

Phase 3 evaluation plan

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Summary

Shaping Futures is the Liverpool City Region Uni Connect partnership. We were formed in 2017 to tackle the progression gap in particular wards in the region where the GCSE attainment should have led to higher progression. In 2019, we were asked to look further at underrepresented groups in higher education and how we could help facilitate them accessing HE. Going into 2022/23, we have been asked to also look at GCSE attainment in our local schools.

This plan will outline how we will undertake our evaluation for 2022/23, and beyond to the end of Phase 3 in July 2025.

Shaping Futures is in receipt of funding for two types of outreach: targeted and strategic.

Targeted outreach is for learners from specific wards identified by the OfS. It is typically delivered via a series of workshops or presentations from the core team or partners. Evaluation of delivery happens at three different levels:

1. Activity level – an individual activity has the outcomes tested. This could come through a pre and post survey during the activity, interactive elements, teacher feedback or practitioner reflections.
2. Series level – a set of activities have their outcomes tested. This means that a practitioner has run some sessions over the course of a few weeks and is testing the outcomes of all of the sessions. This is typically done with pre and post surveys at the first and final session.
3. Programme level – high priority schools are asked to complete a slightly longer survey for all learners in years 9-13. This will be done annually and will provide comparator groups of those that have received Shaping Futures outreach and those that have not.

Strategic outreach is aimed at people from underrepresented groups in higher education. In 2022/23, Shaping Futures aims to work with people from the following underrepresented groups:

- Care leavers
- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
- Low participation neighbourhoods/low income households
- Adult learners

Outreach for these groups will primarily be project based. Projects working directly with learners will have individual evaluation plans in place before any delivery commences. Typically, these will be evaluated through pre and post surveys, as well as practitioner and teacher feedback. Where possible, a comparator group may be used, although the nature of the targeting for these projects may not allow for this.

Monitoring data for both targeted and strategic outreach is collected from schools using a data sharing agreement process.

Phase 3 evaluation plan

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Timeline for 2022/23

Month	Evaluation collection	Evaluation dissemination
September 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools to sign data sharing agreements • Initial school level surveys 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2021/22 activity evaluations written • 2021/22 delivery reports distributed to schools • 2021/22 case study schools report distributed to schools
October	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial activity level evaluation collected • Scoping of strategic outreach and attainment raising projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • OfS monitoring return deadline • National activity impact evaluation report deadline
November		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Release of annual impact report • School level survey results
December	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Termly review of impact data 	
January	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative focus groups for select projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Termly delivery report released
February		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact reports of any autumn term projects
March	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Year 11 and year 13 school surveys collected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National impact report released (estimated)
April	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Termly review of impact data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Termly delivery report released • Impact report of attainment raising pilot project
May		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact reports of any spring term projects • School level survey results
June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualitative focus groups with select projects 	
July	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • End of year monitoring data collected • HE admissions data received for 2020/21 entrants • Process evaluation discussions of partner projects and strategic outreach projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initial insights from data to inform summer planning
August	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Annual review of impact data • Process evaluation discussions of partner projects and strategic outreach projects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Impact reports of 2022/23 year long activity (likely to be September)

Activity level evaluation and monitoring data to be continually collected throughout the year.

Who we are

Shaping Futures is the Liverpool City Region Uni Connect partnership. We were formed in 2017 to tackle the progression gap in particular wards in the region where the GCSE attainment should have led to higher progression. In 2019, we were asked to look further at underrepresented groups in higher education and how we could help facilitate them accessing HE. Going into 2022/23, we have been asked to also look at GCSE attainment in our local schools.

Phase 3 of the Uni Connect programme has 4 key aims set by the OfS:

1. Contribute to reducing the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups.
2. Equip young and adult learners from underrepresented groups to make an informed choice about their options in relation to the full range of routes into and through higher education and to minimise the barriers they may face when choosing the option that will unlock their potential.
3. Support a strategic local infrastructure of universities, colleges and other partners that can cut through competitive barriers, offer an efficient and low-burden route for schools and colleges to engage, and address outreach 'cold spots' for underrepresented groups.
4. Contribute to a stronger evidence base around 'what works' in higher education outreach and strengthen evaluation practice across the sector.

The OfS have also announced that they would like Uni Connect partnerships to start attainment raising initiatives in their region, although this is yet to be implemented.

This plan will outline how we will undertake our evaluation for 2022/23, and beyond to the end of Phase 3 in July 2025.

As outlined in our phase 1 and 2 report our evaluation to date has been more ad hoc and reactive, which although allowing us to evaluate a large proportion of our work, does not lead to high quality robust data being collected. This plan should allow a longer-term view to take place of our evaluation despite a changing remit and reduced resources going forward.

Theory/background

All activities delivered by Shaping Futures are designed using outcomes linked to our progression framework. This framework was designed using a theory of change, meaning that all our work is aligned to our overall objectives. The logic model below portrays how the programme should work, however more information on outcomes is available in our progression framework.

	Inputs	Outputs	Outcomes (impact)		
			Short term	Medium term	Long term
Office for Students funding	Staff: core team; partners	Delivery in line with the progression framework by core staff and partners	<i>Know what HE is</i>		Application to HE rates increase across the Liverpool City Region from priority schools
	Grant-funded delivery		Intro: learners can describe HE Dev: learners can discuss different aspects of HE Con: learners can transition into HE	Learners can discuss what Higher Education is, and assess misinformation about Higher Education Learners apply to Higher Education	
	Student advocates	Grant-funded projects with external organisations	<i>Make informed decisions</i>		Increase in successful applications to HE Participation gap across target wards is reduced
	Progression framework		Intro: learners can describe their upcoming career decisions Dev: learners can analyse which post-16 pathway is best for them Con: learners have made an informed choice on HE	Learners make subject and course choices based off career and education plans	
	Official data sources (provided by HEAT, HESA, schools, etc.)	Projects targeted at specific cohorts	<i>Skills to succeed</i>		Provision of information and guidance across the Liverpool City Region Reduced GCSE attainment gap for school-based learners in underrepresented groups
	HEAT tracking service – monitoring and tracking students		Intro: learners can describe skills and strengths Dev: learners can demonstrate study skills Con: learners submit a UCAS application	Learners can achieve appropriate qualifications at level 2 and 3 Learners successfully transition to further/Higher Education and employment	
	Develop and maintain relationships with schools, partners, external organisations, stakeholders	Organising and/or attending events for school staff,	Understand what school/college staff, parents and carers	School/college staff and parents/carers provide positive feedback that	
	Match funding by partners				

		parents and carers	would benefit from; gain their perspectives on how to help young people	we are supporting them and their students	
		Data: HEAT tracking; local surveys; analysis of primary and secondary data	Information gathered from students is utilised to develop and improve programme activities	Sustained and progressive work with learners	Increased knowledge of impactful outreach in city region

Targeted outreach

Targeted outreach has traditionally been Shaping Futures' largest section of work. However, over phase 3 this will be reducing. The Office for Students have requested that targeted outreach removes one year-group at a time and only works with learners who have already accessed outreach. The table below shows what this looks like:

Academic year	Year groups worked with
2021/22	9-13 and FE college learners
2022/23	10-13 and FE college learners
2023/24	11-13 and FE college learners
2024/25	12-13 and FE college learners

In order to do this, Shaping Futures will be undertaking targeted outreach with the allocated year groups in a select number of schools. Over time, these schools may receive more strategic outreach to fill the gap left by the reduction of targeted outreach.

Targeted outreach is traditionally delivered in two ways: a series of workshops or presentations from the core team, or partner led projects. Evaluation of delivery happens at three different levels:

1. Activity level – an individual activity has the outcomes tested. This could come through a pre and post survey during the activity, interactive elements, teacher feedback or practitioner reflections.
2. Series level – a set of activities have their outcomes tested. This means that a practitioner has run some sessions over the course of a few weeks and is testing the outcomes of all of the sessions. This is typically done with pre and post surveys at the first and final session. This can be linked with the

activity level evaluation for deeper insight into the learners' understanding of a particular concept.

3. Programme level – this is the evaluation for both the core team and partner led delivery at a medium term across a school. The high priority schools will be asked to complete a slightly longer survey for all learners in years 9-13. This will be done annually and will provide comparator groups of those that have received Shaping Futures outreach and those that have not.

Core team delivery

Everything the core team does is linked to the progression framework. This means that all our activities are linked to our overall objectives as the progression framework stages our intended outcomes across three themes. Activities are evaluated at all three levels depending on the data collected.

Partner led

Each partner led project has its own intended outcomes, however they are still linked to the progression framework. Each partner runs their own evaluation with support from the core team where necessary. Depending on the specific outcomes and delivery style of the project, partner evaluations are run in the same way as core team evaluations, with the same questions on surveys to enable comparison.

The partners are also asked to provide a reflection on their project at regular meetings with the core team and through a process evaluation discussion with the Evaluation and Impact Manager towards the end of the project.

Strategic outreach

Strategic outreach is aimed at people from underrepresented groups in higher education. In 2022/23, Shaping Futures aims to work with people from the following underrepresented groups:

- Care leavers
- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
- Low participation neighbourhoods/low income households
- Adult learners

Outreach for these groups will primarily be project based, and will be run by the core team and partners. Each project will have a series of intended outcomes linked to the progression framework. Projects working directly with learners will have individual evaluation plans in place before any delivery commences. Typically, these will be evaluated through pre and post surveys, as well as practitioner and teacher feedback. Where possible, a comparator group may be used, although the nature of the targeting for these projects may not allow for this.

Where strategic outreach projects take place in high priority targeted schools, the medium-term outcomes will be assessed through the school surveys as above.

Long term outcomes for strategic outreach will be assessed through nationally published data on the progression rates for underrepresented groups. As outlined in the [Demographics and Educational Disadvantage in The Liverpool City Region](#) research report, the city region has particularly low progression in some areas. The objective of this work is to bring the region more in line with the national average, and reduce the gaps between underrepresented groups in the region. Although we will not be able to assess the extent that any changes are directly due to Shaping Futures' work, it will be possible to compare progression rates from before and after interventions occurred.

Attainment raising

Starting in 2022/23, Shaping Futures have been asked to look at interventions on attainment raising for young people in state secondary schools, in years 7-11. The first year aims to scope out the specific needs in the region, and work with schools and other outreach providers to design interventions that are beneficial and not duplicating work. In order to do this, there will be some pilot projects taking place with schools. The pilot projects will be evaluated based on the intended outcomes. It is likely that this will be done via pre and post surveys and teacher feedback, as well as comparator groups where possible.

A more detailed evaluation plan for this stream of work will be released in summer 2023.

Process and impact evaluation

As outlined earlier in this plan, the main focus of Shaping Futures' evaluation is understanding what works in higher education outreach. This means that the majority of evaluation undertaken by Shaping Futures is focussed on impact – have the learners increased their knowledge, changed their attitude or behaviour or progressed to higher education at a higher rate than they would have otherwise? This is generally measured by comparing survey responses pre and post interventions, and where possible, using comparator groups.

However, understanding what happened during an intervention and how it can be made more effective or efficient is also important. For this reason, process evaluation is done on projects to understand what the practitioner feels could have gone better in the delivery – often this can lead to a greater understanding of the mechanism for change of any impact seen. The key way that process evaluation is done is via structured conversations with project leads and other stakeholders during and after the project's completion.

Monitoring

As a condition of funding, the Office for Students requires that all activities and attendees are recorded on a tracking service. Shaping Futures uses the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT). Records of attendees are received in two ways:

- Where the activity is facilitated through the school, the school provide the learners' personal details to be added to HEAT via secure spreadsheets
- Where a learner directly signs up for an activity outside of the school (e.g. a webinar), the learner provides their information on sign up

Schools also often send information for learners who may not attend activities, and therefore can act as a comparator to those that did attend.

Monitoring data is regularly reported back to the core team, partners and schools to aid further targeting or prioritising schools for further engagement.

Data collection

The below table presents who we collect what type of data from, and when/how this is done:

Audience	Evaluation or research type	Data collection method
Students	Participation data	Registers sent from school to Shaping Futures team. Where students sign up separately, this is directly into a Shaping Futures database.
	Surveys (evaluation)	Surveys distributed at the start (if applicable) and end of sessions and completed on site. Surveys distributed online or paper via schools for longer term tracking.
	Interactive elements	Practitioners will note results of interactive elements to show learners' understanding of a topic. Example pieces of work may be collected for illustrative purposes.
	Interviews/Focus groups	Focus groups and interviews are conducted in schools or colleges by Shaping Futures staff. These sessions will be audio recorded.
School or college staff members	Surveys (research)	Online surveys are distributed to staff members via emails directly from Shaping Futures staff, or provided as a hard copy to staff members by Shaping Futures staff.
	Surveys (evaluation)	Surveys distributed at the end of sessions and completed on site.
	Interviews/Focus groups (research)	Interviews or focus groups with staff members will be conducted via telephone, online or in person by Shaping Futures staff in private meeting rooms. They will be audio recorded.
Parents or carers	Surveys (evaluation)	Surveys distributed at the end of sessions and completed on site
Practitioners	End of project reports	The templates are completed electronically by practitioners and sent to Shaping Futures staff via email

Data from schools is not collected until they have signed a data sharing agreement to ensure that data is collected in line with the UK GDPR legislation.

In addition to the above, external data will be used. For example, published data on attainment and progression from sources such as HESA or UCAS, and information about schools (their free school meal eligibility and OFSTED data, for example) from HEAT.

Dissemination

Stakeholder	Requirements	Output type
Board of governors	High-level summary of the detailed information provided in the annual report	Executive summary annual impact report with option of full report for each activity
Partners and practitioners	Detailed information summarising what has been done and what the evaluation says, including recommendations	Detailed written report for each project they were involved with, and access to other reports to aid planning Presentations at Monitoring and Evaluation group
Funders (Office for Students)	Comparable outputs	Activity tracker report and monitoring return of financial information.
National evaluators	Detailed information about evaluation methodologies and evidence, as requested by those completing the evaluation	Detailed written report for each project using template provided
Participants – schools	Easily digestible, evidence of something they have contributed to	Thank you letter and link to annual impact report, as well as break down of what they have received
Participants – students	Easily digestible, evidence of something they have contributed to	Impact section hosted on the website, providing headline monitoring figures and some evaluation case studies
Wider audiences (e.g. parents, community members)	Those who hear of Shaping Futures might have an interest in knowing what work has been done in the local area and nationally	Impact section hosted on the website, providing headline monitoring figures and some evaluation case studies Presentations at conferences and webinars

Ethics

The UK General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) set out the principles and obligations that we must follow when processing personal data. In light of this we obtain data from schools under the legal basis of public task. Learners are informed that we are processing their data through a video shown at the start of activities.

The lead institution for Shaping Futures, the University of Liverpool, granted ethical approval for Shaping Futures up to November 2024. The ethical approval covers the data collection that Shaping Futures performs, for monitoring and tracking as well as evaluation. This approves collection methods with students and staff within schools and colleges as planned for phase three.

Evaluation responsibilities

The below table outlines the identified roles of staff members across the partnership. These will contribute to a successful evaluation process:

Staff member/role	Contribution to Evaluation
Shaping Futures Monitoring and Evaluation Group	Engage in strategic conversations about evaluation of Shaping Futures
Head of Programme	Regular meetings with evaluation lead in order to facilitate successful evaluation process and to offer guidance and support where appropriate
Contracts Manager	
Outreach Manager	Meet with the evaluation lead regularly to discuss approach and ensure a relationship between delivery and evaluation is appropriate
Evaluation and Impact Manager	To facilitate the evaluation of Shaping Futures and conduct evaluation and monitoring duties
Higher Education Progression Advisers	Meet with evaluation lead to build evaluation into design of all activities Facilitate evaluation of activities with stakeholders Facilitate qualitative methods with stakeholders Produce case studies as and when requested Engage in feedback/reflection sessions with evaluation lead and other practitioners in order to learn from evaluation
Other team members (Communications Officer, Project Support Officer)	Support aspects of evaluation as and when requested, e.g. data entry, communications support
Student Ambassadors	Provide feedback on activities (from their perspective) Facilitate evaluation of activities with stakeholders when requested by delivery staff
Partner staff	Build evaluation into design of activities in collaboration with evaluation lead Facilitate evaluation of activities with stakeholders
School/college staff	Provide access to stakeholders for evaluation purposes and facilitate focus groups/survey sessions where appropriate Provide feedback via consultations and/or evaluation methods

Limitations

There are limitations to the research and evaluation methodologies outlined in this plan that must be considered and acknowledged.

Some practitioners will be more able to impress the importance of evaluation upon participants than others and some audiences may be more open to evaluation than others. The result is that some of the data will be more valid and reliable than others, depending on whether participants take it seriously or not. Another risk to the validity and reliability of the data is the lack of anonymity in some cases. For some projects and activities, it is imperative to collect data before and after the event, and so students have to provide details in order to match the data. This might discourage students from being truthful, due to perceived expectations and desire to please. This might mean that some required improvements are missed, if students don't highlight the limitations they saw in the activities.

Relatively short annual funding windows also prevent data being collected reliably. The funding means that long term projects cannot be planned and run over multiple years meaning that long term outcomes cannot be measured easily, and learners cannot be tracked across multiple programmes.

The tools themselves can also be flawed. Surveys can include language that students do not understand and/or be boring to the participants. They might collect the wrong data if students misunderstand the meaning of the question or if the questions are not targeting the correct indicators, which can result in data being misinterpreted and potentially incorrect conclusions being drawn. Such instances, where identified, will be used constructively to improve tools in the rest of the phase. There will also be regular research into pre-validated tools that could measure the same things being targeted.

A further point that might lead to incorrect assumptions or things being missed is the small sample sizes in cases. Some projects run with very small numbers, and so the statistical inferences that can be drawn are weaker. It will be important in these cases to triangulate and collect qualitative data.

Focus groups with multiple participants – students or adults – can also be problematic, due to the nature of the sessions. Some participants will be more vocal than others, and hence these voices will be heard more and used as a foundation for interventions. Those who are less vocal might have different perceived barriers to HE, for example, and these might not be recognised during focus groups. One way of avoiding this is to offer focus group training to those conducting the focus groups.

A further issue with conducting research is the lack of representation of the whole cohorts. Teachers will self-select to complete the surveys, and schools will also self-select in terms of agreeing access to student groups. Thus, it will be important not to generalise to all students, teachers and schools within the region.

Perhaps the largest limitation to the evaluation of Shaping Futures is the lack of causality that will be identified. Ultimately, it will not be possible to conclude that specific interventions have been the difference in a student entering HE in the future, or even that the existence of Shaping Futures caused the difference (say if a student does progress to HE/university). It is impossible to know what other activities students take part in outside of Shaping Futures delivery. The best we will be able to do is compare students who are as closely matched as possible with each other, with the variables being specific interventions delivered by Shaping Futures and recorded on HEAT.

Risks

The below table attempts to summarise some of the risks posed to the evaluation plan outlined above and how the team can mitigate for them:

Risk description	Probability	Impact	Mitigating actions
Schools not consenting to surveys and data sharing agreements	Mid	Having a small sample size	Try to build on pre-existing rapport with schools and colleges, offer some level of incentive (e.g. sharing of data about their students' engagement with Shaping Futures)
Attrition for students completing multiple surveys	Mid	Not being able to match students, further reducing the sample size	Get a large enough sample at the start that some drop-out isn't detrimental Check that drop-out isn't based on certain characteristics before reporting on findings
Students getting "survey fatigue" during phase	Mid	Students might not take surveys seriously if they keep being asked to do them, which could lead to unreliable responses	Try to reduce number of questions on surveys to minimum Make surveys visually appealing Do some surveys off-paper Increase qualitative data collection
Students providing "correct" answers (social desirability bias)	Mid	Data might not be valid	Encourage students to understand the importance of evaluation during the session(s) Design surveys to reduce the chance of this
Illness or absence of key team members	Mid	Delay in timeline, a loss of skills required to make the evaluation successful	Evaluation lead to save files on shared drive, provide relevant training to other staff, share the project plan with all staff

Data recording or entry errors	Low	Not being able to match students	Collect registers from schools to help identify typos in comparisons with evaluation surveys
Overestimating effects based on evidence from immediate impact data and/or by including feedback from students who are <i>not</i> target students	Low	If only immediate data collection is conducted, effects of interventions are likely to be over-estimated. Similarly, this is the case if students were already very positive about HE (or their opportunities)	Avoid drawing conclusions based on limited data, collect other types of data and data at different times (which will allow triangulation). Where appropriate and possible, separate data by different student characteristics to identify different impacts. Avoid making causal claims where the effect of other variables cannot be excluded
Disrupted delivery due to resurgence in COVID-19 or other factors	Mid	Reduction in number of learners engaged, lack of ability to see impact of intervention compared to disrupter	When appropriate, engage qualitative methods to discuss impact with learners Consistent approach across region should allow for resilience if one set of delivery is disrupted

CHAT TO US!

Got questions? **Click here** chat to one of our team, we are here to help.

