

# Breaking barriers, making connections: teachers' views on the impact of Uni Connect in Staffordshire

## Executive Summary

### INTRODUCTION

In the generation of evidence, good evaluation involves triangulation, marshalling different methods and different perspectives to make conclusions more robust. Our predominantly quantitative findings secured from young learners are made much stronger when complemented by qualitative insight and insight from influencer stakeholders such as teachers.

Higher Horizons outreach practitioners systematically collect teacher feedback with most mid-high intensity activities. However, it tends to be completed in haste and is never the focus. There is the fear that insight is being missed that could help support, contextualise or even challenge the findings we secure with young people, and therefore missing a piece in the puzzle of 'what works' in university outreach.

### OBJECTIVE

In mid-January 2025 Higher Horizons invited Raniya Ettol, a master's student in Neuroscience at Keele University, to undertake a placement with the partnership's data and evaluation team; the qualitative research desired by the partnership could be secured at no extra cost while helping a student meet the modular requirements of her course. Bringing together an international postgraduate student, a placements and projects team, and an externally funded outreach programme, it also represented an innovative Uni Connect-HE provider collaboration, establishing connections hitherto unexplored.

### METHOD

With the help of the Evaluation Manager and the wider central management team, Raniya developed the rationale and questions for her investigation (Annex 1); it was agreed as Phase 3 draws to a close and Phase 4 opens for consultation that the piece be both reflective and exploratory, reviewing

effectiveness of activities past and gathering thoughts on how to improve them for the future.

Liaising with the outreach officers managing the accounts of their respective schools, Raniya secured interviews with four teachers from the following local education providers, all in the county of Staffordshire; de Ferrers Academy (Burton-upon-Trent), Stafford Manor High School (Stafford), Moorside (Staffordshire Moorlands), and Chase Terrace Academy (Burntwood, near Cannock). The interviews were conducted on Teams for a duration of 40-45 minutes, transcribed, and then thematically analysed.

## **OUTCOME**

Raniya identified a total of ten themes and nineteen sub-themes in the conversations conducted with the four teachers; too many to cover in an executive summary such as this, but cutting through these themes can be seen three fundamental points for consideration;

### **The nature of the impact**

The teachers were clear that the work of Higher Horizons was impactful and spoke of observations they could make of learners after Higher Horizons events and could cite specific examples of sustained success with one crediting entry into Oxbridge in some cases to it. They were keen also to stress not just the effect on aspiration and careers, but also in terms of social skills and confidence. Moreover, there was mention of the teachers themselves benefitting from the programme.

### **The quality of the interventions**

Specific praise was made of Higher Horizons packages and workshops such as the popular IAG mini-programmes and 'Bang for your Buck' finance sessions. The interviewees were keen to stress, however, the effectiveness of *interaction* in these interventions. This was seen as pivotal while who they interacted with also played a role; student ambassadors, mentors, practitioners, and among these it was noted were people often like the students themselves. Teachers saved the most praise for the *interactions with place*; campus visits were repeatedly identified as transformative experiences.

### **The potential for the future**

The participants stressed the continued importance of *interactive* interventions. There was room for skills enhancement, but with a focus on

employability and the raising of attainment-related skills such as numeracy and literacy, rather than provision preoccupied with curriculum itself.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Teacher feedback collected after an activity can sometimes not go further than complimenting the provision and teachers repeatedly do tell us that they like what they see. In this report teachers are enthusiastic about Higher Horizons and extol its contribution too.

This report, however, is not merely a collection of endorsements; it goes further than that, telling us whether our activities are impactful, but also which activities and how, and where to make that impact next. It is a report that endorses, but also informs and recommends; as such, it helps to provide an extra piece in the puzzle of 'what works' in university outreach.

**James Elliott**

May 2025

# Breaking barriers, making connections: teachers' views on the impact of Uni Connect in Staffordshire

## 1. Introduction

The aim of this qualitative research project was to explore the impact of the Higher Horizons programme on students, focusing on how it influences their aspirations, understanding of success, career pathways, and overall engagement with higher education. This report presents the findings from interviews with four school staff members who have worked closely with Higher Horizons, examining both the programme's successes and areas for improvement.

## 2. Research Objectives

The specific objectives of this research were to:

- **From Passive to Passionate:** Investigate how Higher Horizons has impacted student engagement and aspirations.
- **Redefining Success Stories:** Examine how the programme has contributed to the shifting definitions of success among students.
- **Pathways with Purpose:** Explore the support provided by Higher Horizons in career pathways and vocational routes.
- **Elevating the experiences:** Identify potential areas for improvement in the programme's delivery and effectiveness.

## 3. Methodology

This research utilized a qualitative approach, employing semi-structured interviews with four participants who are educators and school staff members who were lead contacts for Higher Horizons in their schools. The data collected was analyzed thematically to identify key themes and sub-themes

related to the programme's impact on students and areas for potential improvement.

## Overview of Participating Schools and Teacher Demographics

Participant number	School	Place	About
<b>Participant 1</b>	The De Ferrers Academy	Burton-upon Trent	<b>The de Ferrers Academy</b> is among the top 20 largest schools in England and largest school in Staffordshire, serving over 2,450 students across three campuses.
<b>Participant 2</b>	Stafford Manor	Stafford	<b>Stafford Manor High School</b> is a mixed secondary school and sixth form located in Stafford
<b>Participant 3</b>	Moorside High School	Werrington, Stoke-on-Trent	<b>Moorside High School</b> is an 11-16 school on the edge of the Staffordshire Moorlands and draws students from Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent.
<b>Participant 4</b>	Chase Terrace Academy	Burntwood Staffordshire	<b>Chase Terrace Academy</b> (formerly Chase Terrace Technology College and Chase Terrace High School before that) is

			a mixed secondary school and sixth form located in the Chase Terrace area of Burntwood in the English county of Staffordshire.
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## Summary of Themes and Sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
<b>1. Impact on Student Aspirations and Motivation</b>	<p>1.1 Raising Aspirations Toward Higher Education</p> <p>1.2 Motivation to Engage More in School Work</p>
<b>2. Exposure to New Experiences</b>	<p>2.1 Visits to Universities and New Environments</p> <p>2.2 Access to Career Information</p>
<b>3. Support for Disadvantaged Students</b>	<p>3.1 Reaching Underrepresented Groups</p> <p>3.2 Financial Awareness and Resources</p>
<b>4. Personal Development and Confidence</b>	<p>4.1 Building Student Confidence</p>

	4.2 Development of Soft Skills
<b>5. Programme Strengths: Delivery and Design</b>	5.1 High-Quality and Engaging Activities  5.2 Use of Relatable Role Models
<b>6. Challenges and Areas for Improvement</b>	6.1 Importance of Interactive and Engaging Learning  6.2 Supporting Future-Ready Skills
<b>7. Teacher Involvement and Impact</b>	7.1 Increased Teacher Awareness of Student Barriers  7.2 Professional Development
<b>8. Social and Emotional Benefits for Students</b>	8.1 Emotional Support Through Mentoring  8.2 Building a Sense of Belonging
<b>9. Inclusivity and Representation</b>	9.1 Diverse Representation Among Staff and Mentors
<b>10. Suggestions for Future Development</b>	10.1 Increase Interaction During Events  10.2 Bringing in More Student Ambassadors

## Thematic Analysis

Through the analysis of interview data, the following major themes and sub-themes were identified:

### 1. Impact on Student Aspirations and Motivation

#### 1.1 Raising Aspirations Toward Higher Education

Teachers reported a significant shift in students' perceptions of university as an attainable goal:

**Participant 1:** *"The university visits are very powerful. Some students had never even considered university until they visited.*

*Just experiencing the campus — touring the facilities, attending lectures — it really puts university on their radar."*

**Participant 2:** *"But I believe that the interest around their GCSE options has very much come from the work that Higher Horizons and myself have done with them. Their awareness is a lot more open — not just to the endpoint but actually the process of how to get there. So, with regard to, "OK, I've got to pick my GCSE options, then I'll do my GCSEs, then I'll probably go to college or sixth form, and then maybe university," — they are now showing awareness of the types of jobs they would need to go to university for."*

**Participant 4:** *"After attending these sessions, some students who had never considered university before are now looking into it. So, I'd say the initiative has really helped to break down barriers and raise aspirations."*

#### 1.2 Motivation to Engage More in School Work

The interventions encouraged improved academic focus:

**Participant 3:** *"After the trips and sessions, some students definitely became more focused on their schoolwork."*



## **2. Exposure to New Experiences**

### **2.1 Visits to Universities and New Environments**

Students gained first-hand exposure to higher education settings:

**Participant 4:** *"Some had never even been on a campus before – that was huge for them."*

**Participant 3:** *"Taking students off-site for visits has a huge impact. Many haven't heard much about these places — maybe they know where Staffordshire Uni is because they drive past it, but when we took them to Keele, they were amazed it was so close! Visits give them a sense of possibility they didn't have before."*

**Participant 1:** *"University trips also have a big impact. I often ask students before we go if they've considered university, and many say no. But once they're there, touring the campus and speaking to real students, their views start to change."*

### **2.2 Access to Career Information**

The programme broadened students' understanding of available career pathways:

**Participant 1:** *"They were amazed by how many different career options there actually are after studying."*

**Participant 2:** *"The work that Higher Horizons has done has opened their eyes to thinking, 'Oh, OK, I do need to start thinking about this,' and that is guiding their GCSE options too. Whereas in the past, they would have just picked subjects they liked — 'I'm going to do art because I like art.' Now they're trying to think, 'OK, I want to be a vet, so I probably need to pick science.'"*

**Participant 4:** *"There's also been a significant shift towards degree apprenticeships, and I've noticed much more interest from students and parents in this option. It's been a positive shift, and I've seen much more buy-in from both students and their families."*

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### 3. Support for Disadvantaged Students

#### 3.1 Reaching Underrepresented Groups

The programme was effective in targeting students who might otherwise miss higher education opportunities:

**Participant 3:** *"It gave those from less advantaged backgrounds a real chance to think seriously about university."*

#### 3.2 Financial Awareness and Resources

Awareness of funding opportunities reduced financial anxiety:

**Participant 1:** *"They now know about bursaries and grants, which made a big difference."*

**Participant 4:** *"We had a collapsed timetable day in November where they ran financial literacy sessions, such as a budgeting session called 'Bang For Your Buck.' The feedback from students was excellent. They were really engaged, and the learning was very effective. So, from what I've seen, I don't think there's much that could be improved in this area."*

**Participant 2:** *"That higher education session was really good; it went through the costs, student loans, and things like that. I think it opened their eyes a bit, making them realise, 'Oh, actually, I don't need to pay for university out of my own pocket; I can get a loan.'"*

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### 4. Personal Development and Confidence

#### 4.1 Building Student Confidence

Teachers observed growth in students' self-belief:

**Participant 1:** *"They started believing they could belong in a university environment."*

## 4.2 Development of Soft Skills

Communication, teamwork, and critical thinking skills were strengthened:

**Participant 4:** *"You could see them learning how to express themselves much better."*

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## 5. Programme Strengths: Delivery and Design

### 5.1 High-Quality and Engaging Activities

Participants praised the sessions for being lively and engaging:

**Participant 2:** *"The sessions were interactive and fun, not just someone lecturing at them."*

**Participant 3:** *"University staff visiting the school helps too — but **only** when they do something interactive, like taster sessions, not just talks.*

*When universities show students something new and exciting, that has a real impact."*

**Participant 1:** *"When they do the mini-programmes, they talk about different pathways and make it very clear that university is an option for everyone, from any background."*

### 5.2 Use of relatable Role Models

Relatable mentors had a strong impact:

**Participant 3:** *"Seeing people from similar backgrounds succeed really hit home for them."*

**Participant 1:** *"They also use mature student ambassadors sometimes, which students find relatable.*

*Their approach is very adaptable and informal — they make students feel comfortable about thinking about higher education."*

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## 6. Challenges and Areas for Improvement

### 6.1 : Importance of Interactive and Engaging Learning

Students responded much better to interactive, hands-on experiences than to lecture-style sessions.

**Participant 2:** *"Interactive workshops left lasting impressions; traditional lectures, not so much."*

**Participant 3:** *"Students need something tangible; otherwise, they switch off quickly."*

**Participant 4:** *"The forensics workshop was fantastic; students need to engage physically, not just sit and listen."*

### 6.2: Supporting Future-Ready Skills

**Participant 1:** *"I think with the new government focus on the skills gap, it would be good to introduce more employability skills."*

*Maybe when they talk about different courses, they could also talk about the skills you gain — both socially and academically — and what skills employers are looking for.*

*That could be woven into their lectures and talks."*

**Participant 2:** *"Supporting students to understand the importance of literacy and numeracy for success at high school, further education, higher education, and employability."*

*They hear "English" and "Maths" and just tune out — but Higher Horizons could show them why those skills really matter."*

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## 7. Teacher Involvement and Impact

### 7.1 Increased Teacher Awareness of Student Barriers

Teachers developed a deeper understanding of student needs:

**Participant 2:** *"It helped me see the hidden barriers some students face."*

## **7.2 Professional Development**

Staff benefited through learning new engagement techniques:

**Participant 3:** *"I learned new ways to motivate students even outside of Higher Horizons."*

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## **8. Social and Emotional Benefits for Students**

### **8.1 Emotional Support Through Mentoring**

Mentorship built trust and support:

**Participant 4:** *"It gave them a real sense that someone cared about their future."*

### **8.2 Building a Sense of Belonging**

Students increasingly identified with the idea of attending university:

**Participant 1:** *"They started feeling that university could be for them too."*

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## **9. Inclusivity and Representation**

### **9.1 Diverse Representation Among Staff and Mentors**

Representation helped students feel seen:

**Participant 2:** *"Having mentors who looked like them was really powerful."*

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## **10. Suggestions for Future Development**

### **10.1 Increase Interaction During Events**

Participants highlighted the importance of increasing interactivity:

**Participant 3:** *"The more hands-on it is, the more engaged they are. Students remember activities where they do something."*

## 10.2 Bringing in More Student Ambassadors

Having more university students involved was seen as highly beneficial:

**Participant 2:** *"Hearing directly from student ambassadors made it real for them. More of that would be brilliant."*

### Standout moments

**Participant 3:** *"Going back a bit further, we've had five or six students in the last five years move on to Oxbridge. They would have attended a Higher Horizons Oxford trip or a workshop."*

*We even had one student who eventually went abroad for university. Two girls, in particular, stand out: one had always planned to succeed academically and went on to Oxford, getting a first in History and English."*

**Participant 3:** *"For example, I share the story of a former female student who wanted to be a motor mechanic. She was a bit lively in school, to put it fairly! She's now in charge of the electronic department at JCB. I tell students, "Look, she left with four GCSEs, did mechanics, got a job, then another one, went back to evening classes, did a foundation degree, then a top-up degree, and now look where she is, without the burden of university fees."*

## Discussion

The findings from this study indicate that Higher Horizons has had a significant and positive impact on student engagement, aspirations, and understanding of success. The programme's efforts to raise awareness of alternative career pathways, particularly degree apprenticeships, have been particularly effective in challenging traditional academic routes. Furthermore, the shift in how students define success, from an emphasis on salary to a focus on happiness and employability, demonstrates the programme's success in fostering a more holistic view of success.

However, areas for improvement were also identified. Enhancing interactivity in workshops and increasing parental engagement present valuable opportunities to further strengthen the programme's delivery and impact. Additionally, the need for further teacher training on vocational pathways is a key area to address in order to ensure that career guidance is comprehensive and impartial.

### **Key words mentioned by teachers**



### **Insights from a Higher Horizons Practitioner**

The feedback from a Higher Horizons practitioner provided valuable insights into student engagement, programme effectiveness, and delivery challenges. Several important themes emerged from their experience:

#### **1. Student Engagement and Effective Sessions**

The practitioner highlighted that students are most engaged when sessions are interactive, relevant, and create space for open discussion. Tailoring the

content and making clear the purpose behind each activity enhances engagement:

*"Students engage well with activities that they feel relate to them... I always introduce the reason behind sessions and how it will apply to them."*

Some consistently impactful sessions mentioned include:

- The **Y7/8 Uni Facts mini programme**, which sparks lively discussion and curiosity.
- The **budgeting session**, described as "empowering" for students.
- The **Y9 mini programme**, which supports decision-making around GCSE choices.
- Introduction to university sessions, which are inclusive of apprenticeship pathways and help students understand different routes to higher education.

Experiential activities such as **campus tours**, **university challenges**, and **subject tasters** (like forensics, creative writing, and fine art) received excellent feedback when aligned with student interests.

## **2. Influence on Aspirations and Attitudes**

The practitioner shared compelling examples of how Higher Horizons sessions have shaped students' aspirations and understanding:

*"At the end of a recent session, two students asked me for more information. One didn't know creative writing was a degree option, and another was excited about engineering."*

Even students who initially appeared disengaged showed change:

*"A student who said they had no aspirations and didn't like school ended up asking for more information at the end of the session. They became more open to future possibilities."*



The programme provides a foundation of knowledge that helps students understand and question what they learn elsewhere, fostering independent thinking and curiosity.

### **3. Challenges in School Delivery**

While most school staff are supportive, the practitioner noted that **teacher involvement significantly impacts session success**. Positive collaboration leads to enriched discussions and better engagement. However, a lack of support from teachers can make sessions more difficult:

*"A poor supporting teacher can take the session into a negative space... Discussion is good, but when it's shut down, students disengage."*

Additional challenges include classroom interruptions, behavioural issues, and some staff holding limiting beliefs about their students' futures.

### **4. Tailoring to Student Needs**

The practitioner emphasized adapting sessions to suit diverse student groups, including nurture and SEN cohorts:

*"I take more time, answer more questions, and give examples that are relatable and supportive."*

They also tailor sessions based on school interests — for example, focusing on sports, creative arts, or vocational routes as needed.

### **5. Support and Suggestions for Improvement**

The practitioner feels well-supported by their team, with strong communication, shared best practices, and access to training and development:

*"I feel invested in... My line manager checks in, and I'm gaining confidence from experience and support."*

They suggested a few ways to enhance the programme further:

- **Increased funding** to provide more engaging materials and experiences.
- **Campus food vouchers or merchandise** to make visits more memorable.
- **Accommodation tours**, which are important to students thinking about living away from home.
- A **real-time chat feature** managed by a dedicated staff member to improve student communication and access to support.

## Conclusion

This report shows that the Higher Horizons programme has had a strong and positive impact on students' views about education and their future.

Teachers shared that one of the most important changes they noticed was a rise in student aspirations. Many students who had never thought about going to university before now see it as something they could achieve.

Another key theme was the benefit of visiting universities and seeing new environments. These trips helped students imagine themselves in higher education and made the idea of university feel more real and possible.

Finally, the programme has helped students and their families understand more about financial support for university, such as student loans and bursaries. This reduced some of the worry around costs and made higher education feel more accessible.

Overall, the programme is clearly making a difference in widening access to higher education. By continuing to build on what is working well, Higher Horizons can keep supporting even more young people to aim high and plan for their future.

**Raniya Ettol**  
May 2025

## ANNEX 1

### Interview questions

1. How do students define **success**, and how have their aspirations and future goals evolved after engaging with Higher Horizons?

Prompts

- How do your students typically **define success** in education, life, and in their career? Have you observed differences in the **types of aspirations** students have?
- Have you noticed any changes in how students think about their future opportunities after engaging with the Higher Horizons programme? Are there any **particular success stories** or standout moments you could share?
- Do students seem **more informed** about their educational choices and pathways after participating in the programme?

2. In what ways do family, cultural **expectations**, and financial concerns influence students' attitudes towards higher education and life choices?

- How do **financial concerns** influence students' attitudes towards their educational choices? Does the program effectively address financial literacy and student finance in a way that resonates with them, or are there areas where this support could be improved?
- Have you observed any students discouraged from higher education due to **family or cultural expectations**? What role do parents or guardians play in shaping students' views on higher education and careers?

3. What factors influence student **engagement** with higher education, and how does Higher Horizons support students who are initially disengaged?

- Have you **observed students** who were initially uninterested but later became more engaged with the idea of higher education? What seemed to influence this shift? To what extent are students **nudged into HE or converted to HE** by HH?
- What **key moments or activities** have had the biggest impact on students reconsidering their future options?
- What **additional support** or interventions could help move more students from passive interest to active participation?

4. What **challenges** prevent some students from fully engaging with or benefiting from the Higher Horizons program?

- What **challenges** do students face in applying what they learn from Higher Horizons to their own academic and career planning?
- Do students express any **skepticism or resistance** towards what the programme offers? Are there specific barriers (e.g., confidence, lack of role models, academic struggles) preventing some students from engaging?
- Have you noticed any students who have not engaged or benefited from the program? If so, are there **particular groups** of students who seem more disengaged, and what do you think are **the main reasons** for this? Are there any aspects of the program that might be less relevant or appealing to them, and how could Higher Horizons better reach and engage these students?

5. How effective is the Higher Horizons progression framework (Inform, Experience, Enable) and the range of **activities** they provide in supporting students' educational journeys?

***Inform (Providing Information on Universities, Applications, Careers, etc.)***

- Do students find the information provided by Higher Horizons **useful and relevant**?
- How well does the programme address **students' questions and concerns** about university and career options?
- Are there any **gaps** in the information being provided?

***Experience (Campus Visits, University Events, Work Experience, etc.)***

- What impact have **campus visits** and other experiential activities had on students' perceptions of higher education?
- How **accessible and inclusive** do you think these experiences are for all students?
- **What would students miss out on** if they just had the information and not the campus visits?

***Enable (Skills Training, Personal Development, Decision-Making Support)***

- Are there any **additional skills** or areas of personal development that would be beneficial for students?

- How well does the programme **prepare students** for making independent, informed decisions about their future?
- How do students generally **adjust to changes and setbacks** in their education, such as moving from school to college or adapting to new learning environments or getting low grades? - ask about challenges they face and how HH has helped with this.

6. How do the **relationships** between students, Higher Horizons officers, and teachers affect students' engagement and decision-making?

- What role do Higher Horizons officers play that differs from the role of teachers?
- Have students responded differently to advice or guidance from higher horizons officers compared to their teachers?
- How could Higher Horizons better support teachers in their efforts to guide students? What can teachers do to reinforce the messages and support that Higher Horizons provides?

7. What improvements or additional interventions could enhance the impact of higher horizons for learners?

- What additional opportunities or activities could make the programme more inclusive?
- How can Higher Horizons evolve to address the changing needs of students at different educational stages?