

A Process Evaluation of Phase Two of the Higher Education Progression Partnership South Yorkshire (HeppSY)

Summary

This summary report is accompanied by the full report.
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Evaluation Summary

- The Higher Education Progression Partnership South Yorkshire (HeppSY) is part of the national Uni Connect programme (UCP) that aims to help school and college students aged 13-19 across South Yorkshire who are most at risk of missing out on higher education.
- The Uni Connect programme consists of 29 regional partnerships of universities, colleges, local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, employers and others who work together to develop and deliver the programme of activity to reduce the gap in higher education participation between the most and least represented groups.
- In the autumn of 2020 an evaluation team from Student Engagement, Evaluation and Research (STEER) at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) was commissioned to undertake a qualitative process evaluation in relation to phase two of the HeppSY programme, its legacy and the impact of Covid-19.
- The evaluation captured the views and experiences of 54 stakeholders from the HeppSY central teams, partner organisations, and schools and colleges through 19 semi-structured individual and group interviews.
- The evaluation sought to explore how the HeppSY programme had performed against its output targets contained in its logic model. Five themes were identified from the logic model: developing a collaborative approach; relationships with partners; programme implementation; evaluation and monitoring; and legacy. These were used to structure the data collection along questions on Covid-19.
- Four evaluation questions informed the evaluation and data collection:
- Findings have been presented in five themes; **developing a collaborative approach; programme implementation; evaluation and monitoring; legacy; and Covid-19**. Relationship with partners was not separated out into its own theme, as relationships were fundamental and embedded in all the other themes.
- Discussion builds on the extensive findings that provided a significant amount of evidence that HeppSY is meeting, or working towards, its output targets, as identified in its logic model. It highlights some of challenges and opportunities for the future within the context of the evaluation questions.
- The report concludes by making **seven recommendations** that will support the transition into phase three of Uni Connect, help secure the legacy of HeppSY in the South Yorkshire region and build on the relationships developed with centres.

Introduction

Evaluation Context

The Higher Education Progression Partnership South Yorkshire (HeppSY) is part of the national Uni Connect programme (UCP) that aims to help school and college students aged 13-19 across South Yorkshire who are most at risk of missing out on higher education. HeppSY is working in partnership with Sheffield Hallam University, The University of Sheffield and South Yorkshire schools and colleges.

This report builds on these previous evaluations (Brown, 2019¹ & Clague, Brown & Squire, 2019²) by examining the ongoing implementation, performance, and evaluation of the programme against its targets set out in the programme's logic model during phase two. The report also seeks to provide insight into how HeppSY responded to societal changes caused by Covid-19 and how it is working to secure a legacy going forward. An external evaluation team from Student Engagement, Evaluation and Research (STEER) at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) was commissioned to undertake a qualitative process evaluation and make recommendations for future work and programme legacy.

Uni Connect Programme Context

The Uni Connect Programme (UCP), formally known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), is an initiative that aims to support the government's social mobility goals in England, by rapidly increasing the number of young people from underrepresented groups who go into higher education. Uni Connect consists of 29 regional partnerships of universities, colleges, local authorities, local enterprise partnerships, employers and others who work together to develop and deliver the programme locally. The programme targets young people in compulsory education years 9 to 13 living in particular geographical areas, where higher education participation is historically lower than might be expected given the GCSE results of young people in those areas.

Covid-19

The global pandemic Covid-19 and the resulting social restrictions introduced in England to contain the virus has caused significant disruption to everybody's lives throughout 2020 and 2021 and in particular the educational experience of young people. HeppSY have aimed to support their partner schools and colleges through this unprecedented time and have reshaped their offer and delivery methods so it is still accessible in an online environment. While HeppSY have continued to deliver their programme, the full impact of Covid-19 on their ability to achieve the aims of phase two may take some time to become fully apparent. The young people they are targeting are those that might have been most negatively impacted by the pandemic and the educational disruption.

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1 Brown, G (2019) HeppSY+: delivering a collaborative approach? Sheffield: HeppSY

2 Clague, L, Brown, G, & Squire, R (2019) HeppSY: school and college views. Sheffield: HeppSY

Evaluative Approach

Evaluation Objectives

This evaluation sought to capture the views and experiences of various stakeholders (HeppSY central teams, partner organisations, and schools and colleges) about the ongoing implementation, performance, and evaluation of the HeppSY programme during phase two. The outputs from the programme's logic model have been used to structure the data collection and these have been themed into five areas: developing a collaborative approach; relationships with partners; programme implementation; evaluation and monitoring; and legacy. The evaluation also sought views concerning the impact of Covid-19 on the HeppSY programme during phase two. The evaluation will endeavour to answer the following questions:

1. How has the HeppSY programme and partnership been developed from phase one to two?
2. To what extent has a culture of evaluation and monitoring developed across phase two?
3. What is the anticipated legacy of HeppSY, and how has this been developed across phase two?
4. What impact has Covid-19 had on the implementation of the HeppSY programme in phase two?

Methodology

A process evaluation was applied where the focus is on “evaluating the mechanisms through which an intervention takes place”, with an emphasis on providing “evidence of how (well) an intervention has been implemented...against expectations” and “how it operates” (Parsons, 2017, p. 16³). In line with the other studies in phase one, a qualitative methodology of semi-structured individual and group interviews was used to gather data for this study. The interview schedule was structured around the four themes developed from the output targets identified in the programme's logic model and adapted according to the participant's role in the HeppSY programme.

Interview transcripts were transcribed by a professional transcription service. They were then organised and analysed in NVivo 12 by two STEER evaluators. Each evaluator read all the transcripts and then divided them so they could be analysed deductively using a pre-set coding structure, which aligned with the five areas of the programme output targets and the evaluation questions. The evaluators also undertook inductive coding that was informed by their interpretations of the data. This synthesis and triangulation of the inductive and deductive analysis allowed the most prominent themes to be identified in relation to the evaluation's objectives. This approach allowed both evaluators to familiarise themselves and be immersed in the data and enabled the evaluators to check for consistency, ensuring the trustfulness of the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1986⁴).

Ethical approval was sought and granted on the 4 November 2020 via Sheffield Hallam University's ethical approval process. All project data was held on a password protected drive, in folders only accessible to the evaluation team. Each participant was emailed an information sheet that outlined what the interview would cover, and how their responses would remain confidential. Participants were also asked to sign and return informed consent forms.

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3 Parsons, D. (2017). *Demystifying evaluation: Practical approaches for researchers and users*. Policy Press.

4 Lincoln, Y & Guba, E (1986) But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in Naturalistic Evaluation. Is 30

Data Collection

Nineteen semi-structured individual and group interviews were conducted with 54 participants between 27 November 2020 and 1 February 2021 (Table 1, Appendix) provides a full breakdown of the interviews). There was representation from: HeppSY, including senior leadership, school and college programme managers and engagement assistants; partners, such as Hepp and the outreach teams at the University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University; and centres, including schools with post-16 provision, schools without post-16 provision and academy trusts. The interviews lasted around an hour and were conducted online via Zoom because of the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions. The interview schedule was adapted to the stakeholder group. A pragmatic, purposeful sampling approach was adopted given the focus and scope of the evaluation.

Limitations of the Evaluation

It is important to highlight several limitations of this evaluation, and their potential influence on the findings and recommendations put forward in this report. Covid-19 had a significant impact on participants, who have experienced unprecedented upheaval in their professional and personal lives, and on schools and centres, with some key contexts not able to participate in the evaluation. Several of the interviewees were new to the HeppSY programme or did not have a full understanding of how it works which limited their knowledge of how the programme has progressed since its inception. Furthermore, some participants' views about the legacy of HeppSY might have been affected by confirmation that UCP phase three would take place, which was decided in January 2021 and halfway through the data collection period.

The findings were generally positive about the perceived differences that HeppSY has had on centres and partners up until phase two of the programme. However, this does not establish any direct causal effect. The sampling approach may have partially contributed to a positive skew in the findings as it could have limited the opportunities to capture a wider range of perspectives of intended beneficiaries. The perceived impact of HeppSY on students is discussed but this evidence is based on observations made by staff within centres and across the partnership, rather than directly with students.

Findings and Discussion

The extensive findings provide a significant amount of evidence that HeppSY is meeting or working towards its output targets identified in its logic model. Overwhelmingly the evidence presented in this report is positive, however there are limitations to the data, as outlined above. The findings are explored fully in the accompanying report to this summary.

The findings are outlined in the full report under five main themes, four of which align with the programme's logic model:

- **Developing a collaborative approach** examines how HeppSY have established and maintained a collaborative approach with its partners and centres over phase one and two of the programme. There are two sub-themes of **establishing strategic leadership** and **effective engagement with partners and centres**.
- **Programme implementation** focuses on the processes and methods used by HeppSY to deliver the programme in the South Yorkshire region. There are two sub-themes of **financial incentive and support** and **delivery of activities**.
- **Evaluation and monitoring** outlines the data processes implemented by HeppSY and how a deeper understanding has been developed about evaluation and its importance in phase two. There are three sub-themes: **targeting young people for interventions; establishing rigorous evaluation practices;** and **survey**, which focuses on the annual national UCP survey.
- **Legacy** shares participants' anticipated hopes and expectations about the long-term impact of the HeppSY programme in the South Yorkshire region. There are three sub-themes: the **resources** created by HeppSY; the **impact on centres** and its students, staff and culture; and the **impact on collaboration**.
- **Covid-19** focuses on the impact of the global pandemic on the HeppSY programme and their response to it. There are three sub-themes: **initial response and transition to online; ways of working and relationship building;** and **programme reach and students' engagement**.

All of the themes relate to a wider theme of building and maintaining relationships with partner organisations, schools and colleges. For the purposes of the summary report, the findings are discussed below within the context of the evaluation questions.

Q: How has the programme and collaborative partnerships been developed from phase one to phase two?

HeppSY have been successful in communicating a clear vision of what they want to accomplish and achieve in the region, which has resulted in collaboration that is built on relationships of trust. This has led to the continued successful implementation of the programme during phase two and aided the response to Covid-19. These relationships were spearheaded by a senior leadership team that are accessible and open in their approach to all partners. HeppSY's approach to collaboration, open communication and consultation was particularly beneficial during the uncertainty around the future of the UCP nationally going into phase two. This allowed the partners to plan for all possible scenarios while also allowing HeppSY to retain staff. As the programme moves into phase three, a similar approach to phase two should be adopted, especially as the impact of reduced funding and different programme aims are explored and implemented.

Building on the foundations set in phase one, HeppSY have developed a strong brand that was perceived to be professional and high quality by evaluation participants. The shift to a regional approach to the management of centres in phase two also meant HeppSY could be more proactive and responsive to the individual needs of each centre. This also enabled greater understanding about the reach of the programme in those areas. Centres appeared to be willing and eager to work with HeppSY. The centres have also come to rely on HeppSY as an accessible conduit for all higher education access activities and support. This could be because of well-developed relationships, which have been established at multiple levels in centres from senior leadership teams to teachers, careers advisors and administrative staff, by a range of HeppSY colleagues. The resources and capacity of HeppSY have also helped them to coordinate and deliver a flexible and bespoke programme to the centres they engage with.

This presents a number of challenges for HeppSY's partner organisations (Hepp, SHU and UoS), as they might not have the resources or capacity to fill the void left by HeppSY after its expected completion in 2025. The partners expressed concerns about: their lack of individual identity amongst the centres; the centres' over-reliance on HeppSY to coordinate their access offer; and the ability to manage the centres' high expectations. HeppSY should consider how they could support their partners in developing collaborative ways of working with each other, that can maximise capacity and resources in the region in the delivery of outreach activities.

According to the centres, a success experienced by the HeppSY programme in both phase one and two was their ability to create capacity and resource in their organisations. HeppSY achieved this through multiple means such as buying out staff time in centres, providing additional staff such as EAs, or by giving the centres access to funds to support outreach activities. The allocation of funding in centres has also meant that HeppSY could expect the centres to actively engage in the programme and deliver on certain requirements. However, there were some concerns expressed that persistent time pressures on staff in centres, even with the funding, was limiting their ability to engage with HeppSY. The reciprocal relationship created through the funding has benefited stakeholders and has helped the programme succeed. Having the funding guaranteed in two-year blocks during phase one and two was also beneficial as it allowed stakeholders to plan further ahead into the future. This may become more challenging if the funding in phase three is subject to annual confirmation and consultation, as the pace of decision making at a national level will have a direct impact on the programme's design and implementation at a regional level.

Centres agreed that higher education has been raised and maintained as a priority within their organisations. They also perceived that the value of HeppSY had increased during phase two as staff in centres began to see the impact it was having on their students. However, there needs to be careful consideration about how higher education access is kept as a priority within centres when capacity and resources are reduced or removed. This is especially necessary given the impact of Covid-19 on education, which might in turn reshape immediate priorities within centres.

Q: To what extent has a culture of evaluation and monitoring developed across phase two?

There was evidence from all stakeholders that HeppSY had developed a strong culture of evaluation and monitoring during phase two of the programme. This was aided by the work carried out in phase one that established the processes and procedures allowing participant data to be shared across the partnership. HeppSY's evaluation and data team had worked with centres and partners to refine and standardise how data was being collected and submitted for registers. There was also a good understanding and appreciation of the importance of having data that demonstrates the impact of the programme. There were only a few issues observed about arranging data sharing agreements with centres, with potential inconsistencies in data sharing across the partnership due to the varied approaches taken by centres. The partners expressed their hopes that these practices would continue beyond HeppSY, as they found them very beneficial for their own outreach work. However, there were concerns that without the financial incentives offered by HeppSY this would cease.

The evaluation and data team have created more opportunities for the outputs of evaluation activities to be shared, either through regular meetings or accessible reports for the centres. Participants from HeppSY, the partners and the centres shared experiences of using evaluation outcomes to shape what they do and their practice. Using evidence to inform activities and practice is a good demonstration of an evaluative culture. Practitioner reflections were a significant element of many of the evaluative practices of HeppSY staff, although many expressed concerns that the move to online had impeded their ability to use this form of evaluation. Others expressed concerns about young peoples' engagement in evaluations of online activities and how this may result in data that provides limited insight into the impact of these activities. It may be necessary for HeppSY to explore how best to apply evaluation practices in a digital environment which support the creation of robust and valid insights.

Centres shared the challenges around identifying the most appropriate young people to participate in the HeppSY programme. Centres felt hesitant about determining the potential of young people to progress to higher education, especially for younger students where a few centres felt that there was a perceived lack of data to support their decision-making, which may lead to inconsistencies in the approach. Some centres expressed the view that all young people could have the potential given the right support and circumstances. Other centres also highlighted that the national approach of using postcodes to identify students sometimes excluded young people from the programme, who the centres felt needed additional support to reach their potential. Some of these discrepancies arise because of the different measures used, such as free school meals eligibility, pupil premium and English as a second language to identify students who face additional barriers in education. DfE, OfS, higher education providers, and other organisations should consider working with centres to align and identify measures that can be used by all stakeholders consistently at all levels of education to select students at risk of not reaching their potential.

Q: What is the anticipated legacy of HeppSY, and how has this been developed across phase two?

Participants commonly hoped that the HeppSY legacy would involve young people making well informed decisions about their futures and that higher education participation increases for those that have been involved in the programme. Centres stated they have already observed a change in aspirations; firstly, in the young people that had participated in the programme, and secondly, to a lesser extent, in the staff working in centres and what outcomes they expected for their students. While this would need further evaluative activity to establish the validity of these observations, many of the centre key contacts interviewed shared experiences of where the HeppSY programme had benefited an individual. HeppSY should endeavour to collect these case studies as they will help contextualise the quantitative measures of success. The centres also thought that part of the HeppSY legacy stemmed from the targeted investment that had helped raise the profile of higher education and careers in their organisations.

The evaluation participants were all committed to building a HeppSY legacy in the South Yorkshire region, especially HeppSY staff who were very focused on how they can support the legacy of the programme. Some of the evaluation participants suggested the impact of Covid-19 had brought legacy to the forefront of their thinking, especially as they created online resources in response to the social restrictions. It was felt that a hub of resources that was freely available for centre staff and young people could help extend the impact of the programme beyond HeppSY. However, the usefulness of such resources was debated as without the funding to keep them up to date and staff to drive engagement with them, they would quickly become irrelevant. However, a solution to this is to continue to deliver and increase the CPD offer to staff in the centres and to ensure that resources can be readily embedded into the practices of the centres. Some HeppSY colleagues thought that a strong CPD offer could help secure the long-term impact of the programme and part of this offer could include how to use and adapt HeppSY resources.

HeppSY can help secure its legacy by supporting the continued collaboration of partners and centres after the end of the programme. While the removal of capacity and resources may cause challenges for collaboration, the maintenance and development of these relationships will help the programme aims to be kept as a priority within the centres and the South Yorkshire region.

Q: What impact has Covid-19 had on the implementation of the HeppSY programme in phase two?

As outlined in the findings about Covid-19, HeppSY paused the implementation and delivery of the programme while its partners and the centres moved to the digital environment and established new ways of working. The move to a digital environment has brought new opportunities and challenges and, in some cases, has magnified existing barriers for the programme's implementation. Some HeppSY staff felt that working digitally allowed them to be more effective, attend more meetings at centres, and reach more young people in a shorter period because they do not have the same time or geographical restrictions. Others felt that digital delivery was less impactful and hindered the opportunity to interact with young people in a meaningful way. Some HeppSY staff, especially those new to the programme or to a particular centre found it hard to develop relationships and establish contact with staff in centres. A major concern was the ability to effectively communicate with centre staff, who always had multiple pressures on their time, which have increased significantly because of Covid-19.

As society returns to normal over the coming months, HeppSY needs to carefully consider how to adapt the programme offer again. There was a consensus amongst evaluation participants that the digital environment would play a greater role in the programme's delivery. However, there were diverse opinions about to what extent and in what ways the digital environment would be incorporated into the programme. While the digital environment offers many benefits and may make some kinds of delivery easier, it may not be the best option depending on what outcomes are being worked towards. HeppSY should consult with its partners and centres and perhaps more importantly young people about how best to incorporate the digital environment into the programme. If the digital space continues to be used, then HeppSY should also consider how it supports its staff and stakeholders to develop their skills and knowledge of online pedagogies, evaluation methods, and relationship building in a digital environment.

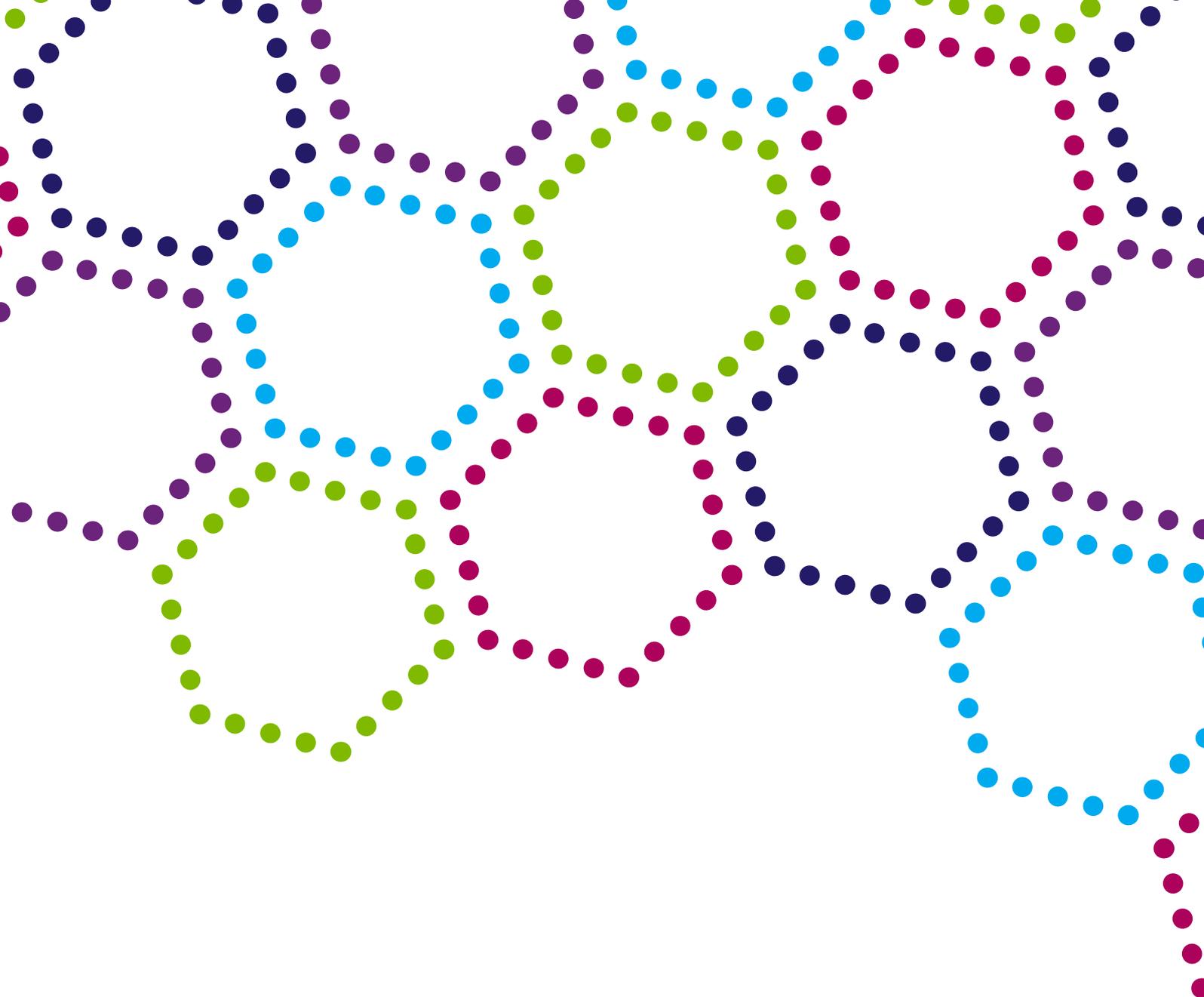
Recommendations

1. As **HeppSY** move into phase three, they should consider adopting the same approach to collaboration based on open communication and consultation as was established in the transition to phase two.
2. **HeppSY and partners** should consider how they can support their partners (SHU, TUoS and Hepp) to strengthen the identity in centres and develop structures that facilitate collaborative ways of working, to help ensure: capacity and resources to deliver outreach activities are maximised in the absence of HeppSY; higher education remains a priority in the centres; and processes such as data sharing agreements can be maintained.
3. **HeppSY's** continuing professional development offer to the centres should be maintained and expanded to help support the legacy of the programme.
4. **HeppSY** should maintain their approach to evaluation and monitoring, including providing opportunities for knowledge exchange and sharing practices; they should also explore how best to apply evaluation practices in a digital environment which support the creation of robust and valid insights, and gather case studies that demonstrate the impact of the programme.
5. **HeppSY** should consult with its partners and centres and, perhaps more importantly, young people, about how best to incorporate the digital environment into the programme. If the digital space is to be maintained then HeppSY should also consider how it supports its staff and stakeholders to develop their skills and knowledge of online pedagogies, evaluation methods and relationship building in a digital environment.
6. **The Department for Education, Office for Students, Higher Education providers**, and other organisations should consider working with centres to align and identify measures that can be used by all stakeholders consistently at all levels of education to select students at risk of not reaching their potential.
7. **The Office for Students** should ensure that any decisions made about the future funding of the Uni Connect Programme are made in a timely manner to help partnerships and centres plan for the delivery of activities in upcoming years.

Appendix

Table 1 - Breakdown of the interviews

Affiliations	Role	Type of Interview	Number of Participants
HeppSY	Director	Individual	1
	Programme Manager	Individual	1
	School and College Programme Manager	Group	4
	HeppSY Evaluation and Data Team	Group	2
	Higher Education Progression Advisor	Group	7
	HeppSY engagement assistant – Centre-based	Group	8
	HeppSY engagement assistant – Centrally-based	Group	4
Partner	University of Sheffield Outreach Team	Group	7
	Sheffield Hallam University Outreach Team	Group	6
	Hepp	Group	3
	Evaluation and Data contact at Sheffield Hallam University, University of Sheffield and Hepp	Group	3
Centres	Further Education College	Individual	1
	School no post-16 provision	Individual	1
	School no post-16 provision	Individual	1
	School no post-16 provision	Individual	1
	School with post-16 provision	Individual	1
	School with post-16 provision	Individual	1
	Academy Trust	Individual	1
	Academy Trust	Individual	1



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Student Engagement,
Evaluation and
Research

