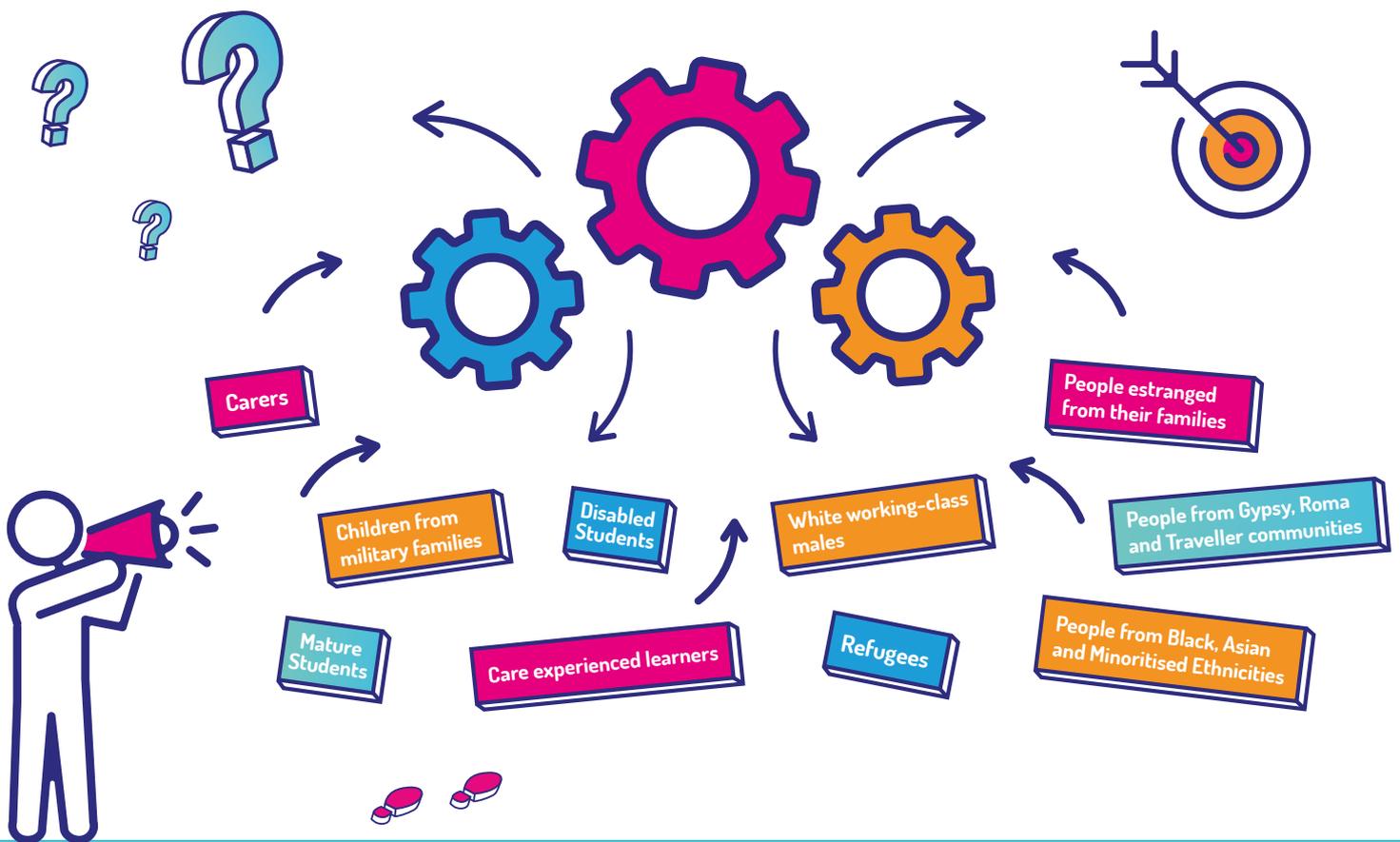




# Engaging learners from underrepresented groups

Guidance for practitioners



# Who is underrepresented in Higher Education (HE)?

It's well-understood that some groups of people are less likely to participate in higher education, and they're currently underrepresented in HE compared to the general population.

**Go Higher West Yorkshire (GHWY) aims to reduce inequalities in access to, success in and progression from HE, particularly for those from underrepresented groups.**

GHWY's Uni Connect project focuses on local areas where higher education participation is lower than might be expected given the GCSE results of the young people who live there. However, living within and beyond these geographic areas **are other groups of students which are also underrepresented in HE:**



**In 2021-22, Go Higher West Yorkshire worked with four different underrepresented groups (URGs) through the Uni Connect project:**

- Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners
- Disabled learners
- Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnic learners
- White, Working-Class Male learners

## Did you know...

- White males eligible for free school meals (FSM) had **lower HE participation rates than any other group** when analysed by sex, ethnicity and FSM status.<sup>1</sup>
- SEN learners are around **30% less likely** to enter higher education compared to non-SEN learners.<sup>2</sup>
- Research shows that in 2014, **just 3-4%** of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) population aged 18-30 years accessed higher education, compared with 43% of non-GRT 18-30-year-olds.<sup>3</sup>
- GHWY research shows that many Black, Asian and minoritised ethnicity students interviewed **have experienced overt and subtle racism from teachers and other students in education**, and this was not always dealt with appropriately.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>House of Commons Library, June 2021. Research briefing: 'Equality of access and outcomes in higher education in England'.

<sup>2</sup>House of Commons Library, February 2021. Research briefing: 'Support for disabled students in higher education in England'.

<sup>3</sup>Office for Students, June 2022. Topic briefing, 'Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities'.

<sup>4</sup>Go Higher West Yorkshire, September 2021. Research report, 'Understanding and Meeting the Needs of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Learners in West Yorkshire'.

# What does our terminology mean?

The language we use plays an important role in establishing an inclusive relationship between practitioners and learners. By considering the words you use carefully, you can demonstrate your understanding of different communities. Remember that your use of language is not more important than **speaking engagingly** with learners: being hyper-sensitive to the right and "wrong" language and depictions might get in the way of **building effective relationships** with your learners. If you're speaking to – or about – individuals from a specific underrepresented group which you're not a member of, it may be better to **use whatever language people prefer** to be used to describe themselves.

## "Disabled learners"

**are students who have a disability that affects their ability to study once they enter higher education, such as:**

- specific learning difficulty, for example dyslexia or ADHD
- mental health condition, for example anxiety or depression
- physical disability, for example if they use crutches, a wheelchair or a special keyboard
- sensory disability, for example a visual or hearing impairment
- long-term health condition, for example cancer, chronic heart disease or HIV

GHWY uses the social model of disability, which suggests that some people are disabled by an ableist society – hence 'disabled learners', not 'people with disabilities'. However, learners might have their own preference for language around disability and it's fine to use whatever terminology they prefer.

**TERMINOLOGY TIP:** Avoid medical labels. They say little about people as individuals and tend to reinforce stereotypes of disabled people as 'patients' or unwell.

## "White working-class males"

**defines learners by their ethnicity, sex and class.**

Definitions based on class are personal and very subjective: 'Working-class' can mean lots of things to students, e.g. their family history, cultural identity, their own socioeconomic status or that of their wider community. Measures of socioeconomic status such as education, income and occupation can be useful indicators:

- First in family to go to university
- Receipt of free school meals
- Receipt of pupil premium
- Live in areas where there is low progression to HE

We recommend using the above measures as well as a learner's self-identity to support this classification – if a learner views themselves as a white working-class male, it makes sense to treat them as such.

**TERMINOLOGY TIP:** Instead of speaking about gender, race or class, focus on what's most relevant to learners – this might be the area they come from, their family and community attitudes, and their experiences and perceptions of education.

## "Black, Asian & Minority Ethnicities"

**Students of non-White ethnicities who are minoritised in the UK are often collectively referred to using the acronym 'BAME' which stands for Black, Asian and Minority/Minoritised Ethnicities.**

The term 'BAME' has been increasingly criticised as it groups together diverse ethnicities, and implies that it refers to reflects a singular ethnic identity. However, it may be appropriate in some contexts to use broad categories, for example, when you are making statistical comparisons between White and the Black, Asian and minority ethnic populations.

**TERMINOLOGY TIP:** Where possible, say or write the phrase in full, as research has found many people do not understand the acronym or dislike its use. When using the acronym, use capitals and avoid writing 'Bame' or pronouncing it as a word.

**TERMINOLOGY TIP:** Terms such as 'BAME' should not be used as a replacement for directly addressing a specific ethnic group or individual. For example, avoid saying "He's a BAME student", where possible be specific and say "He's a Black student" or "She's an Asian teacher".

## The term "Gypsy Roma and Traveller"

refers to three ethnic groups, which are genetically distinct from each other but share in common a history of nomadism (although a large proportion of GRT people in the UK are now 'settled' – that is, they live either on permanent sites or in houses):

- Romany Gypsies
- European Roma
- Irish and Scottish Travellers

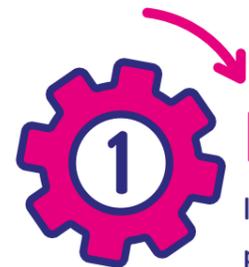
The acronym GTRSB, which is increasingly used in education, encompasses a wider range of individuals who may be defined in relation to their ethnicity, heritage, way of life or how they self-identify. It includes the above ethnic groups and also:

- Showmen – people with a heritage of fairground or circus professions
- Boaters – people living on barges or other boats
- New Age Travellers

**TERMINOLOGY TIP:** Remember to think about how your learners identify within these communities, in order to identify, understand and address their needs.



# How we engaged with underrepresented groups



## Delivering CPD/Training for practitioners

In order to support learners from underrepresented groups, it's very important for practitioners to understand the contexts, perspectives and experiences they bring to education.

GHWY hosted four continued professional development (CPD) sessions for practitioners, designed to enhance confidence and understanding when working with URG learners by raising awareness towards the barriers faced in education, workplace, home or social environments.

- The CPD sessions for supporting learners from Black, Asian and Minortised Ethnicities and White Working-Class Male learners were both based on commissioned research which provided insights into learners' lived experience of education within West Yorkshire, alongside recommendations for good practice in engaging with these learners.
- The CPD session for supporting Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners was co-delivered by Leeds Gypsy and Traveller Exchange (LeedsGATE), a grassroots organisation led by Gypsy and Traveller people in partnership with others in and across West Yorkshire.
- The CPD session for supporting Disabled learners involved contributions from Student Finance England about the Disabled Students Allowance, from Leeds Enterprise Partnership (LEP) about support available locally, and Digitally Active to cover a wide range of topics relevant to this URG.



You can find recordings of the GRT and Disabled Learners CPD sessions on GHWY's Basecamp. We don't have recordings for the sessions to support White Working-Class Male learners and learners from Black, Asian and Minortised Ethnicities, but please email [gohigherwestyorkshire@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:gohigherwestyorkshire@leeds.ac.uk) to register your interest in this topic. We run online repeats of our CPD sessions for groups or individuals on an on-demand basis.



## Co-designing activity with expertise from across our team

Evidence is a vital tool to design outreach and progression activities which are as impactful and effective as possible. While planning engagements to support our target URGs, we used a co-design process to make sure different types of evidence were considered including impact evaluation, academic research, sector knowledge, and learner voice.

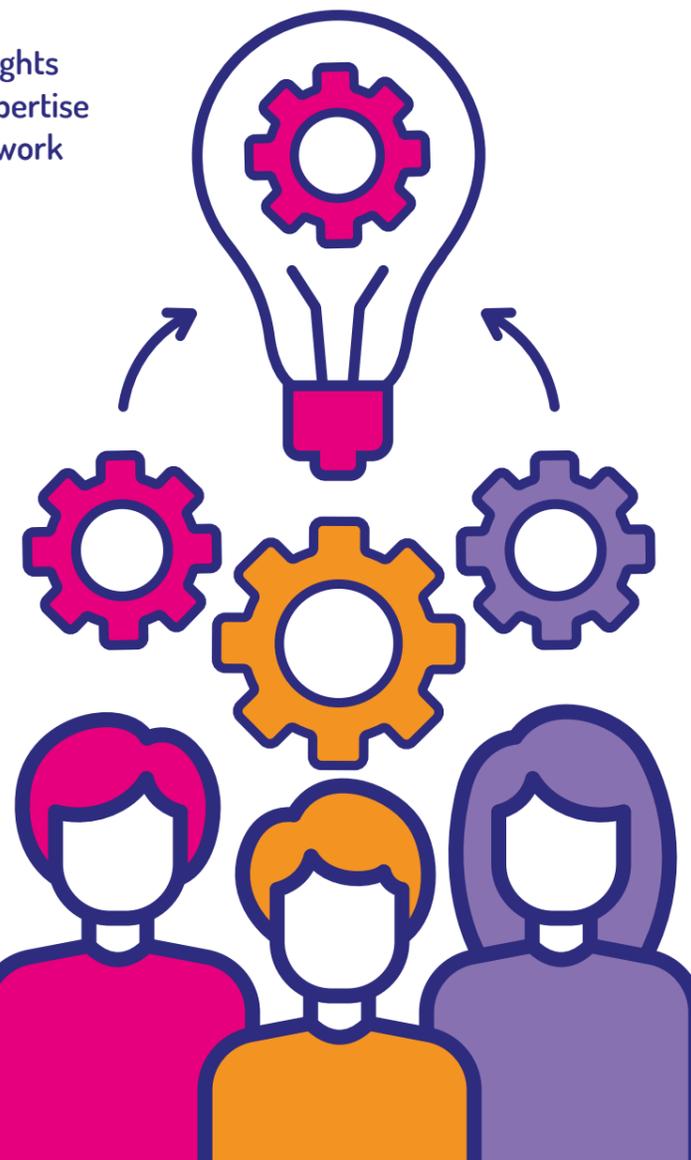
Decisions for each URG were made by team that included:

- a strategic lead from the GHWY oversight team
- a representative from our Data, Evaluation & Impact team
- HEP-based outreach officers
- school-based progression officers.

Each team member provided crucial insights from their own contexts and areas of expertise to ensure we created a co-design framework that led to:

- Articulation of clear intended outcomes
- Utilisation of existing evidence
- Development of learner voice
- Consideration of contextual factors
- Structured and logical activity design

Based on this structure, GHWY produced a range of activities and resources for each of our target underrepresented groups.





## Using learner insights to plan outreach activity for Afro-Caribbean and Black African learners

Our research revealed that many of the Black African and Afro-Caribbean learners interviewed had experiences of racism within education settings, and were anxious that this would be replicated within Higher Education.

We conducted a survey to understand the concerns of a group of Year 10 students, and to find out what outreach activities they would welcome to address challenges.

### Conversations included:

- Independence, living away from home and talking to parents about moving out
- Finance, budgeting and the cost of studying
- Making friends, maintaining relationships and living with others
- The impact of the pandemic and studying remotely

We proposed that learners conduct interviews with student ambassadors and create a podcast for other learners. The students were enthusiastic about the idea, and in June 2022 seven learners took part. Each student prepared questions and then recorded their conversations with Black student ambassadors from Leeds Beckett University, in Leeds City College's professional recording studio.

The podcast episodes have been published on our website and can be shared with learners.



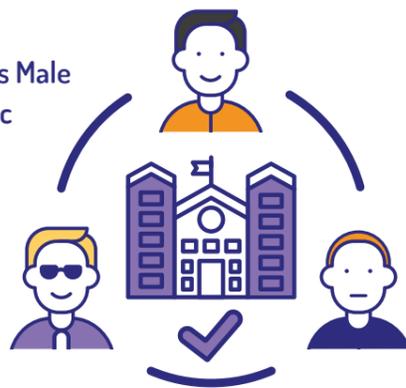
## Collaborative taster day for White Working-Class Males

Our research shows that many White Working-Class Male learners see the benefits of HE and have a pragmatic view of study, particularly in terms of its economic value. However, the learners who were interviewed expressed concerns over the cost and stress of studying.

Based on recommendations from the GHWY toolkit, in June 2022 GHWY hosted a collaborative taster day at Leeds Beckett University for Year 9 learners from five different schools within this cohort. Results from a pre-event survey showed that many learners felt that university or HE wasn't "for people like me".

The event was designed to reflect key learnings from the research and interviews with learners from this cohort. The day included plenty of hands-on, interactive learning; an emphasis on the financial return of studying higher-level qualifications; and content delivered by relatable and authentic role models from a similar background to the learners.

Following the event, there was over 20% positive change in students reporting feeling like university was "for people like me" - one of our key objectives for the taster day.



## Collaborative networks for supporting underrepresented groups

GHWY has led the development of several groups of stakeholders to support learners from underrepresented groups to access, succeed within and progress from higher education. From our Access, Participation and Strategy Group we have launched URG sub-groups focusing on supporting White Working-Class Males, Disabled Learners and learners from Black, Asian and Minoritised Ethnicities (including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups) - as well as a group for Care Experienced and Estranged Students.

Each sub-group has appropriate representation from HE providers in West Yorkshire, practitioners in schools and colleges, GHWY central team and other stakeholders.

Following a research report on how to support Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners, GHWY acted upon specific recommendations in our report, most notably through our development of a GRT network forum in collaboration with LeedsGATE. We are committed to continuing this progress for our GRT communities, HE partners and wider local area as our knowledge and experience in this area of work grows.

If you want to find out more or get involved in any of these networks, please email [gohigherwestyorkshire@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:gohigherwestyorkshire@leeds.ac.uk)



## Transition pack for Disabled learners

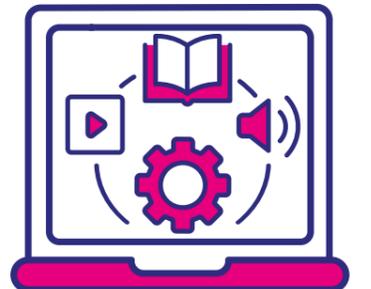
GHWY has collaborated with member HE providers to create an online resource for learners as they transition from statutory education to higher education.

The pack has been created following consultation with a focus group comprising students with different educational needs and physical and mental disabilities.

They shared with us the burden that 'masking' disability places on students, and made recommendations for content to be included in the pack, including:

- Signposting and mapping the entry to HE process
- the differences in support in schools and colleges vs university settings
- communication for parents and carers about transition to HE
- Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) and other support on offer
- employability and career guidance

The transition pack is available on the GHWY website and is suitable for learners in Year 12/13 and those transitioning to HE. This resource will also be available as a downloadable pdf from GHWY's website.





# What we learned



## Engagement with learners



### Disabled learners:

Findings from limited empirical research by GHWY agreed with existing literature: disabled learners find the transition to HE is made easier when faced with understanding staff who are willing to proactively make adjustments, an institution that understands their disability and the necessary adjustments but otherwise treats them like any other student, and when socialising is made accessible and easy.

**Students in our research had positive experiences of support services in HE, often commenting that it was better and/or more extensive than the support they had received at school.**



### Black, Asian & Minoritised Ethnicity learners:

Pre/post survey data demonstrated the significant impact of the podcast activity, with learning gains across all standardised statements measuring outreach activity objectives. There was a particularly large learning gain (46.15%) on the statement **I feel I would enjoy being a student**. Statements which related to the intended activity outcome of improving pupils' knowledge of FE and HE education and the options open to them after school also showed an especially strong learning gain.

While we can't say with confidence that these findings would be replicable with another group of learners, this is likely due to the extremely small sample size (9 respondents) rather than an issue with the activity itself.

**The podcast format provided a useful structure for in-depth conversations between learners and the student ambassadors** during both the planning day and the recording session. Such conversations – which encompassed experiences of college and university, revision tips, reflections on studying during the Covid-19 pandemic, living away from home, and being a Black student – would have been otherwise difficult to facilitate in a natural, comfortable way. For these conversations, ambassadors who closely reflected the learners' own experiences (in this instance, being from Black African backgrounds) were essential.

**The podcast format could be utilised in a number of different contexts and with different URGs.**

### White working-class boys:

Pre/post survey data demonstrated the significant impact of the collaborative taster day. Statements which related to the intended activity outcome of improving pupils' confidence that university is a place for 'people like them' showed an especially strong learning gain, and the largest learning gain (24.14%) was on the statement University/college is for people like me.

**Interactive and hands-on learning was most impactful for these learners.**

GHWY's findings from the survey were statistically significant. That means that we can say with a reasonable degree of confidence that these responses would be replicable with other cohorts who complete the same activity.

**For white boys from working class backgrounds, race is often the least important element of how they relate to others, with class and geography (represented by accent) being more important signifiers.** Therefore a range of role models were present on the collaborative taster day: while there was a focus on ensuring good numbers of white males from similar areas to the attendees, there were also ambassadors from different races, genders and places.

## Engagement with staff



**A significant element of the GHWY work in 2021/22 involved engagement with staff.**

Evaluation of the URG CPD offer showed it had a positive effect, with practitioners reporting that the CPD sessions were useful and had the potential to be impactful to their practice.

However, particularly for the disabled learners CPD and the GRT CPD attendees self-reported high levels of understanding prior to the CPD. This suggests that those attending training may be those who are already interested and knowledgeable in the specific URGs, rather than engaging practitioners who lack knowledge and would especially benefit from CPD.

The evaluation of the practitioner toolkit resources for BAME and WWCB learners suggested that many staff had not had time to utilise the toolkits within their work. GHWY will be exploring how to better support practitioners to access and utilise findings through training and other staff processes.

GHWY's regional multi-sector forum for supporting GRT learners – alongside associated work by GHWY such as a social media campaign for GRT History Month in June – is valued highly by local community organisations working with Gypsies and Travellers. Strong links between GHWY and LeedsGATE have been facilitated via the forum.





# TIPS for engaging with underrepresented groups

## Disabled learners

### Emphasise the range of support services available in HE

Students in our research felt that the support they'd received in HE was better and/or more suited to their needs than the support they had received at school/college. Ensuring that this is clearly communicated to disabled learners pre-entry could reduce anxiety and improve application rates.



## Black, Asian & Minoritised Ethnicities learners

### Role models who come from similar backgrounds are key

Learners – and particularly those from Black African, Black Caribbean, and Mixed Heritage backgrounds – are less likely than other ethnicities to encounter role models 'like them' in schools. Utilising student ambassadors from similar backgrounds as role models is therefore key.



## White Working-Class Boys

### Role models do not need to look 'like them' to be relatable but do need to sound 'like them'

Our learners encountered ambassadors from a range of demographics and, largely, class and geographical background (based on accent) were more important than race or gender. However, one role model was from a WWC background and had attended the same school as some learners, and that was particularly impactful. Consider inviting former pupils who have progressed on from your institution to work with and/or speak to this cohort.



## Gypsy, Roma and Traveller learners

### Outreach with Gypsy & Traveller community organisations is valued but must be sensitive to the specific needs of young people from these communities

Evaluation of the homework club run at LeedsGATE found that work with Gypsy and Traveller young people needs to take account of the following:

- Many learners have been out of formal education since primary school so attainment levels are often lower than would be expected for their age.
- Similarly, vocabulary around education and progression isn't well understood (for example, terms like 'vocational qualification' will need to be explained).
- Interactive, skills-based, hands-on activities are preferable to talk-based sessions.
- Linking outreach to economic and entrepreneurial goals as well as (or instead of) purely educational goals is most successful.





# GO HIGHER

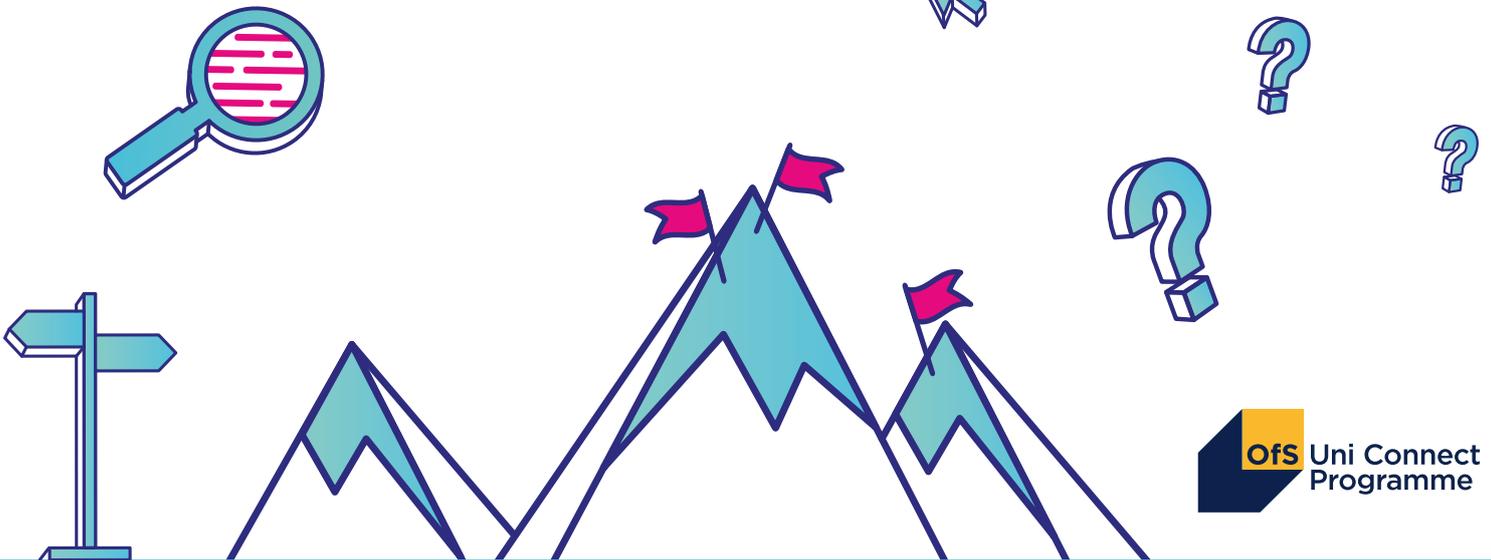
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