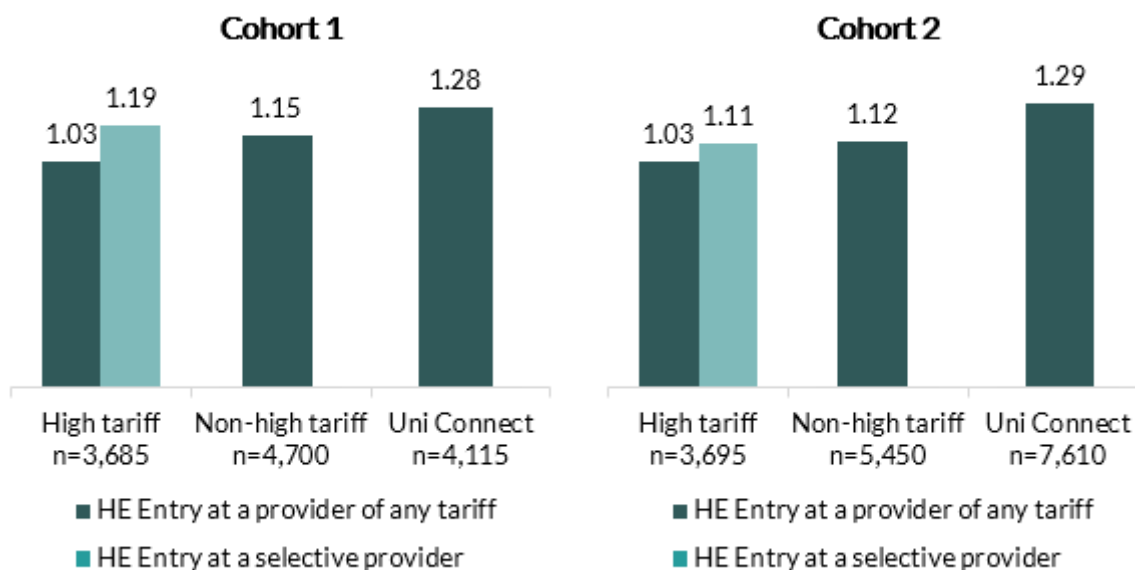
By outreach provider type

The table at the bottom of Figure 2 shows the HE entry rates and absolute gaps between participant and comparator groups broken down by provider type and cohort. Across all provider types, participants in intensive outreach were more likely to enter HE at age 18 or 19 than their matched peers, with absolute gaps ranging from 2.4 to 9.8pp.

The top section of the figure shows the relative likelihood of the participant group entering HE when compared to their matched counterparts. Similar relative likelihoods are observed for both cohorts, with a particularly large relative likelihood for those in receipt of an intensive package Uni Connect-funded outreach, who were up 1.29 times, or 29%, more likely to enter HE at age 18 or 19 than their closely matched peers who received only minimal outreach.

¹⁰ The percentage value refers to the percentage of students who received outreach pre-16, post-16 or across both pre- and post-16 year groups, out of all students in the cohort engaged by the provider type.

Figure 2: Relative likelihood of the participant group entering HE at age 18 or 19. The supporting table below shows the underlying HE entry rates as well as the absolute difference in percentage points.



	Cohort 1			Cohort 2		
	High tariff	Non-high tariff	Uni Connect	High tariff	Non-high tariff	Uni Connect
Participant HE Entry Rate	87.8% (55.7%) ¹¹	61.1%	43.3%	86.7% (58.2%)	62.1%	43.7%
Comparator HE Entry Rate	85.4% (47.0%)	53.3%	33.8%	84.2% (52.3%)	55.6%	33.9%
Absolute Gap	2.4pp (8.7pp)	7.8pp	9.5pp	2.5pp (5.9pp)	6.5pp	9.8pp

These findings suggest that taking part in an intensive package of outreach is associated with higher HE entry rates, which builds on our existing [HESA Track impact research](#), whilst including previously unavailable controls for student-level prior attainment as part of a quasi-experimental matched cohort design.

Key Finding

Intensive outreach boosts higher education entry by up to 29%

1 Students who took part in an intensive outreach package* were up to 29% more likely to enter higher education than a matched group of peers who received minimal outreach.

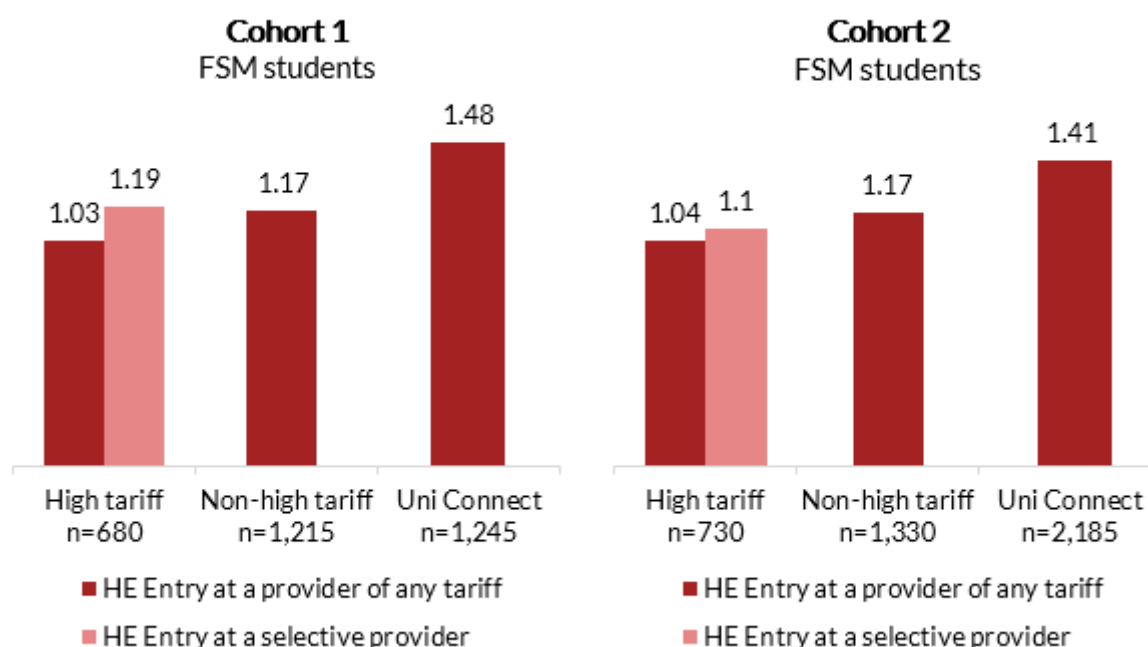
¹¹ In parentheses you can find the HE Entry Rate for entry at a selective provider. This is provided for the high tariff outreach providers only.

This relative likelihood of entering HE at age 18 or 19 further increased when we focus on students eligible for FSM. In particular for participants in Uni Connect-funded outreach, significant absolute and relative differences between those in receipt of an intensive package of outreach and their matched peers with minimal outreach were observed.

Figure 3 shows the range of absolute gaps in HE entry from 2.6 to 11.3pp for students eligible for FSM across all provider types (see table). Uni Connect participants eligible for FSM were 48% and 41% more likely to enter HE than their matched counterparts in cohort 1 and 2, respectively.

These findings suggest that outreach is particularly beneficial for economically disadvantaged students, and that the Uni Connect programme in specific is contributing to reducing the gap in HE participation between the most and least represented groups by significantly boosting HE entry of its disadvantaged outreach participants.

Figure 3: Relative likelihood of students eligible for FSM in the participant group entering HE at age 18 or 19. The supporting table below shows the underlying HE entry rates as well as the absolute difference in percentage points.



	Cohort 1			Cohort 2		
	High tariff	Non-high tariff	Uni Connect	High tariff	Non-high tariff	Uni Connect
Participant HE Entry Rate	84.8% (41.7%) ¹²	54.9%	34.9%	82.3% (44.4%)	53.7%	34.9%
Comparator HE Entry Rate	82.2% (35.1%)	47.0%	23.6%	79.3% (40.4%)	46.0%	24.8%
Absolute Gap	2.6pp (6.6pp)	7.9pp	11.3pp	3.0pp (4.0pp)	7.7pp	10.1pp

¹² In parentheses you can find the HE Entry Rate for entry at a selective provider. This is provided for high tariff outreach providers only.

Key Findings

2

Impact was strongest for the most disadvantaged

Students eligible for free school meals engaging in intensive outreach were up to 48% more likely to progress to higher education compared to matched peers.

3

Uni Connect delivers the biggest gains for free school meal learners

The largest relative increase in higher education entry for students eligible for free school meals was seen amongst those who participated in Uni Connect-funded outreach.

For participants who engaged in intensive outreach with a high tariff provider, we specifically looked at HE entry by age 18 or 19 at more selective institutions. Figure 2 above (see figures in parentheses) shows that students who engaged in intensive outreach with a high tariff provider were up to 1.19 times, or 19%, more likely to enter a selective HE provider than their closely matched counterparts.

Students eligible for FSM who participated in an intensive package of outreach with a high tariff provider were observed to have a similar relative likelihood of entering a selective HE provider compared to all students who participated in intensive outreach with a high tariff provider (Figure 3, see figures in parentheses). We could not observe a higher impact for disadvantaged students in receipt of intensive outreach, as we have seen with other outreach provider types.

This suggests that intensive outreach with high tariff providers is associated with increased access to selective HE institutions; though, there is room for improvement when it comes to supporting more economically disadvantaged students to access selective HE providers.

Key Finding

4

Intensive outreach increases access to selective higher education providers

Students receiving intensive outreach from high tariff universities were up to 19% more likely to enter a high tariff higher education institution than similar students who received minimal outreach.

By outreach provider type and timing of engagement

The receipt of an intensive package of outreach is the key criterion for students to be included in our participant groups, but as established in the [cohort outreach engagement analysis](#), engagement in this intensive package of outreach may have occurred at any point from as early as primary education through to the end of post-16 study, and was for the cohorts included in this analysis still predominantly focused on post-16. While engagement across both pre-16 and post-16 year groups rose from cohort 1 to cohort 2, we expect to see a significant increase for future cohorts as outreach providers expand delivery to pre-16 learners in line with new OfS priorities.

For this reason, we take a closer look specifically at participants in intensive outreach, where engagement took place more long-term, across multiple Key Stages. However, because engagement across both pre- and post-16 year groups was not as prevalent for the two cohorts included in this report, it should be noted that the matched group sizes the following results are based on are smaller than the matched group sizes for our higher-level analyses. Uni Connect partnerships are not included in this sub-analysis due to Uni Connect timelines and the resulting limited pre-16 engagement.

The table at the bottom of Figure 4 shows the HE entry rates and absolute gaps between students in the participant group who engaged in outreach pre-16 and post-16 and matched comparator groups broken down by provider type. For both high tariff and non-high tariff providers, the participant group progressed to HE by age 18 or 19 at a higher rate than the matched comparator group, with absolute gaps in HE entry rates varying from 0.6 to 8.0pp. The top of Figure 4 shows that similar relative likelihoods of entering HE (and entering selective providers for those in receipt of outreach by high tariff providers) are observed for cohort 1 compared to cohort 2.

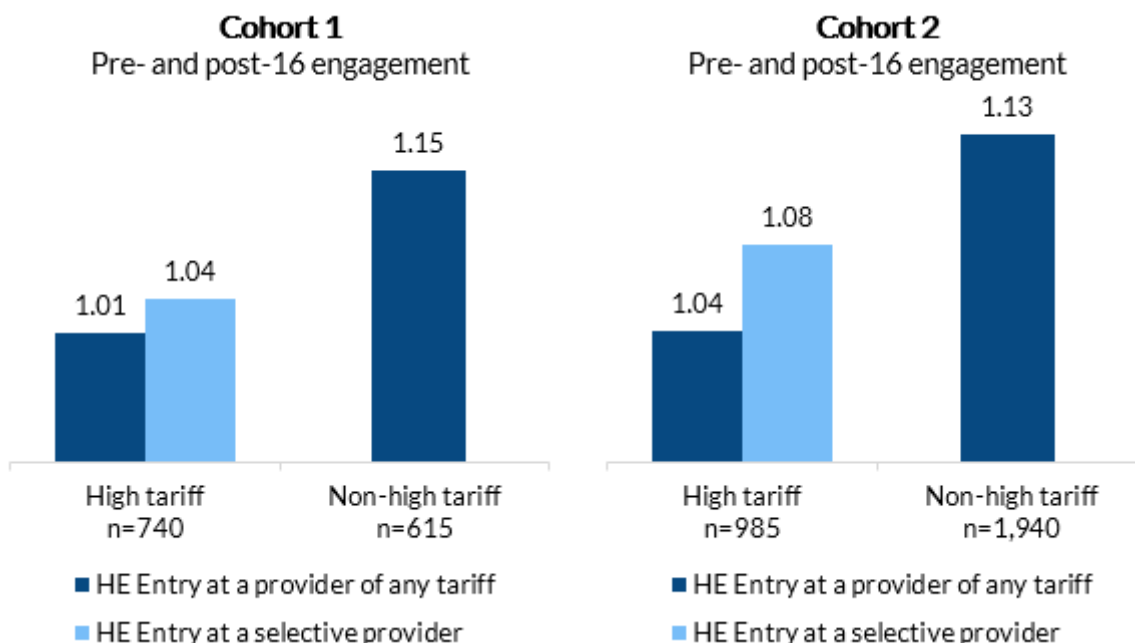
This relative likelihood of entering HE at age 18 or 19 increased when we focus on students eligible for FSM who engaged in intensive outreach across pre- and post-16 year groups. Figure 5 shows that FSM-eligible participants of intensive outreach are now up to 1.32 times, or 32%, more likely to enter HE by age 18 or 19 than their peers closely matched on prior attainment and socio-economic characteristics.

This is in particular a promising finding when comparing to the relative likelihood of students eligible for FSM taking part in an intensive package of outreach with a HE provider, regardless of timing of engagement (see Figure 3). Our sub-groups engaged over a specific, longer period of time were more likely to enter HE, both in relative and absolute terms.

These findings suggest that there is a promising indicative association between taking part in longer-term, sustained, intensive outreach with higher education providers, in particular for the most disadvantaged students.

As discussed at the beginning of this section, matched group sizes are smaller for these sub-groups. However, comparing cohort 1 to cohort 2 already suggests that the number of students engaged in intensive outreach over longer periods of time is increasing, and we expect further growth as providers will increase pre-16 outreach in line with recent changes to OfS priorities.

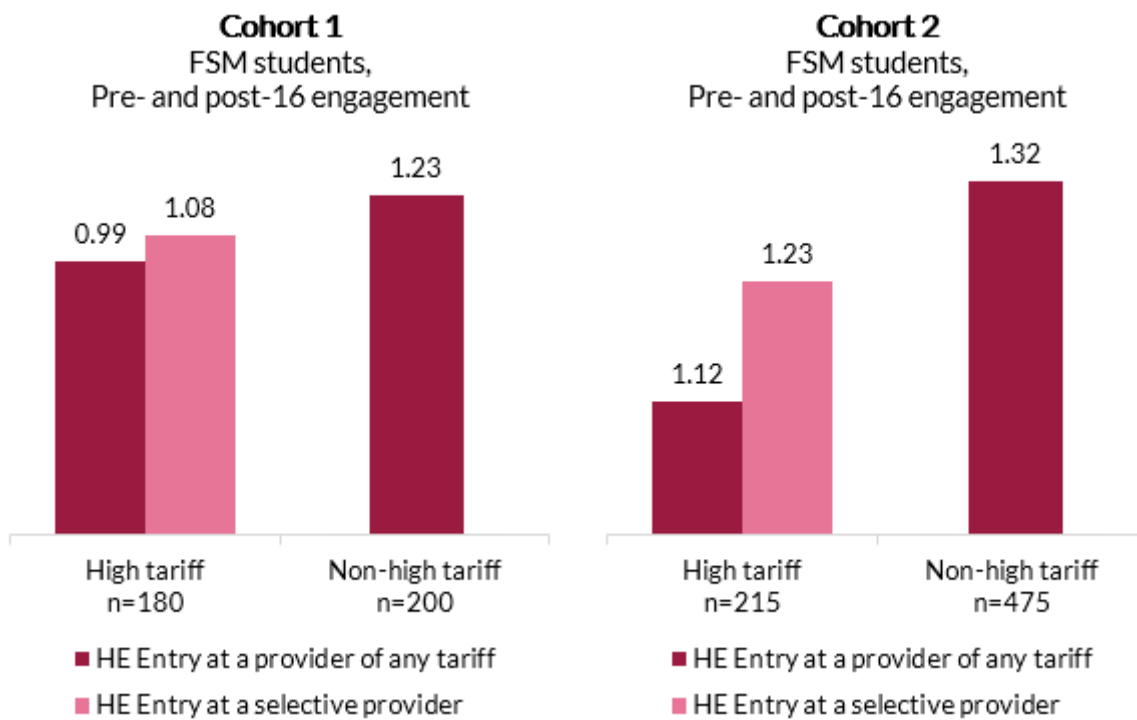
Figure 4: Relative likelihood of the participant group entering HE at age 18 or 19. The supporting table below shows the underlying HE entry rates as well as the absolute difference in percentage points.



	Cohort 1		Cohort 2	
	High tariff	Non-high tariff	High tariff	Non-high tariff
Participant HE Entry Rate	84.9% (47.6%) ¹³	61.4%	86.6% (55.6%)	52.6%
Comparator HE Entry Rate	84.3% (45.9%)	53.4%	83.6% (51.6%)	46.6%
Absolute Gap	0.6pp (1.7pp)	8.0pp	3.0pp (4.0pp)	6.0pp

¹³ In parentheses you can find the HE Entry Rate for entry at a selective provider. This is provided for high tariff outreach providers only.

Figure 5: Relative likelihood of students eligible for FSM in the participant group who engaged in outreach pre- and post-16 entering HE at age 18 or 19



	Cohort 1		Cohort 2	
	High tariff	Non-high tariff	High tariff	Non-high tariff
Participant HE Entry Rate	79.6% (37.0%) ¹⁴	61.4%	86.9% (49.8%)	43.8%
Comparator HE Entry Rate	80.7% (34.4%)	50.0%	77.8% (40.6%)	33.3%
Absolute Gap	-1.1pp (2.7pp)	11.4pp	9.1pp (9.2pp)	10.5pp

Key Finding

5

Compelling evidence for sustained outreach across Key Stages 4 and 5

Higher education provider outreach has the highest impact when delivered to students eligible for free school meals across both Key Stages.

¹⁴ In parentheses you can find the HE Entry Rate for entry at a selective provider. This is provided for high tariff outreach providers only.

Conclusion

This report has provided compelling evidence that **sustained and intensive programmes of outreach interventions can significantly increase the likelihood of entering HE at age 18 or 19**. This finding is particularly encouraging for outreach engagement of learners eligible for FSM, a group at significant risk of equality of opportunity¹⁵.

We know that disadvantage gaps in HE entry are to a large extent driven by gaps in attainment at KS4 between disadvantaged students and their peers, and as a result, pre-16 attainment-raising outreach has increasingly come into focus for the widening participation community in recent years. Recent changes in OfS direction towards addressing attainment now require both HE providers and Uni Connect partnerships to put a stronger focus on pre-16 attainment raising outreach.

While the HE entry outcomes of students who are benefitting from these changes in direction are not available yet, we are looking forward to analysing them more closely as part of future iterations of the Contextualised HE Entry Track. In the meantime, we will take the change in emphasis on attainment into consideration in upcoming analyses of the KS4 Attainment Track, where we analyse the impact of taking part in attainment-raising outreach on attainment at GCSE.

Findings in this report also show a **clear association between taking part in outreach and entering HE, particularly for disadvantaged learners taking part in outreach funded by Uni Connect**. Evidence from our [KS4 Attainment Track Impact Report](#) for the 2021 GCSE cohort has also shown that Uni Connect is reaching the most educationally disadvantaged learners, which HE provider may not reach on their own, and there is an evident concern that these learners will likely miss out without targeted initiatives such as Uni Connect.

The findings of this quasi-experimental research support an association of taking part in an intensive package of outreach and increased HE entry at age 18 or 19 for all learners, with a stronger relative effect for FSM eligible learners, which can be classed as Type 2, empirical evidence (OfS, 2019).

What's next

This research was based on the first iteration of HEAT's Contextualised HE Entry Track, and in future iterations, we aim to build on the methodology used in this report to further explore the cohorts engaged in outreach, how they have been targeted, and their HE entry outcomes. We aim to progress this type of impact analysis towards Type 3, causal evidence by further improving the quasi-experimental design. Moreover, by negotiating access to further matching variables via the NPD, we will improve the data available for matching, and in turn improve the quality of and quantity of our matched groups. This will contribute to more robust evidence on the impact of outreach participation on HE entry above what otherwise might have occurred.

The next iteration of the Contextualised HE Entry Track, consisting of students ready to enter HE in 2022, will be available in 2026. While these future cohorts will include learners who had increased exposure to Uni Connect-funded outreach also in earlier pre-16 year groups, results of the OfS direction changes to put greater emphasis on working with schools to support pre-16 attainment-raising outreach in particular for HE providers will take more time to be reflected in Contextualised HE Entry Track outcomes.

¹⁵ England-wide the gap in progression rates between FSM eligible pupils and non-FSM pupils increased to the highest recorded level in 2022/23 (Department for Education, 2024).

In order to get the most benefit and value from HEAT, we encourage our members to use our range of tools and resources that support the design and execution of a robust evaluation design for their interventions.

Our tools support you at every stage, from planning interventions and evaluation, targeting schools and students, recording and monitoring progress, and evaluating outcomes. In particular, we encourage our members to use the 'Evaluation Group' field to attach comparator groups to activities and receive tracking data for non-participating students. This allows the membership to make use of local knowledge and insights to control for additional observed and unobserved variables that are not possible to account for in aggregate analyses.

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Match rates by outreach provider type

Table 8: Matching outcomes for cohort 1 and 2, high tariff HEAT members

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
Participant group (pre-matching)	9,685	13,470
Comparator group (pre-matching)	4,775	4,825
Successful matches	3,685	3,730
Match rate achieved	38.0%	27.7%
Maximum possible match rate	49.3%	35.8%

Table 9: Matching outcomes for cohort 1 and 2, non-high tariff HEAT members

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
Participant group (pre-matching)	5,670	7,825
Comparator group (pre-matching)	11,335	11,940
Successful matches	4,700	5,510
Match rate achieved	82.9%	70.4%
Maximum possible match rate	100.0%	100.0%

Table 10: Matching outcomes for cohort 1 and 2, Uni Connect HEAT members

	Cohort 1	Cohort 2
Participant group (pre-matching)	5,445	10,025
Comparator group (pre-matching)	12,690	19,585
Successful matches	4,115	7,665
Match rate achieved	75.6%	76.5%
Maximum possible match rate	100.0%	100.0%

Outreach delivery by outreach provider type

Table 11: Number of outreach activities delivered to cohort 1 by a high tariff HE provider HEAT member by academic year and activity type

	pre-2012/13 pre-Year 7	2012/13 Year 7	2013/14 Year 8	2014/15 Year 9	2015/16 Year 10	2016/17 Year 11	2017/18 Year 12	2018/19 Year 13	2019/20 post-Year 13
Exhibition				1	9	12	26	4	4
General HE Information				3	22	27	93	75	63
HE Campus Visit	1	20	19	81	87	105	231	151	43
HE Subject Insight		1	15	30	72	61	315	277	68
Mentoring			1	11	105	38	50	36	8
Non-Student						1		3	3
Other	3		1	4	2	4	27	13	21
Skills and Attainment			1	13	31	72	382	280	88
Summer School			3	8	30	42	192	124	26
Total	4	21	40	151	358	362	1,316	963	324

Table 12: Number of outreach activities delivered to cohort 1 by a non-high tariff HE provider HEAT member by academic year and activity type

	pre-2012/13 pre-Year 7	2012/13 Year 7	2013/14 Year 8	2014/15 Year 9	2015/16 Year 10	2016/17 Year 11	2017/18 Year 12	2018/19 Year 13	2019/20 post-Year 13
Exhibition				7	13	18	105	98	31
General HE Information	2	2	18	61	81	68	486	802	431
HE Campus Visit	27	17	29	115	130	105	299	301	121
HE Subject Insight	1	18	18	96	120	74	551	497	167
Mentoring			3	20	12	34	561	547	99
Non-Student				1	1		5	6	2
Other	4	1	1		4	8	50	39	12
Skills and Attainment	5	4	15	45	63	123	448	584	189
Summer School			3	14	33	32	152	85	18
Total	39	42	87	359	457	462	2,657	2,959	1,070

Table 13: Number of outreach activities delivered to cohort 1 funded by a Uni Connect HEAT member by academic year and activity type

	pre-2012/13 pre-Year 7	2012/13 Year 7	2013/14 Year 8	2014/15 Year 9	2015/16 Year 10	2016/17 Year 11	2017/18 Year 12	2018/19 Year 13	2019/20 post-Year 13
Exhibition						4	134	236	120
General HE Information						43	1,133	3,144	1,789
HE Campus Visit						10	242	373	156
HE Subject Insight						5	385	764	370
Mentoring						17	2,784	2,767	654
Non-Student							17	53	23
Other						4	54	119	152
Skills and Attainment						21	1,128	1,548	948
Summer School						8	75	43	10
Total	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	112	5,952	9,047	4,222

Table 14: Number of outreach activities delivered to cohort 2 by a high tariff HE provider HEAT member by academic year and activity type

	pre-2013/14 pre-Year 7	2013/14 Year 7	2014/15 Year 8	2015/16 Year 9	2016/17 Year 10	2017/18 Year 11	2018/19 Year 12	2019/20 Year 13	2020/21 post-Year 13
Exhibition			2	5	10	14	7	7	4
General HE Information	14		3	23	46	54	125	175	94
HE Campus Visit		30	30	106	202	147	305	121	8
HE Subject Insight		2	41	57	100	104	409	224	86
Mentoring				53	112	46	46	25	29
Non-Student					2		5	3	5
Other	3		1	3	9	18	21	40	19
Skills and Attainment		1	5	35	52	99	314	292	160
Summer School			6	13	28	49	226	65	17
Total	17	33	88	295	561	531	1,458	952	422

Table 15: Number of outreach activities delivered to cohort 2 by a non-high tariff HE provider HEAT member by academic year and activity type

	pre-2013/14 pre-Year 7	2013/14 Year 7	2014/15 Year 8	2015/16 Year 9	2016/17 Year 10	2017/18 Year 11	2018/19 Year 12	2019/20 Year 13	2020/21 post-Year 13
Exhibition			4	8	16	43	115	67	2
General HE Information	3	12	66	70	58	225	770	764	556
HE Campus Visit	37	20	50	136	167	129	401	225	40
HE Subject Insight	9	8	75	90	98	147	609	307	100
Mentoring		2	13	4	67	297	476	496	119
Non-Student						4	6	7	1
Other	4	1	2	1	9	68	76	32	15
Skills and Attainment	2	10	42	72	156	273	639	504	206
Summer School	1		4	12	34	66	121	47	24
Total	56	53	256	393	605	1,252	3,213	2,449	1,063

Table 16: Number of outreach activities delivered to cohort 2 funded by a Uni Connect HEAT member by academic year and activity type

	pre-2013/14 pre-Year 7	2013/14 Year 7	2014/15 Year 8	2015/16 Year 9	2016/17 Year 10	2017/18 Year 11	2018/19 Year 12	2019/20 Year 13	2020/21 post-Year 13
Exhibition					6	85	257	188	49
General HE Information					89	654	2,609	3,239	2,290
HE Campus Visit					37	104	408	259	38
HE Subject Insight					48	155	833	661	437
Mentoring					27	603	1,417	1,578	716
Non-Student					1	25	43	40	9
Other					13	73	135	242	72
Skills and Attainment					62	843	1,726	1,521	1,370
Summer School					10	59	70	25	30
Total	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	293	2,601	7,498	7,753	5,011

Matched participants by FSM status and timing of engagement

Table 17: Percentage of matched outreach participants by FSM status and timing of engagement

	FSM	Non-FSM	Total
Only Pre-16	4%	9%	13%
Only Post-16	14%	45%	59%
Both	8%	21%	28%
Total	25%	75%	100%