![TASO]

Supporting disabled students

University of Birmingham: Enhanced Theory of Change
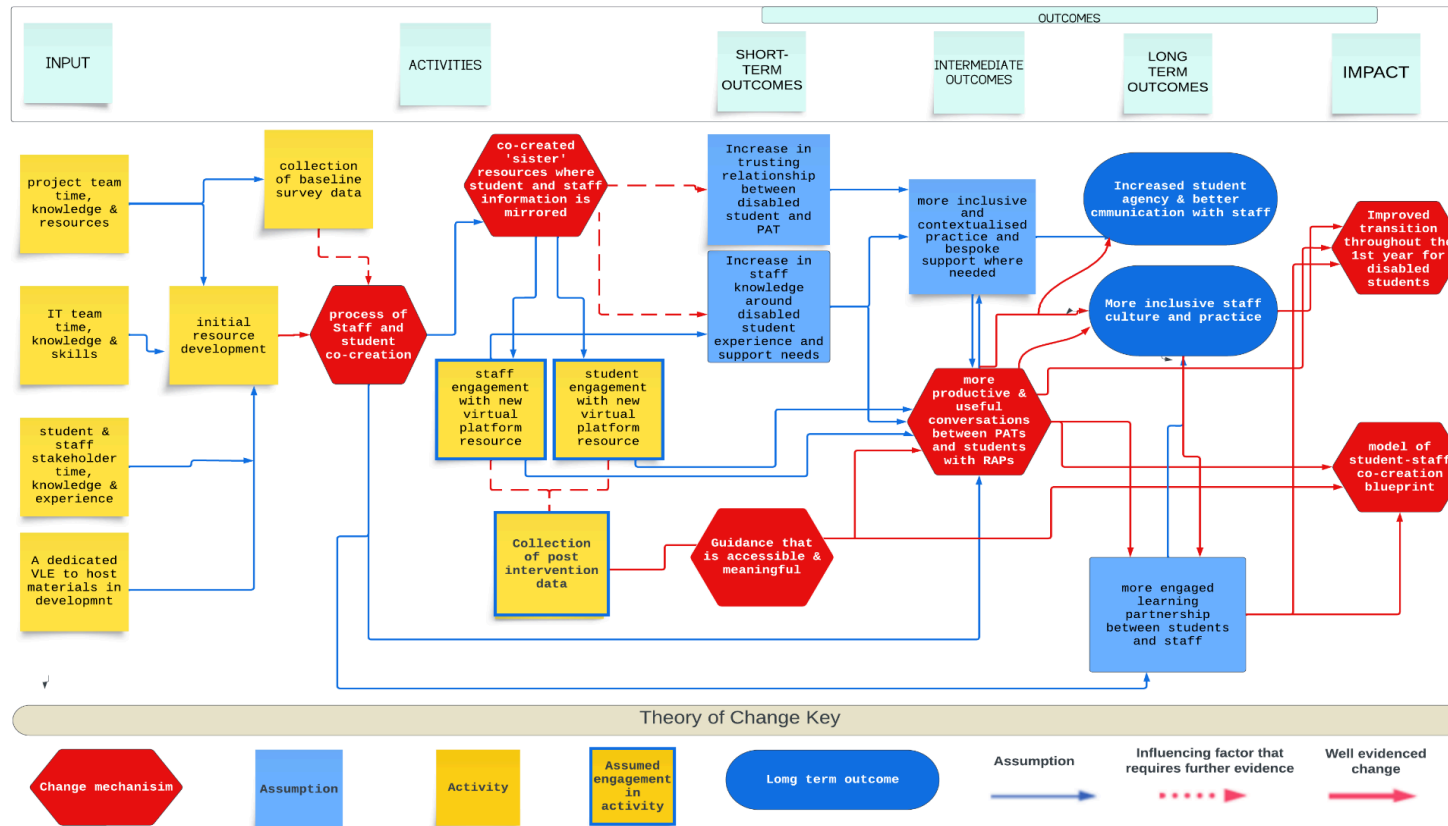
June 2024

![TASO logo] Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education

Enhanced Theory of Change

Supporting disabled students at the University of Birmingham: Developing evidence-based transitions and improving data use

VIEW ENHANCED THEORY OF CHANGE DIAGRAM (PDF)

OUTCOMES

INPUT · ACTIVITIES · SHORT-TERM OUTCOMES · INTERMEDIATE OUTCOMES · LONG TERM OUTCOMES · IMPACT

- project team time, knowledge & resources
- IT team time, knowledge & skills
- student & staff stakeholder time, knowledge & experience
- A dedicated VLE to host materials in developmnt

- collection of baseline survey data
- initial resource development
- process of Staff and student co-creation
- co-created 'sister' resources where student and staff information is mirrored
- staff engagement with new virtual platform resource
- student engagement with new virtual platform resource
- Collection of post intervention data

- Increase in trusting relationship between disabled student and PAT
- Increase in staff knowledge around disabled student experience and support needs
- more inclusive and contextualised practice and bespoke support where needed
- more productive & useful conversations between PATs and students with RAPs
- Guidance that is accessible & meaningful

- Increased student agency & better cmmunication with staff
- More inclusive staff culture and practice
- more engaged learning partnership between students and staff

- Improved transition throughout the 1st year for disabled students
- model of student-staff co-creation blueprint

Theory of Change Key

- Change mechanisim
- Assumption
- Activity
- Assumed engagement in activity
- Lomg term outcome
- Assumption
- Influencing factor that requires further evidence
- Well evidenced change

ENHANCED THEORY OF CHANGE UNDERPINNING NARRATIVE

VERSION 4 April 2024

The aim of this project is to develop a blueprint for innovation in staff: student co-creation, developed and tested through an intervention which engages staff and students from across the university in the activity of co-creating online resources to support disabled students and Personal Academic Tutors.

Contributors: Andrea MacLeod

NAME

Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education: Supporting conversations about Reasonable Adjustments in Personal Academic Tutorials

WHY IS THE INTERVENTION BEING RUN?

The Personal Academic Tutor (PAT) role carries increasing significance in higher education, pivotal to the retention and success of students. Through a partnership of learning with a range of student and staff stakeholders, the project will provide accessible, inclusive spaces for students and staff to be active stakeholders in the development of materials and resources designed to support them in Personal Academic Tutorials, and through this work, engage in a partnership of learning. According to the Higher Education Academy: "…partnership is understood as a relationship in which all involved are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together to foster engaged student learning and engaging learning and teaching enhancement. Partnership is essentially a way of doing things, rather than an outcome in itself." (2014, p.2).

For the purposes of this work, we are defining transition broadly as the first year of studies in higher education. Gale & Parker (2014) frame this as 'transition-as-development', whereby the student entering higher education takes on not just new knowledge and experiences, but also a change in identity as they navigate the different expectations of adulthood and independence. For disabled students, particularly those seeking formal support through reasonable adjustments, there is a particular and additional set of expectations around self-advocacy to be negotiated. For the first time, they are required to take on the responsibility for disclosure directly, with the additional burden of workload and administration that this can involve (MacLeod et al., 2018). More complex adjustments such as those related to group work, assessments and/or placements primarily come into play only after students have entered higher education, and student agency in their application depends upon the student possessing an understanding of the actual context and specific module requirements. Therefore, by exploring how this takes place over the course of the first year of studies, rather than limiting it to pre-entry and entry, the project addresses these expectations, the development of adult identity and self-advocacy using a meaningful and realistic timeframe. The outputs of this work will include both the 'sister' online resources for staff and students, and the blueprint for a collaborative co-creation process which will be suitable for deployment across the University of Birmingham and by others across the higher education sector.

Disabled students have more difficult study trajectories, more extensions, repeats of year and deferrals than other students. Reasonable Adjustment Plans (RAPs) are designed to be personalised adjustments that ensure disabled students do not experience disadvantage compared to other students. However, students and academic staff lack knowledge and confidence in how best to ensure that RAPs are meaningfully utilised (Beck, 2022; Fossey et al., 2017; Kendall, 2018; Little et al., 2023). The intervention is being run because there is an identified need to develop university processes and ways of working that meaningfully take account of student and staff experience, and in which they are active stakeholders (DSUK, 2023)

Developing the intervention as a collaborative, participatory project focusing on a partnership of learning aims to ensure that student and staff experiences are central to the intervention, that a holistic understanding of the subject is achieved and that the two sets of guidance are well aligned, rather than entirely separate.

Targeted support for Personal Academic Tutors (PATs), developing their knowledge of the underlying function of RAPs, equity and inclusive practice standards, and how best they can be implemented in different contexts, is expected to lead to more inclusive and contextualised practice and bespoke support where needed. Alongside this, targeted support for students to support their personal knowledge and confidence to interpret how their RAP might be best applied within a particular context, as well as how certain adjustments can be applied to specific kinds of learning and learning stages, will lead to increased student agency and more effective communication with staff (Kendall, 2016; Bunbury, 2020).

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WHO IS THE INTERVENTION FOR?

The intervention aims to work collaboratively with:

- Student stakeholders. Existing and former University of Birmingham (UoB) students who have (had) RAPs, including but not exclusively first-year undergraduate students, since students from other years will also have valuable experiences to contribute.
- Staff stakeholders including Personal Academic Tutors, Senior Tutors, senior staff from Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Wellbeing and Student Disability Service teams.

Direct beneficiaries will be intervention participants, who are expected to gain experience and knowledge of collaborative, inclusive working and co-creation through their involvement with, and contributions to, the project; and students with RAPs/Personal Tutors, who will benefit from the resources developed as a result of the intervention.

Indirect beneficiaries (through the cultural and procedural changes anticipated to take place over time) will be current and future disabled students (with and without RAPs) and staff across UoB, particularly Personal Academic Tutors but also others who have an interest in inclusive, collaborative approaches, supporting disabled students and EDI considerations more generally. Lessons from the co-creation will be shared across the university through a variety of dissemination activities, with the aim that the intervention model (the blueprint) can be adapted and replicated in other relevant work.

WHAT IS THE INTERVENTION?

Through the intervention, a blueprint for innovation in student & staff collaborative co-creation will be developed, which focuses specifically on disabled students/students with Reasonable Adjustment Plans (RAPs). The target of the co-creation will be the development of two complementary resources which will support first year undergraduate students and their Personal Academic Tutors to use Personal Tutorials as a space for discussing the practical application of RAPs.

Students and staff will work together to develop and trial resources which establish Personal Academic Tutorials as supportive spaces for conversations focusing on reasonable adjustments. By collaborating with both students and staff, we aim to find out what knowledge they

have and need, and what form of delivery this should take to develop resources accordingly. This process will result in transparent and accessible processes that will:

- empower disabled students to have greater agency in relation to their RAPs; and
- support academic staff in the implementation of more inclusive practice.

Inputs:

Materials required for the intervention consist of:

- Time, knowledge and skills from the main project team.
- Time, knowledge and skills from the IT team.
- Time, knowledge and experience from student stakeholders.
- Time, knowledge and experience from staff stakeholders.
- Engagement and support of relevant members of the senior management relating to Student Disability Services, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Student Experience and Wellbeing.
- A dedicated virtual learning environment to host and share materials in development.
- Accessible resources such as video case studies from students and staff, FAQ sheets and flow charts.
- Data spreadsheets of anonymised UG year 1 student progression/attainment.
- Evaluation data.

Procedures:

1. Baseline surveys with students and staff will inform the development of a framework for two 'sister' resources (one for staff and one for students) which will provide information and guidance to support useful conversations about RAPs within PAT sessions.

2. The framework will be used as a starting point with the stakeholders: to be developed, amended and then trialled.

3. Staff (recruited via the EDI team, Senior Tutor team, Student Disability Service and Student Experience & Wellbeing Team) and students (recruited via the Disabled Students' Consultation Group, Guild of Students and Student Alumni networks) stakeholders will be partners in learning to develop the information and resources within the draft framework.

4. Stakeholder work will take place over a period of weeks and via an accessible format of focus groups, online discussions and interviews, in order to include the broadest range of participants. Student stakeholders will each receive a £10 'thank-you' voucher as an acknowledgement of their contribution.

5. The framework will be revised and developed based on the stakeholder work, then trialled within one college, with further contributions from wider samples of staff and student stakeholders contributed over the trial period, as they use the resources in their individual contexts.

WHO IS DELIVERING THE INTERVENTION?

The intervention is being delivered by members of the TASO team, who combine academic, professional services and senior management responsibilities. Names listed below with professional role and project role in brackets:

Dr Andrea MacLeod: Associate Professor in Autism Studies & PI (*Overall project + financial coordination, development of resources, ethical approval & data collection documents, data analysis and report writing, team support, leading development of Theory of Change blueprint and dissemination.*)

Prof Chris Millward: Professor of Practice in Education Policy *(Strategic oversight and advice, development and testing of Theory of Change blueprint and dissemination.)*

Prof Celia Greenway: Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor responsible for Student Engagement *(Strategic oversight and advice, development and testing of Theory of Change blueprint and dissemination.)*

Sue Onens: Accessibility & Inclusivity Adviser for UoB Student EDI Team (*Strategic oversight and advice, development of Theory of Change blueprint and dissemination.)*

Dr Rachel Hewett: Head of Department of Disability Inclusion and Special Needs and Co-Director of Vision Impairment Centre for Teaching and Research (*Strategic oversight and supporting day-to-research activities, development of Theory of Change blueprint and dissemination.)*

Dr Barbara Sandland: Research Fellow **(***Development of resources, ethical approval & data collection documents, data collection, analysis and report writing, team support, development of Theory of Change blueprint and dissemination.)*

Vikki Anderson: Teaching Fellow and Learning Support Disability Advisor**: (***Development of resources and data collection tools, development of Theory of Change blueprint and dissemination.)*

Sara King: Research Fellow *(Development of resources, ethical approval & data collection documents, data collection, analysis and report writing, team support, development of Theory of Change blueprint and dissemination.)*

Neil Hall: Lecturer in the Department of Disability Inclusion and Special Needs and the School of Education's Head of part-time Postgraduate Taught Students **(***Development of resources and data collection tools, development of Theory of Change blueprint and dissemination.)*

Dr Francesca Peruzzo: Research Fellow in Educational Equity and Policy **(***Development of resources and data collection tools, development of Theory of Change blueprint and dissemination.)*

WHERE IS THE INTERVENTION DELIVERED?

The intervention will be delivered primarily via our Canvas virtual learning environment, which will host live workshops, recordings, resource and information templates and online discussion spaces. There will be face to face delivery where appropriate, if requested by individual participants, although we expect this to be a minority and also text-based evaluations.

HOW MANY TIMES WILL THE INTERVENTION BE DELIVERED? OVER HOW LONG?

The initial survey stage will take place once, early in the academic year, over a period of 3 weeks.

The main stakeholder work and evaluation will run once over a period of approximately 3-4 weeks, during which multiple events will take place with different stakeholders, in groups and individually.

The trial will launch during the Spring term and run until the end of the academic year.

Student and staff participation and the different means of recruitment and participation will be logged to determine what was found to be most and least effective and accessible.

The evaluations, assessments and data in relation to participation will inform the blueprint.

WILL THE INTERVENTION BE TAILORED?

As above, there are options for participation, including personalisation to specific needs where appropriate. The intervention will not otherwise be tailored. Recommendations arising from the intervention and its evaluation will include how the intervention could be tailored for use with different profiles of participants and different purposes, both across the University of Birmingham and by other HEPs.

HOW WILL IMPLEMENTATION BE OPTIMISED?

The strategies to maximise implementation include:

- Raising awareness of the project through UoB networks, forums, newsletters, TASO and external student networks.
- Providing participation options over an extended period and in a range of formats (eg. Face to face, online).
- Providing 'thank you' vouchers for students who participate in the collaborative work or who contribute case studies.

WHO ARE THE KEY ACTORS / STAKEHOLDERS?

The key actors/stakeholders in the design are:

- The collaborative project team.
- The key actors/stakeholders in the main intervention are representatives from: Disabled Student Consultation Group (DSCG).
- Students' Association for Neurodivergence, Disability and Mental Health (SANDAM).
- College of Social Sciences Disabled Student Community Action Group.
- Senior Tutors within College of Social Sciences (CoSS).
- CoSS Wellbeing Team.
- UoB Student Disability Service.
- UoB EDI Team.
- UoB Student Experience & Engagement Teams.

The key actors/stakeholders in the use of resources are:

- Personal Academic Tutors (PATs) within the College of Social Sciences (CoSS) who tutor first year UG students

- First year UG students with RAPs.

The success of the project depends on the stakeholders listed in the first two sections above, in relation to the success of the partnership of learning to develop the intervention and more broadly, the success of the resource depends upon engagement from PATs and from first year UG students with RAPs.

CHANGE MECHANISMS

Change mechanism 1

- *Student stakeholders (disabled students with RAPs) perceive that the project's aims are worthwhile and meaningful to students and staff at UoB which will lead to student engagement with the intervention.*
- *The evidence for this change mechanism comes from UoB Student Voices Reports (2020:2021) indicating both the need for greater attention to student voice, and improved mechanisms to ensure implementation of Reasonable Adjustment Plans.*

Change mechanism 2

- *Staff stakeholders perceive that the project's aims are worthwhile and meaningful to students and staff at UoB which will lead to staff engagement with the intervention*
- *The evidence for this change mechanism comes from the work undertaken so far to support the PAT process, including direct feedback and comments from PATs within training sessions.*

Change mechanism 3

- *The development of resources as a collaborative partnership of learning will lead to guidance that is meaningful, co-created and accessible which will lead to better provision of support for students with RAPs.*

- *The evidence for this change mechanism comes initially from existing work on co-creation and learning partnerships (Searle et al., 2019, Greenway, 2022) to be supplemented by staff and student perceptions as measured by surveys and interviews when the resources are piloted.*

Change mechanism 4

- *The implementation of resources will enable more productive and useful conversations between PATS and students with RAPs which will lead to improved transition in relation to academic and wellbeing outcomes for students.*
- *The evidence for this change mechanism comes from staff and student perceptions as measured by surveys and interviews when the resources are piloted.*

Change mechanism 5

- *Stakeholder involvement in the development and piloting of resources as a partnership of learning will lead to a set of guidance that is aligned to and well integrated with current systems, and which can be adapted for use across the university and by others across the sector.*
- *The evidence for this change mechanism comes from staff and student perceptions as measured by surveys and interviews when the resources are piloted.*

Change mechanism 6

- *Co-creation of resources for both staff and students   will lead to a more coherent and consistent understanding of the target area (in this case, how best to use Personal Academic Tutorial spaces for discussion of Reasonable Adjustment Plans.*

- *The evidence for this change mechanism comes from staff and student perceptions as measured by surveys and interviews when the resources are piloted.*

Change mechanism 7

- *The implementation of the guidance through the pilot work will lead to improved academic outcomes and wellbeing for first year UG students with RAPs.*
- *The evidence for this change mechanism comes from student data on progression, retention, etc. within CoSS, compared to data from last year and to data from a comparable college.*

References for all change mechanisms

Greenway, C. (2022). 'Ask PAT: How the introduction and implementation of an E-portfolio approach transformed the nature of student support and development.' In Lochtie, D., Walker, B., Stork, A*., The Higher Education Personal Tutor's and Advisor's Companion, Translating Theory into Practice to Support Student Success*, Herts: Critical Publishing.

Searle, K. A., Ellis, L., Kourti, M., MacLeod, A., Lear, C., Duckworth, C., & Simpson, J. (2019). 'Participatory autism research with students at a UK university: Evidence from a small-scale empirical project'. *Advances in Autism*, 5(2), 84-93.

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ASSUMPTIONS

For each link/connection that is characterised as an assumption in the diagram, please outline the assumption below:

Assumption 1

- We assume that students and staff will engage with the consultation process in order to co-create resources and information.
- This (operational) assumption is based on the belief, and other indicators from research, that students and staff value the opportunity to actively contribute to change and development at UoB (Searle et al., 2019; University of Birmingham Guild of Students, 2021).

Assumption 2

- We assume that an accessible, multi-format mode of collaboration will maximise engagement in the process, in terms of co-creation and use of the resources.
- This (rationale) assumption is based on research evidence indicating that accessible and participatory approaches are associated with high engagement (MacLeod, 2016; Seale, 2009; Asaba & Suarez-Balcazar, 2018).

Assumption 3

- We assume that resources and information co-created with students and staff will lead to better aligned guidance and more effective practice.
- This (causal link) assumption is based on anecdotal evidence from students and staff, indicating current inconsistencies around both presentation and interpretation of information.

Assumption 4

- We assume that targeted support for Personal Academic Tutors, developing their knowledge of the underlying function of RAPs, equity and inclusive practice standards, and how best they can be implemented in different contexts, will lead to more inclusive and contextualised practice and bespoke support where needed.
- This (causal link) assumption is based on research evidence indicating that focused staff training, and training which foregrounds lived experience is more impactful for staff and leads to better awareness of inclusive practice (Greenway, 2022; Barrett, 2006).

Assumption 5

- We assume that targeted support for students, to develop their knowledge and confidence around how RAPs can be individualised within a particular context, and how specified adjustments can be applied to specific kinds of learning and learning stages, will lead to increased student agency and more effective communication with staff.
- This (causal link) assumption is based on evidence that disabled students currently lack knowledge around RAP processes and view this as a barrier to learning (Beck, 2022).

Assumption 6

- We assume that the improved PAT practice and student self-advocacy already described will lead to better overall progression for students with RAPs, fewer extensions, deferrals and leaves of absence.
- This (causal link) assumption is based on the belief, and indicators from research, that transition into, and progression through, university studies in the first year is hampered by difficulties which could be resolved relatively easily through improved communication opportunities with key academics (Moriňa et al., 2017; Shpigelman et al., 2022).

Assumption 7

- We assume that a multi-disciplinary project team that includes staff from across different parts of the university and students/alumni with lived experience will contribute insights and experiences that strengthen the project methods and aims

This (environmental) assumption is based on research evidence on the benefits of collaborative, participatory research (Seale, 2009; Searle et al., 2019).

References for the assumptions

Asaba, E., & Suarez-Balcazar, Y. (2018). 'Participatory research: A promising approach to promote meaningful engagement'. *Scandinavian Journal of Occupational Therapy*, *25*(5), 309-312.

Barrett, M. (2006). '"Like dynamite going off in my ears": using autobiographical accounts of autism with teaching professionals'. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, 22(02), 95-110.

Beck, S. (2022). 'Evaluating the use of reasonable adjustment plans for students with a specific learning difficulty'. *British Journal of Special Education*, 49(3), 399-419.

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WHAT IS THE EVALUATION AIM?

The evaluation will collect evidence to:

- Test the specific **change mechanisms** detailed above
- Address institutional or systemic considerations in relation to the **efficacy** of the collaborative model and implications for further work using this blueprint
- Assess the perceived **impact** of the intervention for specific sub-groups of stakeholders, eg, for certain groups of students with RAPs or for Personal Academic Tutors
- Assess the **feasibility** to scale up and adapt the model for wider use across the higher education sector.

WHAT ARE THE EVALUATION QUESTIONS?

Efficacy

- Did the collaboration enable meaningful contributions from all stakeholders?

- Was the collaborative model effective for some stakeholders more than others, and if so, who?
- Were there any barriers to involvement and how were these addressed?

Impact

- What was the impact of the collaborative model for: the stakeholders; the target group; wider work within UoB; related work across the sector?

Scalability

- Could elements of the collaborative model be adapted and applied for other purposes and projects within the university, and if so, which ones and how?

WHAT METHODOLOGY ARE YOU USING?

Our evaluation of the intervention aims to generate Type 2 evidence via contribution analysis, using the following methods of data collection:

- Online surveys to consult with first year undergraduate students and Personal Academic Tutors pre-and post-intervention on their experience and confidence in using PAT sessions to discuss RAPs
- Evaluations of stakeholder perceptions regarding the value of the collaborative work on the paired resources via survey
- Data spreadsheets of anonymised UG year 1 student progression/attainment data, comparing participant student group with comparable non-participant student group, and comparing data for 2023-4 with 2022-3.

The primary methodology for evaluation will be a Contribution Analysis as this is most appropriate to our project design and the range of data we will be collecting. It is not appropriate or ethical for us to consider a Randomised Controlled Trial for this project, as it is intended, from conception and design through to implementation, to be a collaborative endeavour grounded in practice and lived experience. Our theory of change is typical in being "embedded in the context of the intervention, and is developed incorporating the perspectives of key stakeholders, beneficiaries and the existing relevant research" (Mayne, 2012, p. 273). This intervention is necessarily part of a package of initiatives underway to support our undergraduate students with and without Reasonable Adjustment Plans. The students in our College will be coming from different contexts and studying different courses. It is therefore unlikely that we can make any absolute claims to cause-and-effect, based on the intervention. Nevertheless, we have a number of clear causal link assumptions that we can test, and we anticipate being able to both understand and report on these through the quantitative and qualitative data which we collect (Mayne, 2001) in order to identify both alternative explanations for outcomes, and the plausible contribution provided by the work of this project.

RISKS AND LIMITATIONS

RISK AND LIMITATION	MITIGATION
There is a risk that students and staff will not have time to, or wish to, engage with the survey stages, thereby limiting data on their perceptions of the impact of the intervention and changes to confidence levels/knowledge.	Survey calls will be sent out in multiple ways over the survey period and we will encourage 'snowballing' whereby staff and students pass the link to their known contacts. The project will also be reported in relevant School and College newsletters to raise awareness. Means of contribution will be flexible to accommodate differing capacity and availability, and contributors will be asked to evaluate their experience of participation separately and anonymously.
There is a risk that students and staff will not engage with the collaborative work on the resources, thereby limiting the extent of the learning partnership.	Key staff will be recruited over a lead-up period and we will highlight the multiple and flexible modes of participation. Students will be offered a 'thank you' voucher for their participation.
There is a risk that student data will be inaccessible or incomplete, thereby limiting the evaluation of outcomes.	We will identify potential gaps and blockages in data and explore alternative means of accessing the data. All activities will be logged in detail.

There is a risk of staff sickness or absence within the team.	The core team is relatively large (10 in total) so that most elements of work can be covered and shared to minimise the impact of absence.	
There is a risk that findings within our College/University may not be relevant to other colleges or institutional contexts.	We will engage with University-wide senior management and Professional Services staff, as well as wider networks across the sector.	

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