

Randomised control trial of the Contact and Engagement Service Final project report

Contents

1. Executive summary	4
1.1 Project team	4
1.2 Project description	4
1.2.1 Intervention being evaluated	4
1.2.2 Brief description of the Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE)	5
1.2.3 Key conclusions	5
2. Introduction	6
2.1 Background and rationale for intervention	6
2.2 Intervention aims and objectives	6
2.3 Detailed description of the intervention	6
2.4 Brief description of the evaluation and what this report covers.	7
3. Methods	8
3.1 Overview of planned Impact Evaluation design and methods.	8
3.2 Overview of IPE design and methods.	8
3.2.1 Specific research questions related to IPE	8
3.2.2 Research methods	9
3.2.3 Sample	9
3.2.4 Details of trial implementation	12
3.2.5 Analytical approach	13
3.2.6 Ethics	13
4. Findings	14
4.1 Summary of findings from the implementation and process evaluation	14
4.1.1 Delivery	14
4.1.2 Actions	15
4.1.3 Mattering	16
4.1.4 Motivation	19
4.2 Cost analysis	20
5. Discussion	20
5.1 Discussion of trial implementation	20
5.2 Evidence to support theory of change	21
5.3 Discussion of cost	22
5.4 Limitations of the research.	23
5.4.1 Student sample size	23
5.4.2 Non-engagement vs. low engagement	23
5.4.3 Traceability of support provision beyond CES	23
6 References	23

1. Appendix 1 Theory of Change	25
2. Appendix 2 Email Copy	26
3. Appendix 3 Interview and Focus Group Question Schedules	29
4. Appendix 4 Coding Framework	34

1. Executive summary

1.1 Project team

Table 1 Project team, roles and responsibilities

Organisation	Name	Role and responsibilities
NTU	Eleanor Turpin	Project lead (intervention / RCT delivery)
NTU	Emma Hynd	Project support and NTU final decision maker
NTU	George Cox	IPE author, qualitative research lead and intervention administration
NTU	Jonathan Hale	Intervention implementation lead
NTU	Mike Kerrigan	Project support and advice
NTU	Ed Foster	Project support and advice
TASO	Eliza Kozman	Project lead (commissioner)
TASO	Robert Summers	Project manager

1.2 Project description

1.2.1 Intervention being evaluated

Nottingham Trent University's (NTU's) previous work with learning analytics has shown a strong association between students with no engagement with academic related activities, for example attending classes or reading materials Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), and an increased risk of departing early. The Contact and Engagement Service (CES) is a telephony-based intervention for non-engaged students. An undergraduate student generates a no-engagement alert if they do not interact with any of the resources that contribute to the learning analytics system for 10 days (first year students) or 14 days (second and subsequent year students). The resources that the learning analytics system uses are VLE logins, access to VLE learning rooms, attendance monitoring, online submission, online library resource use, building access and library loans. Some courses are exempted from the alerting system, such as those with an off-site placement component. No-engagement alerts are cross-checked with academic tutors for contextual reasons why students should not be contacted. The CES Calling Team telephones the remaining students for a coaching-style conversation, helping students to identify their no-engagement and guiding them towards changed behaviours. The coaching conversation aims to give students the skills, confidence, and motivation to continue and thrive at NTU.

The intervention was first introduced in 2020 as part of a response to THE Covid-19 lockdown, and has been run in its current format since term 2 of 2021/22 academic year. This evaluation covers the period 10th October 2022 to 9th December 2022; in this time 3351 first time no-engagement alerts were generated that were within scope, leading to 2147 contact attempts (emails and calls) and 439 answered calls.

1.2.2 Brief description of the Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE)

NTU carried out 13 semi-structured interviews with students in both intervention groups to assess if the intervention achieved the intended outcomes and whether the underlying assumptions were correct. NTU also ran a semi-structured interview with an intervention coordinator, and a focus group with intervention implementers (callers), to establish whether the intervention was delivered as initially planned.

1.2.3 Key conclusions

The IPE findings can be categorised into four broad themes: delivery, actions, mattering and motivation.

Responses from the calling team show that the delivery of the intervention was carried out successfully with calls being implemented as planned. All implementers followed the principles of the training and scripting, which allow space for contextual decision-making and customizable approaches and collaborated both internally and externally to ensure best practice and continuity with the wider institutional support offer.

Students took a range of actions following the call, including consulting with personal and course tutors (and maintaining ongoing relationships with them), reversing their slides into no-engagement by increasing attendance, and contacting Student Support Services.

Equally important was a sense of mattering, as students repeatedly referred to institutional valuing, care, and concern. This mattering appeared to be precipitated by the authenticity and active listening of the callers, which was specific to the medium of the phone conversation.

Finally, the intervention acted as a motivating call-to-action, and empowered students to access support.

2. Introduction

2.1 Background and rationale for intervention

While a decline in student mental health and well-being was noted before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, COVID-19 has exacerbated the issue (Catling et al. 2022; Hall 2018; National Union of Students 2020). One survey has shown that students experiencing poor mental health and wellbeing desire someone to talk to more than any other form of support (National Union of Students 2020).

Accordingly, learning analytics provides an effective platform from which early alert systems for low engagement can be implemented (Foster & Siddle 2020; Jayaprakash et al. 2014). Once these low- and non-engaging students are identified via learning analytics, the CES can initiate contact to understand their engagement (or lack thereof) together. There is a strong correlation between student engagement ratings (as produced by the NTU Student Dashboard) and academic progression and attainment (Foster & Siddle 2020).

2.2 Intervention aims and objectives

We aim to coach low- and non-engaging students to develop self-efficacy, and to signpost these students to relevant support services if necessary. The coaching conversation intends to motivate and empower them leading to an increase in academic engagement, with a resulting increase in attainment and progression rates for these students.

Prior to the intervention starting, a Theory of Change was developed in collaboration with the project board accounting for all project stakeholders (see Appendix 1). The Theory of Change captured the situation and problem the intervention was intended to address, as well as the intervention's aims, outcomes, impact, activities, inputs, outputs, and the rationale and assumptions underpinning the intervention.

2.3 Detailed description of the intervention

NTU uses a learning analytics dashboard - StREAM - that tracks how engaged a student is with their learning by drawing data from the following institutional systems:

- Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) logins
- VLE learning room access
- Attendance monitoring
- Online submissions
- Online library resource use

- Building access
- Library loans

The dashboard generates ‘no-engagement’ alerts if a student does not interact with any of the institutional systems listed above during term time for 10 consecutive days for first year students and 14 consecutive days for subsequent years. Lack of engagement with these institutional systems is strongly associated with non-progression (Foster & Siddle 2020). In 2020, as part of the institution’s response to the first national COVID-19 lockdown, NTU used data from the dashboard to create a contact service.

‘No-engagement’ alerts are now sent to a team of callers who attempt to contact students with the aim of providing them with an initial coaching-style phone call.

All no-engagement alerts trigger an email to personal tutors informing them that one of their students has generated an alert. Students that generated a first or second no-engagement alert are added to contact list to receive an email informing them to expect a support call within 24-48 hours, with an option to opt-out. In addition to this, personal tutors could also opt their students out of receiving the intervention. This occurs in small numbers, and it is most likely in situations where the intervention was not relevant to the student, e.g. the student was on a study break. If a student triggers a third or subsequent alert, this information is sent to their school administration team to investigate and intervene.

2.4 Brief description of the evaluation and what this report covers.

In this evaluation, we assessed the impact of providing the calls to students the first time they generate a no-engagement alert by comparing two groups, Intervention 1 and Intervention 2, in a randomised control trial (RCT):

- In the Intervention 1 group, students received an email informing them to expect a support call within 24-48 hours, unless they opt-out (delivery by default).
- In the Intervention 2 group, students who generated a no-engagement alert received an email inviting them to request a phone call (voluntary delivery).

A step was added to the process that prepares the contact-list to identify a student as either Intervention 1 or Intervention 2. The outcome of the phone call attempts (e.g. spoken to student, left voice mail etc.) were recorded and shared with the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) for analysis.

The trial ran for teaching weeks 3 to 11 of term 1 of the 2022/23 academic year (10th October 2022 to 9th December 2022). Table 2 shows the number of students in each

intervention arm, totalling 3351 first time no-engagement alerts, 2147 contact attempts (emails and calls) and 471 answered calls within scope of the trial.

Table 2 Pre-filter alerts, post-filter alerts and successful calls

Intervention group	Pre-filter alerts	Post-filter alerts	Successful calls
Intervention 1	1654	1045	439
Intervention 2	1697	1162	32

This document reports findings from an implementation and process evaluation, run to collect and analyse qualitative data pertaining to students' experiences of the intervention. Alongside this student data, an interview and a focus group also took place with staff members who implemented the intervention, to understand their experiences of supporting students.

3. Methods

3.1 Overview of planned Impact Evaluation design and methods.

The trial protocol for the RCT can be found here:

<https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/YGTDX>

3.2 Overview of IPE design and methods.

3.2.1 Specific research questions related to IPE

With reference to the Theory of Change (Appendix I), the calling intervention is intended to produce the outcomes of increased student self-efficacy, raised motivation, raised empowerment, and an improved knowledge of university systems and available support services. The interview questions were developed to test if these were the outcomes identified by students themselves, and to gather feedback about the processes needed to produce these outcomes.

- What was the prior knowledge of alert generating-students of CES, engagement and the student dashboard?
- What was their experience of communication from CES apart from the phone call (covering emails, voices mail and missed calls)?
- Where applicable, what was their experience of the CES phone call?

- Where applicable, did the phone call lead to the outcomes described in the theory of change or to different outcomes?

3.2.2 *Research methods*

The research coordinator from NTU worked closely with colleagues to develop the semi-structured interview schedules for the four different student interview groups, as well as the schedules for the interview and focus group with NTU staff members (see Appendix 3). The question schedules were also shared with the relevant research ethics committee during the ethical approval process. To ensure consistency across the data, questions were standardised as much as possible while remaining conscious of the nuances in the different student groups' experiences. It was important to keep a distinction between the call intervention itself and the research interview, and so the researchers decided not to explicitly pursue questioning related to reasons for non-engagement. A directory was set up on the department's SharePoint site to act as a secure repository for data and other documents relating to the IPE.

Student interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams by the research coordinator and recorded for transcription purposes. While some participants chose to turn their camera on, others did not; this was not a necessity for the interview to take place. These interviews were to help us understand how effective the CES intervention was from the student perspective focusing on short-term outputs and medium-term outcomes. There was an emphasis on inclusion, openness, honesty, and privacy in discussing views and opinions.

The staff interview and focus group were facilitated by a colleague from a different team to ensure that participant responses were honest and unaffected by any working relationship with the questioner. These sessions were also conducted on Teams and recorded. The research coordinator used the generated Teams transcription as a basis for transcribing sessions in detail, anonymising all participants. These sessions were to help us understand how effectively the CES intervention was run from a process and delivery perspective.

3.2.3 *Sample*

The participants sought by the research team fell into one of four discrete groups:

1. Intervention 1 (successfully contacted): Students in the treatment group who generated a first alert on day 0, were sent a notification email on day 1, and were successfully called on day 2 (or later).
2. Intervention 1 (not successfully contacted): Students in the treatment group who generated a first alert on day 0, were sent a notification email on day 1, and were called on day 2 (or later) but who did not answer the phone.

3. Intervention 2 (call booked): Students in the control group who generated a first alert on day 0, were sent a booking email on day 1, and booked a call that they then took up on day 2 (or later).
4. Intervention 2 (no call booked): Students in the control group who generated a first alert on day 0, were sent a booking email on day 1, but who did not book a call. These students may have had a subsequent call based upon a second alert.

Participants' groupings were determined by the intervention based on their first alert. However, students may have had other experiences of the Contact and Engagement Service based upon their historic or subsequent alerts. Where this was disclosed in the research interviews, questions were asked regarding these interventions as well as the first-alert intervention attempt that led to their grouping.

As participants had a background of low engagement with the University, it was determined that the research team would offer a shopping voucher worth £40 to boost participation in the research project. Take-up was moderately successful, with student participant representatives from each of the four groups listed above. Table 3 shows the sample of student participants by grouping.

Table 3 Sample of student participants for the IPE by grouping

Participant Group	No. of participants
1. Intervention 1 (successful)	5
2. Intervention 1 (not successful)	4
3. Intervention 2 (booked)	3
4. Intervention 2 (not booked)	1*
Total IPE Student Sample	13

* This student was successfully called following a second alert later in the term.

The researchers also organised an interview with a member of the Contact and Engagement Service coordination team, to provide a perspective on the implementation of the intervention. Members of the calling team were invited to participate in a focus group to gather their insights and reflections on the implementation, and to give an alternative perspective to the coordinator. Both the interview and the focus group were carried out by a facilitator external to the team. Table 4 shows the sample of staff participants.

Table 4 Sample of staff participants for the IPE

Participant Group	No. of participants
5. Coordinator	1
6. Caller	5
Total IPE Staff Sample	6

3.2.4 Details of trial implementation

Adaptation

There may be times when required call volume exceeds the CES' capacity to make calls. Therefore, contingency plans are in place to adapt the CES from a two- to a one-call attempt service.

Fidelity

The CES intervention is implemented by a team of six callers, each with different backgrounds, contexts, relationships to higher education and experience. Each member of calling staff receives training and script prompts to ensure a consistent service.

Dose

The CES intervention is constituted by a single successfully administered call to a non-engaging student. This call can vary in duration according to the needs and availability of the student, but usually lasts between 5 and 30 minutes. We currently work to benchmarks, where all eligible alerts receive an attempted call with an expected 40% call success rate.

Reach

This intervention is targeted at those students that generate no-engagement alerts on the Student Engagement Dashboard.

Usual Practice

Usual practice is to identify at-risk students and send an email informing them they will receive a support call. An attempt is made to speak to all eligible students that generate a no-engagement alert within two calling attempts (i.e. if student does not answer the phone the first time that they are called, a second attempt to call them will be made the next day).

Alerts go through a filtering process before being uploaded to the calling list. This includes removing students not showing on the most recent enrolment list and those with missing contact details (the latter are emailed rather than telephoned when a number is missing). Students are also filtered out if they are likely to be away from the University as part of their course (e.g. reading week or placement), or if they have already received two or more dashboard alerts that term. Finally, students are removed

if they have opted out of the CES, or if their tutors have identified them as not requiring contact. The proportion of alerts that go through filtering are shown in Table 5.

Table 5 Pre-filter alerts, post-filter alerts and successful calls

Intervention group	Pre-filter alerts	Post-filter alerts
Intervention 1	1654	1045 (63%)
Intervention 2	1697	1162 (68%)

3.2.5 Analytical approach

Each interview was transcribed using the Microsoft Teams transcription as a basis, and then reread in detail with the audio/visual recording to check for errors and to become familiarised with the data. Data were encoded using NVivo and appropriate themes were generated by the research coordinator. The coordinator used an inductive approach, with themes emerging from the data during familiarisation. This familiarisation enabled the researcher to spot broad thematic patterns in the data, and points of interest that could be explored deeper in the coding process.

Next, a coding framework was created based on these observations (see Appendix 4). The framework contained both discrete themes and themes grouped together hierarchically. This framework was shared amongst the research team and discussed in detail, with suggestions made about why certain themes were recurring more than others while ensuring that these themes remained relevant to the research questions. After transcription, familiarisation, and theme confirmation, data was coded using the agreed-upon coding framework and then interpreted. The four themes generated were delivery, actions, mattering, and motivation.

3.2.6 Ethics

The submission 'Implementation and Process Evaluation (IPE) of calling intervention following learning analytics generated alert' received a favourable opinion from the NTU Schools of Art and Design, Arts and Humanities, and Architecture, Design and the Built Environment Research Ethics Committee on 20th January 2023 to conduct semi-structured interviews/focus groups with students, and for its data management plan.

The Impact Evaluation, with the title 'Evaluation of calling intervention following learning analytics generated alert' received a favourable opinion from the NTU Schools of Art and Design, Arts and Humanities, and Architecture, Design and the Built Environment

Research Ethics Committee on 5th October 2022 to conduct a randomised control trial to evaluate the calling intervention on the basis that all second alerts received a call to reduce the risk of harm to students.

4. Findings

4.1 Summary of findings from the implementation and process evaluation

The findings are captured under four key themes: delivery, actions, mattering, and motivation. The first, delivery, relates to whether the intervention was implemented as originally planned. The other three themes relate to student experiences and outcomes associated with the intervention as implemented.

4.1.1 Delivery

As the control group limited the number of students that needed to be called by the Contact and Engagement Service, no contingency plans were needed to be implemented to adapt from a two-call to a one-call offer.

Before the start of the evaluation in autumn term 2022, the implementers had six months of experience with carrying out the calling intervention. The callers were provided with a comprehensive suite of training, including coaching, safeguarding, well-being support, referrals, sexual violence disclosure, suicide awareness, the Student Union, shadowing, and campus familiarisation. Callers had conversation structures at their disposal, as well as a tiered hierarchy of needs that is used in risk assessment (see Appendix 4). While some training and scripting was strongly adhered to (e.g., dealing with sexual violence disclosure, or the script for a voicemail), implementers acknowledged that the context of each call requires a customised approach:

Part of the training is to listen to your own intuition, or what we might call read the room. (Staff, Group 5)

A customizable approach was key when call length varies as much as it does. The calling team reported that calls typically last between 2 and 50 minutes. Shorter calls could be more transactional, as students were aware of what they required from the caller and once information was exchanged there was no further need for discussion. Booked calls might fall into this category:

It's almost as if they [the students] had a list of things that they wanted to discuss with us prior to the booked call. (Staff, Group 6)

Students who were initially withdrawn often became more talkative as callers teased out the reasons for a lack of engagement, leading to longer calls:

Ask the question, “is there anything else?” And leave a pause, embrace the pause. Don’t be afraid of that pause, and then you’ll find that the student starts to really open up and be honest with their situation. (Staff, Group 5)

Communication between the implementers was also key. The team were an informal community of practice sharing advice, tips and resources via their shared digital workspace. As an extension of this, callers required opportunities to reflect on their work on a regular basis.

Beyond collaboration within the team itself, implementers emphasised the importance of collaboration with a wider support network, in particular with personal tutors:

It’s raising awareness for students with the dashboard, it’s raising awareness for tutors and then once that awareness is there, those tutors and students are looking for opportunities to change, to re-engage, to engage with that student. (Staff, Group 5)

It’s good for us and it’s good for the student that the tutor is aware of the situation. (Staff, Group 6)

4.1.2 Actions

The actions that students took because of the call often included a discussion with their course or personal tutor:

I did email my personal tutor and that’s been really helpful because she’s been really, really great and really understanding. So that’s been great because she’s given me lots of advice. (Student, Group 3)

After this initial contact, some students continued to use their tutors as an ongoing source of advice and guidance:

I got in touch with my course tutor, and we were able to set up some one-to-ones. I was in more regular contact with him because we’d already discussed it. So, I just made sure that happened and from there I was able to start finding resolutions to my outside issue through the uni. (Student, Group 3)

While students sought solutions to what was causing their non-engagement, students also took measures to address the non-engagement itself:

I chose to make more of an effort to go to my lectures. (Student, Group 1)

I engaged a bit more with the course after it, because from now on I was able to engage the course leader. So, I was doing a lot more looking at the course.
(Student, Group 3)

Students also accessed wider university support, from teams such as Student Support Services (including Disability Services). This was either mediated through their newly restored tutor relationship, or via signposting from the call itself:

My personal tutor then took over and helped with the pastoral support that I needed, and [Notices of Extenuating Circumstances] and stuff like that. (Student, Group 3)

After the call, I actually got into contact with the disability team, which was via a link I was sent with regards to help going back to university. And I also looked at a mental health and wellbeing link, I did read through that. (Student, Group 4)

4.1.3 Mattering

While it was assumed that students would experience an increased sense of belonging after the call, the participant interviews revealed that the phone conversations often fostered a sense of mattering. Mattering and belonging are closely aligned, and in the case of one student, a sense of the former led to a sense of the latter:

I feel like I'm definitely part of the uni, the way the uni were very keen to help, and how quick they were to help. (Student, Group 3)

While a sense of belonging pertains to a student's self-identified fit at the institution, a sense of mattering more precisely describes a student's belief that the institution values them individually as a member of the community. Students repeatedly referred to institutional valuing, care, and concern when the issues underpinning their non-engagement were discussed:

It shows that they care about how I'm feeling. (Student, Group 1)

They were very concerned for your welfare. (Student, Group 3)

When you know that you belong to an organisation or a setting that can actually be of support to you, it's something that definitely helps a lot. (Student, Group 4)

Some students juxtaposed the reality of the telephone conversation—sympathetic and personal—with an idea of universities as uncaring and massive institutions:

If they didn't really care that I was attending or that I was at the university, then they wouldn't go out of the way to call me and just check up on the engagement. I'd say I felt more belonging. (Student, Group 1)

It has definitely made me feel cared about as an individual, instead of just a number, because it shows that even though there's thousands of students, my engagement is still viewed and acknowledged and seen when it's decreasing. It made me feel cared about. (Student, Group 1)

I suppose it has reinforced the fact that I'm valued, I'm not just going to fall through the cracks and vanish off the face of my course. It definitely makes me feel more valued, and that I still matter. Even if I'm not going in all the time, they still care. (Student, Group 3)

They were more stressed about what's causing the engagement, which made me feel like they're not doing this to boost numbers. They're doing this because they actually care about why it's happening. (Student, Group 4)

Integral to this sense of mattering was the specificity of the intervention as a telephone call, rather than another communication method:

There's some fear attached to having a face-to-face conversation. But when it's a faceless conversation over the phone, there's something that releases the student's fear. (Staff, Group 5)

According to some students, the synchronous communication allowed for more rapport to be built up between caller and those called:

I could tell she really meant it from the tone and emotion to her voice, and that's a nice thing to hear that they care and makes you feel like you're not alone. (Student, Group 4)

An important aspect of this rapport was a sense of authenticity from the caller. Students felt that callers were genuine in their care and desire to help, which emphasised a sense of mattering:

It just felt like they genuinely wanted to know about me and what was going on. (Student, Group 1)

I think it is just a matter of people being there, just genuinely being there. (Student, Group 1)

It's almost like you can hear that they care and genuinely want to help. (Student, Group 4)

Active listening was a technique deliberately employed by the intervention implementers to encourage a sense of mattering:

Although we're not really a counselling service, there are better listening skills and better communication, I think, between ourselves and the students. Just letting them know that we're there for them, that they're not a number, I think that's really important it came across. (Staff, Group 6)

The success of this approach was confirmed in the students' comments. While the call offered a platform for staff to signpost students to support services and resources, students also value the opportunity to reflect and disclose their situations to a confidant:

Someone listened to me and helped me out and made me feel a bit more easy about my situation. (Student, Group 1)

I was really uplifted after the call because I was able to share things. (Student, Group 3)

An important part of this active listening was callers' non-judgemental approach to student disclosures:

Knowing that I'm not in trouble like you would be if you were at school, knowing that I'm not villainized for that and being supported, has probably been the highlight of the year so far. (Student, Group 3)

I just remember her being really lovely and non-judgemental, which was nice. (Student, Group 3)

Students also appreciated callers validating their concerns as proportionate and real, which in turn fed into a sense of mattering:

I feel like my issue and my feelings have been validated and taken seriously. (Student, Group 3)

Having a caller actively listen to their issues was especially valuable for those students who had historically not been forthcoming when speaking about their situations for either personal or cultural reasons:

With the kind of culture I have or the way I was brought up, some of your personal issues you don't share with a third party apart from a family member.
(Student, Group 3)

Students who did not respond to the attempted contact cited this as a reason for not responding:

Usually, I don't speak about things. I prefer people reaching out to me, then I'll speak about it, but I wouldn't normally reach out and be like "this is going on," then explain myself. (Student, Group 2)

4.1.4 Motivation

Students reported that the revelation of the extent of their non-engagement was a motivating call-to-action:

I needed that kick up the arse. (Student, Group 1)

It was a little bit of a push, to show me my engagement was low. (Student, Group 1)

It opened my eyes a little bit and showed me how low my engagement had got.
(Student, Group 1)

It made me want to improve on my engagement. (Student, Group 1)

Another student, who said their non-engagement was a result of a course transfer, nevertheless remarked that in different circumstances:

Getting that call would have really kicked me back into going into class. (Student, Group 1)

Motivation was intrinsically tied to signposting. Many students felt the act of being told where support was available—even if they were already cognizant of this—was a motivating factor in subsequently accessing that support:

I was pointed in the right direction and pushed along rather than held back.
(Student, Group 3)

Being put on that right path, and you have a direction now you're going in, it's like starting your engine up when you just put the key in. (Student, Group 3)

I needed that push. (Student, Group 3)

I feel free, I feel strong, I feel motivated. (Student, Group 3)

Some students were confident they already had the resources to improve their non-engagement, yet they identified the call as a source of empowerment to bring this about:

I felt more motivated because I could now see the links and the resources that I have always had access to, and I wasn't making use of them, so I just felt motivated enough to start accessing all those resources. (Student, Group 3)

This was particularly true of those students who felt that the earlier email notification, rather than the call itself, was enough of an impetus to change their behaviour (see Appendix 2):

Internally I knew how to deal with it anyway. It was just a wake-up call to get back into action. (Student, Group 2)

The email is the wake-up call. (Student, Group 2)

4.2 Cost analysis

It is not feasible to establish the financial cost of the interventions as this trial was delivered as part of a wider network of support available for students that generate no-engagement alerts across term 1, and a time and motion study to assess the cost of the individual tasks associated with the interventions is outside of the scope of this work. The cost difference between Intervention 1 and Intervention 2 was negligible as the same resource was needed to deliver both arms of the trial.

5. Discussion

5.1 Discussion of trial implementation

As shown in the Impact Evaluation, the call success rate for those students who received Intervention 1 was 41%, while the success rate for those students on Intervention 2 was 62% when a call was booked, and 3% across the whole intervention group.

The CES's benchmarks for business-as-usual call success—based upon previous calling history—is to contact all eligible alert-generating students, with a subsequent call success rate of 40%. As such, those receiving Intervention 1 surpassed that benchmark. While 62% of booked students in the Intervention 2 group had successful calls (ostensibly above the benchmark), the proportion of Intervention 2 students that booked calls is very low, at 4% of the total number. This leads to a 3% call success rate

across the whole intervention group. The low success rate would suggest that allowing students to register their interest in having a call intervention does not increase call success due to the high proportion of students who do not register.

5.2 Evidence to support theory of change

The Theory of Change posited four desired outputs for the Contact and Engagement Service: student self-efficacy, raised motivation, raised empowerment, and an improved knowledge of university systems and available support services. From the findings of the IPE, we have seen that students have become more motivated as a result of the call intervention and have a greater sense of empowerment to change their behaviour. We have also seen students report that they have a better knowledge of available support, although it is also worth noting that students may already be aware of available support but lack the confidence to access it. More research can be carried out to assess potential increases in self-efficacy.

The Theory of Change conceived four outcomes of the Contact and Engagement Service: an increased sense of belonging, being a more socially active member of the campus community, more frequently accessing support, and increasing academic engagement. The findings from the IPE provide evidence for two of the outcomes projected in the Theory of Change, while suggesting that one may require slight amendment and another further research.

The first outcome listed on the Theory of Change was an increased sense of belonging. The findings showed, however, that it was in fact an increased sense of mattering that students felt after the call intervention. Students appreciated a telephone conversation with a member of staff that had genuine concern for their issues, which translated for them into a wider institutional sense of valuing student welfare on a personal level.

Although students had an opportunity to reflect on their peer relationships when asked about belonging, very few students had any response. Most framed the call as a stimulant to staff-student relationships rather than student-student relationships. More research could be undertaken to reveal the effects the call might have on peer networks, social activity and participation in the campus community.

The third outcome is an increased frequency of access to student support. Not only did students take the call as a cue to initiate contact with a support network (either via their tutors or other support services), but this relationship was also often maintained to provide an ongoing source of support when needed.

Finally, it was suggested in the Theory of Change that the final outcome of the intervention is increased academic engagement. There was evidence in the IPE

findings that some students did make concerted attempts to re-engage with studies or increase attendance.

5.3 Discussion of cost

The statistical analysis did not show a clear and unambiguous improvement in outcomes amongst Intervention 1 students. Therefore, the cost benefit cannot yet be simply one of improving student retention. However, the context is important. The HE sector is facing significant resource challenges. Funding per student has fallen by over a third since the introduction of higher fees in 2012 and the value of the maintenance grant to students has not kept pace with inflation. Students are facing further challenges due to the nature of short-term crises (including COVID-19 and cost of living) and longer-term trends (including mental health and questions about the competitive advantage associated with attaining a degree).

Arguably, the sector has an outmoded model of support for students. Students are still expected to be largely self-motivated customers (or 'partners' depending on one's preferences), supported by a combination of state funding, parental support and occasionally part-time jobs and hardship loans. In theory most students developed a good working relationship with their tutor who would then deal with the rare cases when problems occurred. Many personal tutors are outstanding, but the large number of students and nature of learning mean that there are significant challenges offering that model. Often the personal tutor model has become a Cinderella service with unrealistic expectations placed on staff and little reward for doing the role well. One issue for researchers, institutions, and the sector, is that there are no good baseline studies demonstrating the impact of personal tutoring systems. Yes, every personal tutor will be able to provide anecdotal evidence of re-engaging students, but providing systematic evidence of impact is far harder.

The Contact and Engagement Service is a rational attempt to respond to increasing numbers of students and stretched resources. The CES team play a key role in attendance policies (delegated to academic schools) and take much work off the relatively expensive personal tutors. The team represents extremely good value for money and opportunities to work in a far more systematic manner than is the case in many other institutions. The team also has the potential to develop specialist skills in coaching that it's arguably impossible for individual tutors to achieve.

At the end of the study, the findings show similar results to prior work (OfLA, 2020): the processes worked, and students were satisfied with the service. However, more work is needed on finding ways to not only make students contacted feel valued and supported, but to also understand whether or not it is possible to make a significant difference in

student outcomes. To this end, the team will work on testing the impact of earlier alerting or other modifications to timings, communication media and approach. It may be that post-problem/remedial interventions will never work, but there is far more work to be done before we are anywhere near such a conclusion.

5.4 Limitations of the research.

5.4.1 Student sample size

The sample size for the student interviews was small, due to the usual limitations of time and resources associated with one-to-one interviews. There was also a risk of self-selection bias, as those students engaged enough with the University to participate in interviews may also be more likely to have re-engaged with their studies compared to those who did not volunteer.

5.4.2 Non-engagement vs. low engagement

Students generate a no-engagement alert if they do not interact with any of the resources that contribute to the learning analytics system for 10 days (first year students) or 14 days (second and subsequent year students). A likely direction for further work is to generate alerts sooner within shorter timescales or triggering against low engagement rather than no-engagement.

5.4.3 Traceability of support provision beyond CES

It is difficult to account for the support accessed by a student before and after the CES intervention. As previously described in the findings, students may have complex relationships with Student Support Services or their personal tutors prior to CES involvement. Moreover, there is a lack of data available for the take-up rates for referrals to Student Support Services during the call or for students' ongoing relationships with Student Support Services, as well as their meetings and correspondence with personal tutors.

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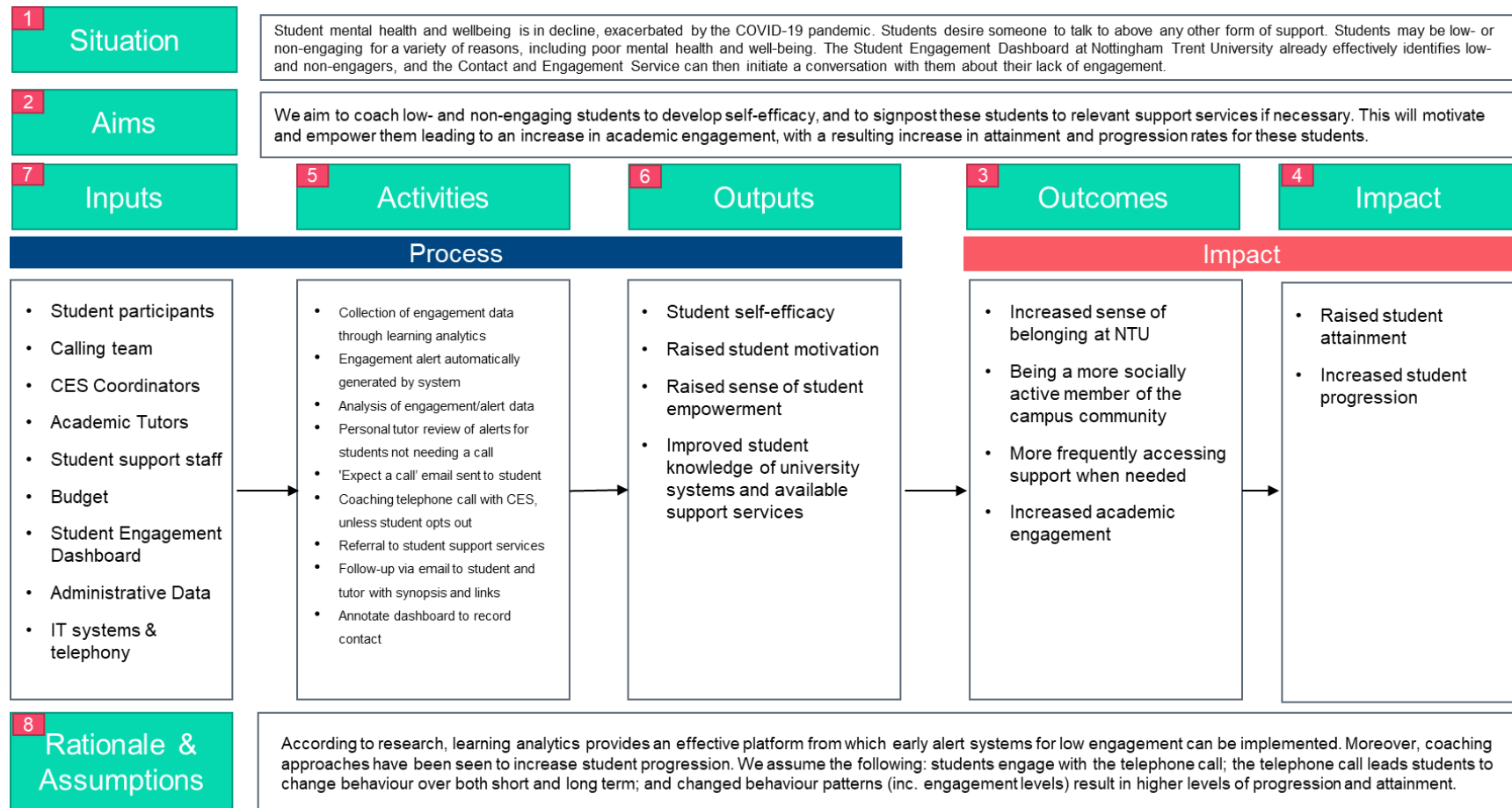
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1. Appendix 1 Theory of Change



2. Appendix 2 Email Copy

First email to Intervention 1 students

Hi,

This message is part of a package of support offered to NTU students.

One of my team will follow up with a call early next week.

The purpose of the call is to check how you are doing and to help you with your studies by letting you know about university support. We work in a central team; Centre for Student and Community Engagement (CenSCE) and we are contacting students across the University.

You don't need to do anything to prepare, it's an opportunity to talk and discuss how you are finding the year so far, your course, and to see if there is anything we can do to support you.

If you don't want us to call at all, please reply to let us know or leave a voice-mail at 0115 848 4080.

If you prefer, we can continue to discuss support by email.

We look forward to speaking to you.

Kind regards,

Student Contact and Engagement Team

The Centre for Student and Community Engagement

Nottingham Trent University

First email to Intervention 2 students

Hi,

I hope you're well.

This message is part of the package of support offered to NTU students.

The purpose of the call is to check how you are doing and to help you with your studies by letting you know about university support. We work in a central team; Centre for Student and Community Engagement (CenSCE) and we are contacting students across the University.

If you'd like to receive a call in the next few working days, please [register your interest](#).

Unless you register, you will not receive a call.

You don't need to do anything to prepare, it's an opportunity to talk and discuss how you are finding the year, your course, and to see if there is anything we can do to support you.

If you prefer, we can continue to discuss support by email.

I look forward to speaking to you.

Student Contact and Engagement Team

Follow up email to Intervention 1 & 2 students with a successful call

Hi,

This email is a follow up from our call today. Thanks very much for your time, I hope you found it useful.

We talked about the following actions:

Contact your personal tutor: [add email]

Fill out a Student Support Request form [school specific advisor]

Fill out a health and wellbeing support request form [SSS support]

Contact the Students' Union for information and advice

Contact the Library to book an appointment

Add any additional items/delete above as necessary

As agreed, I have emailed your personal tutor and updated your Dashboard to reflect our call.

Below are some further links to information you might find useful:

MyNTU Student Hub – a wide range of advice for students

Your Student Dashboard | Nottingham Trent University – advice about how the Dashboard works

Skills for success | Nottingham Trent University - information and advice on study skills

Self-care toolkit - information on self-care and coping with overwhelm

Healthy NTU – Helping you to be happy and healthy while studying at NTU

A blog written by NTU students sharing their tips, advice and experiences of university.

I would encourage you to keep in contact with your personal tutor, and if there is any support you need, they are usually a good first point of contact.

Best wishes,

[First name]

Student Contact and Engagement Team

Follow up email to Intervention 1 students with 2 unsuccessful call attempts

Hi [Student name],

A member of our team tried to call you today but didn't manage to speak to you.

The call was to see how you are doing and to check that you know about the support available to you at the University.

The following links to information may be useful:

- MyNTU Student Hub – wide range of advice for students
- Your Student Dashboard | Nottingham Trent University – advice about how the Dashboard works
- Skills for success | Nottingham Trent University - information and advice on study skills
- Self-care toolkit - information on self-care and coping with overwhelm
- Healthy NTU – Helping you to be happy and healthy while studying at NTU blog written by current students and alumni sharing their tips, advice, and experiences of university
- How I was able to open up to people about my mental health at university – Healthy NTU

We have updated your Dashboard and let your tutor know that we haven't been able to reach you.

We would encourage you to keep in contact with your personal tutor, and if there is any support you need, they are usually a good first point of contact.

Your tutor's name and contact details can be found on your Dashboard Profile page, failing this, you can contact your course leader.

Kind regards,

Student Contact and Engagement Team

The Centre for Student and Community Engagement

Follow up email to Intervention 2 students with no booking after 2 days

Hi,

I hope you're well.

Recently we emailed you with the opportunity to book onto a support call from the Contact and Engagement Team.

The call was to see how you are doing and to check that you know about the support available to you at the University.

The following links to information may be useful:

- [MyNTU Student Hub](#) – wide range of advice for students
- [Your Student Dashboard | Nottingham Trent University](#) – advice about how the Dashboard works
- [Skills for success | Nottingham Trent University](#) - information and advice on study skills
- [Self-care toolkit](#) - information on self-care and coping with overwhelm
- [Healthy NTU – Helping you to be happy and healthy while studying at NTU](#) blog written by current students and alumni sharing their tips, advice, and experiences of university

We have let your tutor know that we haven't been able to speak to you.

We would encourage you to keep in contact with your personal tutor, and if there is any support you need, they are usually a good first point of contact.

Your tutor's name and contact details can be found on your Dashboard Profile page, failing this, you can contact your course leader.

Kind regards,

The Student Contact and Engagement Team

The Centre for Student and Community Engagement

3. Appendix 3 Interview and Focus Group Question Schedules

Interview Schedule for IPE – 01 Intervention 1 Student

- *Before starting the interview, interviewer to introduce themselves, briefly explain the project and why we're interested in talking to them about the Calling and Engagement Service (e.g. investigating the effects and reach of the call).*
- *Make clear the expectations of the interaction – offer to send an email after the interview with links to support.*
- *Run through the consent form, allow time for them to read the background information sheet.*
- *Ensure interviewees understand that they can withdraw from the research, and that they know the process for this. They can withdraw at any point up to 24th February 2023; their data will be removed from analysis and deleted.*
- *Explain that the interview will be recorded but that they can ask for the recorder to be switched off at any time. The recording will be used for transcription purposes and will be deleted when no longer needed (within 6 months).*

Interview should last around 30-45 minutes.

START RECORDING.

1. Tell me about your academic year so far. *[General discussion to begin, then specify]*
 - a. What has gone well?
 - b. What have been the biggest challenges?
2. What do you consider to be good engagement with your course at university?
3. Did you have any knowledge or experience of the student engagement dashboard prior to being contacted?
 - a. If yes, what knowledge and from where?
 - b. *Prompt:* dashboard page on NTU website
4. Did you have any knowledge or experience of the CES prior to being contacted?
 - a. If yes, what knowledge and from where?
5. Did you see the email from the CES notifying you about the call?
 - a. If yes, did it make you more likely to pick up?
 - b. Is there anything you would want in this initial email?
6. How did you feel being contacted by a central service rather than by the course or a tutor?
7. How did you find the call?
 - a. *Prompt:* describe experience
8. What did you do because of the call, and why?
 - a. *Prompt:* increased engagement (how?), followed referral, took advice
9. How did you feel after the call?
 - a. *Prompt:* motivation; empowerment

10. Did the call give you a better idea of university support on offer?
 - a. Are you more confident in accessing support? If yes, why and where?
11. Has the call changed your relationship with the university, staff or other students?
 - a. *Prompt:* sense of belonging; community; social life
12. What did you find most useful about the call?
 - a. Why? *Prompt:* coaching techniques
13. Is there anything that wasn't included in the call that you would have liked?
14. How do you prefer to be contacted about your university work?
 - a. *Prompt:* Email, phone call, text

STOP RECORDING.

Thank participants for their time.

Explain how they will receive their incentive and the time frame in which they will receive it.

Ask if they have any questions.

Interview Schedule for IPE – 02 Intervention 1 non-answering Student

1. Tell me about your academic year so far. *[General discussion to begin, then specify]*
 - 1.1. What has gone well?
 - 1.2. What have been the biggest challenges?
2. What do you consider to be good engagement with your course at university?
3. Did you have any knowledge or experience of the student engagement dashboard prior to being contacted?
 - 3.1. If yes, what knowledge and from where?
 - 3.2. *Prompt:* dashboard page on NTU website
4. Did you have any knowledge or experience of the CES prior to being contacted?
 - 4.1. If yes, what knowledge and from where?
5. Did you see the email from the CES notifying you about the call?
 - 5.1. If no, would it have made you more likely to pick up?
 - 5.2. Is there anything you would want in this initial email?
6. Why did you not answer when the CES team called you?
7. How do you feel about being contacted by a central service rather than by the course or a tutor?
8. What would you want included in the call, and why?
 - 8.1. *Prompt:* Coaching; signposting to support
9. How do you prefer to be contacted about your university work?

Prompt: Email, phone call, text

Interview Schedule for IPE – 03 Intervention 2 Booked Student

1. Tell me about your academic year so far. *[General discussion to begin, then specify]*
 - a. What has gone well?
 - b. What have been the biggest challenges?

2. What do you consider to be good engagement with your course at university?
3. Did you have any knowledge or experience of the student engagement dashboard prior to being contacted?
 - a. If yes, what knowledge and from where?
 - b. *Prompt:* dashboard page on NTU website
4. Did you have any knowledge or experience of the student engagement dashboard prior to being contacted?
 - a. If yes, what knowledge and from where?
5. Did you have any prior knowledge or experience of the CES prior to being contacted?
 - a. If yes, what knowledge and from where?
6. Is there anything else you would want in the initial booking email you received?
7. Why did you book a call?
 - a. *Prompt:* Needed support; wanted someone to talk to; availability
8. How did you find the call?
 - a. *Prompt:* describe experience
9. What did you do because of the call, and why?
 - a. *Prompt:* increased engagement (how?), followed referral, took advice
10. How did you feel after the call?
 - a. *Prompt:* motivation; empowerment; improved knowledge of university
11. Did the call give a better idea of university support on offer?
 - a. Are you more confident in accessing support? If yes, why and where?
12. Has the call changed your relationship with the university, staff, or other students?
 - a. *Prompt:* sense of belonging; community; social life
13. What did you find most useful about the call?
 - a. Why? *Prompt:* coaching techniques
14. Is there anything that wasn't included in the call that you would have liked?
15. How do you prefer to be contacted about your university work?
 - a. *Prompt:* Email, phone call, text

Interview Schedule for IPE – 04 Intervention 2 Non-booked Student

1. Tell me about your academic year so far. *[General discussion to begin, then specify]*
 - a. What has gone well?
 - b. What have been the biggest challenges?
2. What do you consider to be good engagement with your course at university?
3. Did you have any knowledge or experience of the student engagement dashboard prior to being contacted?
 - a. If yes, what knowledge and from where?
 - b. *Prompt:* dashboard page on NTU website
4. Did you have any prior knowledge or experience of the CES prior to being contacted?
 - a. If yes, what knowledge and from where?
 - b. *Prompt:* dashboard page on NTU website

5. Did you see the email from the CES inviting you to book a call?
 - a. If no, would you have booked a call if you had?
 - b. Is there anything you would want in this initial email?
6. *[If yes to 5]* Why did you choose not to book a call?
 - a. *Prompt:* Did not feel support needed; unavailable
7. Would you be more likely to pick up if we did not give you the option to book?
8. How do you feel about being contacted by a central service rather than by the course or a tutor?
9. What would you want included in the call, and why?
 - a. *Prompt:* Coaching; signposting to support
10. How do you prefer to be contacted about your university work?
 - a. *Prompt:* Email, phone call, text

Interview Schedule for IPE – 05 STAFF COORDINATOR

1. How did the calling in the first term go? *[leave general, and then specify]*
2. While you were delivering the CES, did you have to adapt at all?
 - a. If yes, was the CES delivered effectively when you had to adapt?
 - b. What impact, if any, did these changes have on the intervention outcomes?
3. What training and/or scripts are provided for calling staff?
 - a. How closely do the callers adhere to the training the CES provides? Why might they deviate from it?
 - b. How closely do the callers adhere to the scripts the CES provides? Why might they deviate from them?
4. What are the different ways that the CES interacts with students?
 - a. What role does each way of interacting serve?
5. Was the call content or experience different between those who booked a call and those who did not?
 - a. If yes, why?
 - b. If no, why?
6. How much does call length vary?
 - a. If call length does vary, what are the reasons for this?
7. Are there any other reflections on calling this term that you wish to share?

Focus Group Schedule for IPE – 06 CALLER

1. How did the calling in the first term go? *[leave general, and then specify]*
2. While you were delivering the CES, did you have to adapt at all?
 - a. If yes, was the CES delivered effectively when you had to adapt?
 - b. What impact, if any, did these changes have on the intervention outcomes?
3. What training and/or scripts are provided for calling staff?
 - a. How closely do you adhere to the training provided? Why might you deviate from it?

- b. How closely do you adhere to the scripts provided? Why might you deviate from them?
- 4. What are the different ways that the CES interacts with students?
 - a. What role does each way of interacting serve?
- 5. Was the call content or experience different between those who booked a call and those who did not?
 - a. If yes, why?
 - b. If no, why?
- 6. How much does call length vary?
 - a. If call length does vary, what are the reasons for this?
- 7. Are there any other reflections on the term's calling you wish to share?

4. Appendix 4 Coding Framework

Theme	Definition
Theme 1: Delivery	How was the intervention implemented? Was it implemented as planned? Did the implementers have to make any adaptations?
Sub theme(s):	
1.1 Booking	1.1: There were differences between business-as-usual calls and booked calls.
1.2 Call Length	1.2: Implementers noted call length varied between calls depending on content and context.
1.3 Centralisation vs. Localisation	1.3: Students valued the centralised nature of the CES within the institution OR Students preferred a local intervention within academic schools.
1.4 Coaching	1.4: Implementers delivered a coaching-style approach in their calls.
1.5 Collaboration	1.5: Implementers collaborated with:
1.5.1 Internal Collaboration	1.5.1: Each other within the team, creating a community of practice.
1.5.2 External Collaboration	1.5.2: External stakeholders such as tutors or student support staff.
1.6 Communications	1.6: Students provided context for the role different modes of communication play in their lives:
1.6.1 Email	1.6.1: Email communication.
1.6.2 Phone	1.6.2: Phone communication.
1.6.3 Text	1.6.3: Text communication.
1.7 Scripting	1.7: Implementers used scripts effectively.
1.8 Training	1.8: Implementers used training and training materials effectively.
Theme 2: Actions	What actions were taken because of the call, and why?
Sub theme(s):	
2.1 Attendance & Engagement	2.1: Students increased their attendance and engagement.
2.3 Student Support	2.2: Students accessed Student Support Services.

2.4 Tutors	2.3: Students contacted their personal or course tutors.
Theme 3: Mattering	How did students feel their relationship with the institution and its community changed because of the call?
Sub themes(s):	
3.1 Active Listening	3.1: Students feel active listening is an important part of the intervention, which leads to a sense of mattering to the university.
3.2 Call Experience and Sentiment	3.2: Students recalled details of the call and shared the sentiments they felt during the intervention.
3.3 Expectation vs. Reality	3.3: Students compared their expectations of what the call would be with the reality of talking to an implementer.
3.4 Sense of Belonging (FIT)	3.4: Students felt an increased sense of belonging after the call intervention.
3.5 Sense of Mattering (VALUE)	3.5: Students felt an increased sense of belonging after the call intervention.
Theme 4: Motivation	Did the intervention make students feel more motivated to change their behaviour?
Sub theme(s):	
4.1 Call content	4.1: Students reported that the content of the call led them to feel more motivated to change their behaviour.
4.2 Confidence in Accessing Student Services	4.2: Students felt more confident in accessing Student Services in the future, should they feel they need support.
4.3 Contact	4.3: Students reported that the contact itself was a sufficient stimulus to lead them to change their behaviour.
4.4 Email Notification	4.4: Students reported that the email notification of a call led them to feel more motivated to change their behaviour. Students suggested how it may be improved.
4.5 Empowerment	4.5: Students reported that they felt more empowered to change their behaviour.
4.6 Post-call Sentiment	4.6: Students reported their sentiment after the call intervention.
4.7 Pre-existing Support	4.7: Students reported their pre-existing relationships to support, either academic or pastoral.

4.8 Understanding of Student Support	4.8: Students felt they had a greater understanding of the university's student support offer.
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5. Appendix 5 Call Scripting

1. Hi, this is [NAME] calling from NTU. Is this a good time to talk?
2. I am calling from the Student Engagement Team and this call is part of our process of supporting students. We sent you an email yesterday to inform you about the call. How are you doing today?



3. **If not engaged since the start of the year:**
 - a. We are calling to see how you are doing and if there is anything we could do to support you with starting your studies at NTU?
 - b. *If student struggling to start their studies but still interested, refer them to their personal tutor and any other relevant support if needed*

4. **If disengaged:**
 - a. We understand that the university experience is a little different from what you are used to or from what you expected, and I just wanted to check how you are finding it all?
 - b. What about the lectures and seminars? What about your social engagement? Have you been accessing the library and other support services?

5. **If temporarily enrolled:**
 - a. We can see that you haven't completed your university enrolment yet. Is there anything we can do to help?
 - b. *Signpost to any relevant support if still interested in attending the University, or*
 - c. *If they do not want to come to University anymore - ask if the University can do anything to support them, or help with any outstanding actions*



6. **If student is fine and no issue identified**
 - a. It is good to hear that you are settling in and looking forward to this academic year. Do you know where to start? Do you know who your personal tutor or course leader is?

7. **If issue identified**
 - a. I understand that you are finding [X] difficult. Have you spoken to anyone about it? Have you been in contact with your personal tutor recently?



8. What would you find useful in this situation?
How would you like the university to support you with this?

What would help you to engage better?

What can I do today to support you? (follow up email, contact the tutor, refer to other support)

9. *Follow up their response by referring to the list of support and check what would work the best for the student*

10. Thank you for talking to me today. With your permission, I would like to leave some notes in your Dashboard about our conversation. Can I read these to you and check if they are OK?

I will also be contacting your personal tutor to let them know that I've spoken to you and to inform them about our agreed actions. Is that OK?

I will now send you the information that we discussed, and you will xxx (contact your tutor, book an appointment with library...)

Is there anything else that I could maybe help with? Do you have any questions for me?

Have a good day. Bye.

11. *Check student has everything they need and end call.*

12. *Safeguarding?*

13. *Send information email.*