Enhanced Theory of Change (EToC): Aspire to University Progression Programme

September 2025

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# Enhanced Theory of Change diagram

An Enhanced Theory of Change diagram titled “Enhanced ToC: Aspire to University Progression Programme.” The diagram is structured from left to right with the following sections:

Problem statement: Some young people do not consider higher education as an option due to beliefs that it is “not for them” or concerns about grades and finances. Limited awareness and skills may hinder their aspirations.

Inputs: Includes university resources (outreach officers, venues, materials, ambassadors, APP funding) and school resources (staff time, venues, transport funding).

Activities: Divided into programme management (school engagement, scheduling, monitoring) and workshops for pupils from Year 7 to Year 11 focused on awareness, campus experience, pathways, employability, and study skills.

Short-term outcomes: Improved knowledge among parents and pupils about higher education pathways, campus life, employability, and study skills.

Medium-term outcomes: Increased pupil motivation, confidence, sense of belonging in HE, and improved academic performance.

Long-term outcomes: Improved attainment among pupils.

Impact: Greater likelihood of progressing to higher education, fulfilment of APP targets, improved attainment in partner schools, and a reduced GCSE attainment gap.

Black arrows connect the boxes, showing causal links from inputs and activities through to impact.

# Enhanced Theory of Change narrative

## Background

### Problem statement

Some young people do not consider Higher Education (HE) an option for their future. This could be due to beliefs that HE is ‘not something for them’ or that they do not have the required grades/finances for HE. These beliefs, and limited awareness around HE options, may impede pupils’ aspirations and plans when it comes to making decisions about their future. Equally, pupils may need support to acquire the necessary skills and/or knowledge to achieve their aspirations.

**Additional context**

Evidence suggests that young people’s aspirations for HE are high, regardless of their background (Baker et al., 2014). Importantly, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds often have aspiration levels that exceed their actual HE participation and their expectations of progression to HE (Boxer et al., 2011). Improving students’ expectations is therefore important for widening participation and there is some evidence that supports this approach. For example, pupils’ expectations about the future correlate with attainment at age 16 (Chowdry, Crawford & Goodman, 2011) and HE entry (Anders and Micklewright, 2015).

The programme therefore aims to support pupils who may have limited awareness of HE options to better understand these pathways and support them in making informed decisions about their future. It also aims to normalise the idea of going to HE, encourage pupils to start thinking about their future goals, and help them build up skills to support their academic and professional journey. A series of workshops aim to strengthen and develop pupils’ study, exam, and employability skills, provide information on HE to participants and parents, and facilitate pupils’ visits to the University campus to foster an interest in HE participation. The programme rests on the assumption that raising aspirations, confidence and motivation can support attainment-raising.

## Design and implementation

### Inputs

University

* Skills, knowledge and time of two Outreach Officers
  + Responsible for programme management and workshop delivery
* Venues and rooms for workshops
* Workshop materials
  + Developed by Outreach Officers
* Existing relationships with schools
* Skills, knowledge and time of student ambassadors
* APP funding

Schools

* Skills, knowledge and time of school staff
* Venues and rooms for workshops
* Funding for transport

### Activities

**Programme management**

* Selection and engagement of schools
  + Selecting schools that could benefit from the workshops and engaging them to secure buy-in, working with schools liaison staff
* Scheduling and timetabling of sessions
  + Ensuring that the workshops are delivered during a time of year that is relevant and timely for the content
* Monitoring and feedback activities

**Workshops**

* Schools select eligible pupils
  + Cohort of 40 pupils who meet at least one of the following criteria: eligible for free school meals or Pupil Premiums, have a disability, be from a Gypsy, Roma or Traveller community, be a refugee or an asylum seeker, be in care or having experience of being in care, have a parent/carer who serves in the armed forces
* Y7 - Aspire to Know workshop - 1 hour Introduction to University session
  + This consists of a 1-hour Introduction to University session that provides an overview of HE to all Year 7 pupils. It covers topics such as the value of going to university, the courses, accommodation, clubs and societies available. This workshop is delivered in schools.
* Y8/9 - Aspire to Explore workshop - 4 hour campus experience day
  + This workshop is designed for Year 8 or Year 9 pupils and their parents. It consists of a 4-hour campus experience day to experience what it is like to be a student for a day. The pupils will be able to hear from current pupils about their experiences as well as get the opportunity to tour the campus. It also involves a 1-hour virtual parents introduction evening for parents to explain the aims of the programme, introduce them to the University and provide information to support their children with the GCSE selection processes.
* Y8/9 - Aspire to Explore workshop - 1 hour virtual parents introduction evening
  + This session explains the aims of the programme, introduces parents to the University and provides information to support their children with the GCSE selection processes.
* Y8/9 - Aspire to Learn workshop - 1 hour future pathways session
  + This is a 1-hour interactive workshop designed to help pupils think about their GCSE choices and future options. It is addressed to Year 8 or 9 pupils and is delivered in school.
* Y10 - Aspire to Succeed workshop - 1 hour skills for the future session
  + This workshop aims to help Year 10 pupils gain transferable and employability skills such as interview techniques. It is delivered in schools.
* Y11 - Study skills workshop
  + This workshop is offered to Year 11 pupils and aims to help them with revision and exam techniques, such as structuring essays and creating study timetables. It lasts one hour and is delivered in schools.

#### **Target group**

This intervention is designed for Year 7 to Year 11 pupils, primarily from disadvantaged backgrounds. The first workshop is delivered in Year 7 to the whole year group. Following this, schools identify approximately 40 pupils meeting at least one of the following criteria who are offered the remaining workshops:

* Be eligible for free school meals
* Be identified as Pupil Premium
* Have a disability
* Be from a Gypsy, Roma or Traveller community
* Be a refugee or an asylum seeker
* Be in care or having experience of being in care
* Have a parent/carer who serves in the armed forces

#### **Delivery stakeholders**

The intervention is managed, coordinated, and delivered by two Outreach Officers from the university. Student Ambassadors are also involved in the delivery of some workshops, playing a larger role in the Aspire to Explore campus visit.

#### **Mode of delivery**

All workshops are delivered face-to-face, except for a virtual meeting with parents delivered as part of the Aspire to Explore workshop.

The number of participants in each workshop affects how each one is delivered. The universal element (Aspire to Know Workshop) caters to a whole year group and is therefore delivered lecture-style. Meanwhile, the targeted workshops (Aspire to Explore, Aspire to Learn, Aspire to Succeed and Study Skills workshops) consist of groups of approximately 30-40 pupils and are delivered in a more interactive way and encourage peer connection.

#### **Location**

Four workshops (Aspire to Know, Aspire to Learn, Aspire to Succeed and Study skills) are delivered in participating schools. The Aspire to Explore workshops are delivered on the university campus, except for the virtual parents’ introduction evening which is delivered online.

#### **Timeframes**

The full programme takes place over five years. The university delivers one workshop per school each year. The timing for workshops depends on school availability and preference. They last one to four hours, depending on the workshop.

#### **Tailoring**

The implementation can be optimised and impacts maximised when the university and participating schools sustain an effective relationship and continue to communicate their needs and expectations. By collecting constructive feedback from pupils and teachers, the workshops can be better designed to suit pupils’ needs. Feedback is collected after every workshop to better understand the needs of the pupils and what could be improved. However, workshops are not designed or tailored to address the needs of any specific pupil.

Pupil experience can also be enhanced if they continue to engage in the full programme (despite it being optional after Year 9). Pupils who continue with the programme receive more workshops focused on skills, such as study, exam, and employability skills. These skills can subsequently strengthen their pathway into HE by influencing their academic performance, confidence and motivation.

## Expected change

### Outcomes

* Parents improve knowledge of educational pathways, including HE options

**Pupils**

* Increased awareness and knowledge of future pathways/options
* Increased knowledge of HE pathways, including types of courses, entry requirements and funding options
* Improved knowledge and awareness of campus life
* Improved employability skills
* Improved study and exam skills
* Increased motivation and confidence
* Increased sense of belonging in HE environment
* Improved academic performance
* Improved attainment

### Impact

* Participants increase likelihood of progressing to HE
  + After having participated in the programme, pupils are expected to have the academic skills to complete their studies, the knowledge and awareness of finance options and resources available to progress towards HE, as well as the confidence and motivation to pursue this pathway
* Fulfilment of University APP targets
* Improved attainment in partner schools
* Reduced attainment gap at GCSE

## Causal pathways and change mechanisms

### Causal pathway 1: Engaging with student ambassadors

By engaging with Student Ambassadors and Outreach Officers, pupils learn about various aspects of HE and build confidence that they can succeed and fit in a university environment, increasing their sense of belonging. This is expected to contribute to an increased likelihood to progress to HE.

This causal pathway hypothesises that pupils attending and engaging in the Aspire to Learn and Aspire to Succeed workshops – which deliver sessions on future pathways and skills for the future – will improve their employability skills and increase their awareness of future pathways and options, including HE. By engaging with university Student Ambassadors and Outreach Officers, pupils can learn about the courses available, entry requirements, and funding options to access university. Through this experience, participants are expected to build confidence that they can succeed and fit in a university environment, increasing their sense of belonging. This is expected to contribute to an increased likelihood to progress to HE.

This pathway is supported by existing evidence that suggest that employing Student Ambassadors to provide information, guidance, and support to school pupils is effective and positive (see TASO’s Rapid Evidence Review). Several studies have outlined that the reason why ambassadors are credited with much success is their ability to transfer “hot knowledge” (Austin and Hatt, 2005) that comes from informal and unofficial sources. Despite this, further research is needed to confirm whether this causal pathway holds true and assess the extent to which this type of workshop and aspiration-raising activities translates into an increased likelihood to progress to HE.

#### **Change mechanisms**

* There is some evidence to suggest that an increased sense of belonging is associated with increased applications to HE (Morgenroth et al., 2015).
* The information workshop aims to fill an information gap for participants to ensure that they are all aware of the range of post-18 options available to them. The workshop will be targeted to the group, as evidence suggests that this can increase the success of an IAG intervention (Sanders et al., 2018).
* In the workshop, participants will meet Student Ambassadors. Talking to these ambassadors will demystify university for participants and make them feel more comfortable with the idea of a university environment (Gartland, 2015).
* The workshop will involve a range of activities which aim to develop participants' employability skills. The interactive nature of the activities will give participants practical experience of using these skills in the workshop.

### Causal pathway 2: Developing study skills

By attending and engaging in the Study Skills workshops pupils will have better study and exam skills and develop their confidence, which will in turn improve academic performance.

This causal pathway hypothesises that by attending and engaging in the Study Skills workshops – which teach pupils revision and exam techniques, as well as how to structure essays – pupils will have better study and exam skills. In turn, this is intended to improve pupils’ academic performance (e.g. by pupils applying the skills developed in the workshops in their lessons). Simultaneously, improving their skills could improve their motivation and confidence. Together, this pathway aims to improve pupils’ attainment and increases their likelihood to progress to HE.

According to TASO’s Rapid Evidence Review, the strength of evidence for activities to develop study skills is emerging, as there is evidence that general study skills interventions contribute significantly to attainment yet the impact of these types of interventions delivered by Higher Education Providers on pupil attainment has not been systematically evaluated. Therefore, further research and data collection is needed to confirm whether this causal pathway holds true and leads to improved attainment. However, there is good evidence that shows prior academic attainment is associated with access to HE (Office for Students, 2022).

#### **Change mechanisms**

* Practical activities are designed to enhance techniques to improve learning. Students are given the chance to practice what they have learned in the workshop, which will make them feel more confident about applying them independently in future.
* Prior academic attainment is the strongest indicator for entering HE (OfS, 2022). Individuals with higher attainment have more university options and are more likely to be successful in their applications.
* Improved performance in school is indicative of effective academic practices, which is likely to translate into higher grades in external examinations.
* There is evidence that study skills interventions are associated with improved academic performance (Anthony, 2019). The session is designed to help pupils improve how they approach and think about learning, equipping them to get better grades.

### Causal pathway 3: Campus visit

By visiting the University campus and engaging with students and staff there, pupils increase their awareness and understanding of campus life, leading to an increased sense of belonging in HE and increased likelihood of progressing there.

This causal pathway hypothesises that by visiting the University campus as part of the Aspire to Explore workshop and engaging with Student Ambassadors and University Staff – who explain the different University support functions and courses, and guide pupils around the campus – pupils increase their awareness and understanding of campus life. This is expected to lead to an increased sense of belonging in a HE environment as pupils can experience it first-hand. An increased sense of belonging is expected to contribute to an increased likelihood to progress to HE.

As mentioned in the first causal pathway, studies have shown the positive effects on engaging Student Ambassadors to inform and guide pupils. Some studies on programmes that involved campus visits also showed that these activities were positively associated with pupils’ knowledge of most aspects of HE and student life and progression. Evidence on the effect of campus visits on learners’ intention towards HE is still mixed, but further evidence of a positive impact is emerging, therefore further research is still needed to assess whether this causal pathway holds true.

#### **Change mechanisms**

* In the visit day, participants will meet Student Ambassadors. Talking to these ambassadors will demystify university for participants and make them feel more comfortable with the idea of a university environment (Gartland, 2015).
* The campus visit will include interactive IAG sessions and a tour which contain comprehensive information on what campus life is like. Both staff members and student ambassadors will deliver the information so that participants receive information from both reliable, authoritative sources, and from role models.
* There is some evidence to suggest that an increased sense of belonging is associated with increased applications to HE (Morgenroth et al., 2015).

## Moderating factors

### Moderating factors

* Strong relationships with schools, and good buy-in from school staff
  + Mitigation: Building on existing strong relationships, using clear and consistent communication throughout so schools know what to expect, opportunities for school staff to provide feedback and make requests
* Schools are able to identify students who meet the eligibility criteria
* Sufficient staffing and resources to deliver the programme as planned
* Appropriate space and facilities for the delivery of workshops
  + Mitigation: Spaces will be reserved well in advance with the workshop design in mind
* Parents and pupils have access to technology for virtual sessions
* Improved knowledge, confidence and motivation translates into improved attainment
  + Pupils' attainment and attainment-related outcomes are influenced by a range of factors, not all of which are addressed within the intervention.
  + Mitigation: Workshop content is designed to boost attainment and improve HE knowledge and motivation as far as possible. Pupils who continue with the programme receive more workshops focused on skills, such as study, exam, and employability skills. These skills can subsequently strengthen their pathway into HE by influencing their academic performance, confidence and motivation.
* Workshop content addresses pupils knowledge gaps' and needs
  + Mitigation: The University and participating schools sustain an effective relationship and continue to communicate their needs and expectations. Feedback is collected after every workshop to better understand the needs of the pupils and what could be improved.

## Impact and outcome measures

### Impact measures

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Impact** | **Impact measure** |
| Participants increase likelihood of progressing to HE | Tracking pupils via HEAT. In future, impact evaluation with a counterfactual. |
| Fulfilment of University APP targets | Monitoring internal institutional data |
| Improved attainment in partner schools | Pupil attainment, depending on a Data Sharing Agreement with the schools |
| Reduced attainment gap at GCSE | Pupil attainment, depending on a Data Sharing Agreement with the schools |

### Outcome measures

How will you measure whether and to what extent your intervention has led to your outcomes? This could include self-report measures, performance measures, or behavioural measures.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Outcome** | **Outcome measure** |
| Parents improve knowledge of educational pathways, including HE options | Parent feedback surveys |
| Increased awareness and knowledge of future pathways/options | Pupil feedback surveys, using TASO's Access and Success Questionnaire |
| Increased knowledge of HE pathways, including types of courses, entry requirements and funding options | Pupil feedback surveys, using TASO's Access and Success Questionnaire |
| Improved knowledge and awareness of campus life | Pupil feedback surveys, using TASO's Access and Success Questionnaire |
| Improved employability skills | Pupil feedback surveys. |
| Improved study and exam skills | Pupil feedback surveys, using TASO's Access and Success Questionnaire |
| Increased motivation and confidence | Pupil feedback surveys, using TASO's Access and Success Questionnaire |
| Increased sense of belonging in HE environment | Pupil feedback surveys, using TASO's Access and Success Questionnaire |
| Improved academic performance | Pupil attainment, depending on a Data Sharing Agreement with the schools. |
| Improved attainment | Pupil attainment, depending on a Data Sharing Agreement with the schools. In future, impact evaluation with a counterfactual. |

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