

12 May 2026

WELCOME TO

TASO

Annual conference

Collaborate to evaluate

TASO

Opening and welcome

Dr Omar Khan
CEO, TASO

#TASOCon26

Improving equality of opportunity: the role of collaboration

Professor Chris Millward

Interim Director for Fair Access and Participation, Office for
Students

How do we address the higher education postcode lottery?

- > **Professor Graeme Atherton**, University of West London
- > **Alex Proudfoot**, Independent Higher Education
- > **Dr Shaid Mahmood MBE**, Durham University
- > **Dr Kate Wicklow**, GuildHE

Refreshment break and networking

Up next: Paper presentations: pre-entry interventions

Paper presentations: pre-entry interventions

> Chaired by **Dr Molly Rowlands**, TASO

> **Professor Elisabeth Moores**, Aston University

> **Sirin Tangpornpaiboon**, The Open University

> **Sarah Dirrane**, Imperial College London

> **Tom Broom & Alex Bairstow**, Higher Education Progression Partnership

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A randomised controlled trial of a multi-intervention outreach programme: what happened next?

Professor Elisabeth Moores

Aston University

A randomised controlled trial of a multi-intervention outreach programme for entry to higher education: what happened next?

Elisabeth Moores, Rob Summers, Adrian Burgess and
Amy Slater-McGill

12th May 2026

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Why this project matters

Multi-intervention outreach pathways are:

- a common approach to widen access (Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020)
- often associated with positive outcomes for participants (e.g. Burgess, Horton & Moores, 2021)

BUT most current evidence

- focuses on impact on student **aspirations/attitudes** rather than HE attendance
- provides **correlational** rather than causal evidence due to methodologies used

Our aim (back in 2020!): use a pilot **randomised controlled trial (RCT)** to evaluate impact of programme on progression to HE

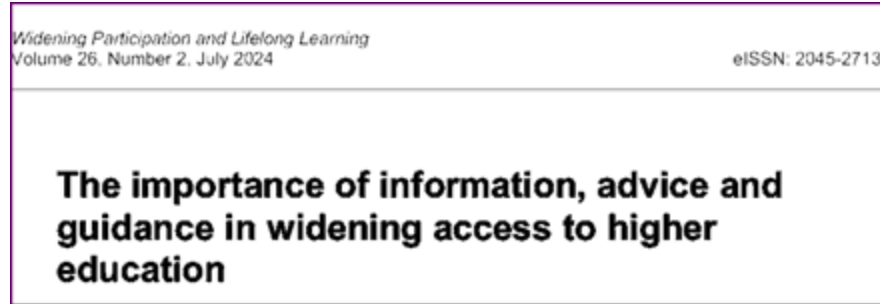
18-month programme:

- induction session
- healthcare subject taster days
- attainment-raising
- careers advice
- university interview preparation
- work experience
- UCAS personal statement day
- summer school
- graduation and transition event.

Participants:

- Year 12 students meeting at least one WP criterion
- Randomised and tracked two cohorts from 2020-21 and 2021-22
- First cohort n=152: randomly allocated to the *treatment* (n=110) and *control* (n=42) groups

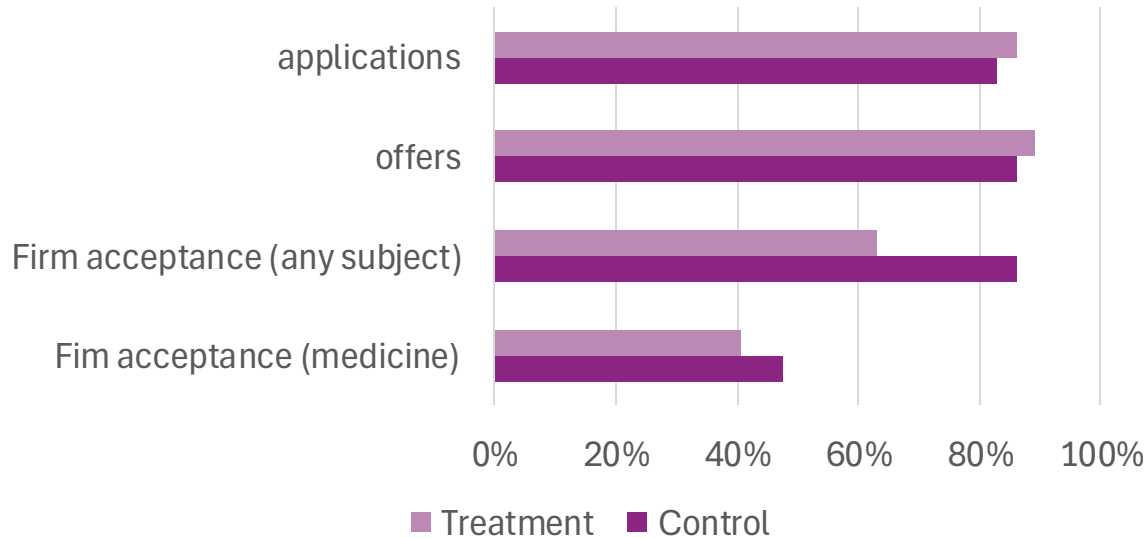
Midway analyses of survey data and focus groups (Summers *et al.*, 2024):



- At the start of the programme, **attitudes were already positive** towards studying at - and belonging in - HE i.e. no lack of aspiration
- Confidence in **applying to and funding HE was relatively low** at the start of the programme and increased significantly during it
- The perception of being able to **afford to participate in HE was relatively low** throughout

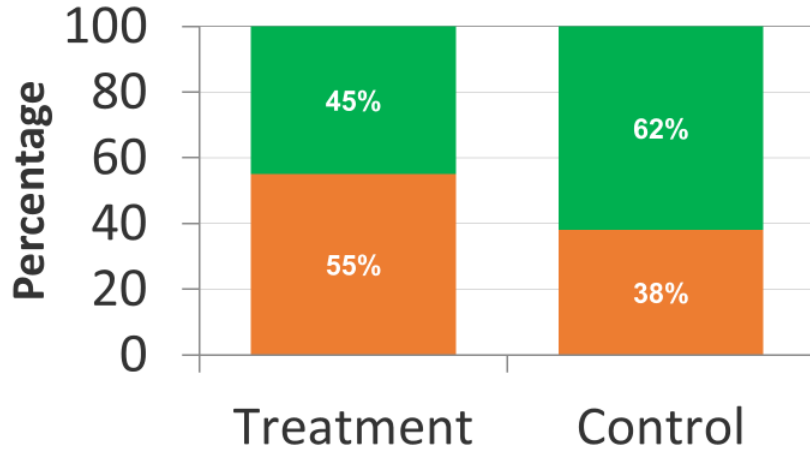
Pipeline: applications, offers and acceptances to HE

Results from UCAS Outreach Evaluator



i.e. treatment group: (i) marginally more applications (ii) greater proportion of offers **but (iii) less likely overall to make a firm acceptance**

Enrolment to HE

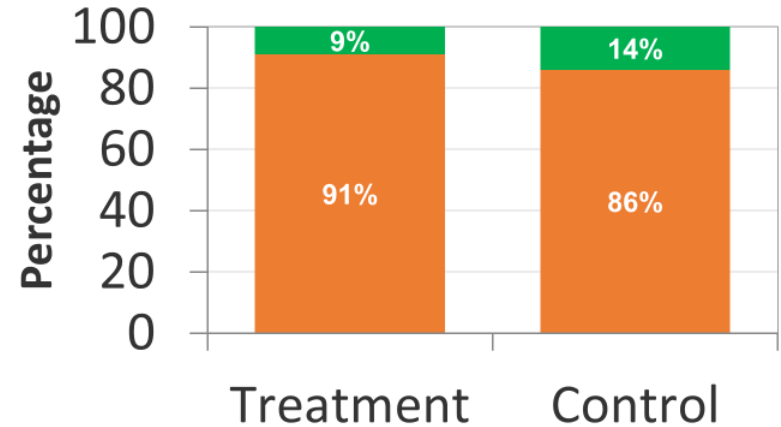


■ Unsuccessful ■ Successful

Fisher Exact test, $p=0.10$

No statistically significant difference

Enrolment to medicine



Fisher Exact test, $p=0.381$

No statistically significant difference

More likely to go into medicine:

- First generation students (12.3% vs. 5.3%)
- Pupils with higher GCSE grades (8.18 mean GCSE score vs. 6.97)
- Pupils from areas with lower GCSE gap quintile (i.e. less disadvantaged areas in terms of GCSE attainment)

More likely to go into HE:

- Pupils with higher GCSE grades

NOT predictive for either:

- **Treatment group** (marginally NEGATIVE effect for entry to HE: $p=.07$)
- Free School Meals
- TUNDRA
- Sex
- Ethnicity

Findings (at this point in time):

- GCSE grades are the only strong and consistent predictor
- Pathways programme does **not** significantly increase enrolment in HE or medicine

Possible Explanations:

- Possible deferrals/ A level retakes for medicine – treatment group **less** likely to have a firm acceptance – may be holding out for healthcare offers?
- Randomisation was not blind – control group may have gone elsewhere or become more determined
- COVID year – not delivered in normal way

BUT

Second cohort – yet to analyse – data just become available!

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Examining success for multi-touch point, pre-enrolment STEM programmes

Sarah Dirrane

Imperial College London

COSMOS

External evaluation

Examining success for multi-touch point, pre-enrolment STEM programmes

STEM Futures & STEM Potential: what we found, and what it means for the sector

Sarah Dirrane · Co-Founder & Research Director, Cosmos

TASO Annual Conference 2026 · 12 May 2026 · Woburn House, London

IMPERIAL



Two Imperial pre-enrolment programmes

Both supporting students from disadvantaged or underrepresented backgrounds onto STEM pathways. Both pre-enrolment, multi-touchpoint, on Imperial's campus.

STEM POTENTIAL

Underrepresented students, all ethnicities

Launched 2014 · Year 10-13

- Practical sessions, masterclasses, lab visits, lectures
- Summer School, field trips, guest speakers
- A-Level revision & university application support

STEM FUTURES

Black Heritage students, co-designed

Designed in 2022 with Black students (Cosmos research) · Year 10-13

- Same multi-touchpoint format as STEM Potential
- Culturally competent curriculum, Black role models
- Explicit focus on belonging, identity, community
- Personal development woven through every element

Shared aim: build confidence, belonging and STEM identity to support informed choices about university and STEM careers.

Two programmes, one qualitative evaluation

Imperial commissioned Cosmos in 2025 to qualitatively evaluate both programmes against their theory of change. External and qualitative – to amplify student voice, limit internal evaluator bias, and create space for students to speak openly.

7

focus groups

7 × 90-minute virtual focus groups with current students across Years 11, 12 & 13 on both programmes

49

students

27 STEM Potential
22 STEM Futures

2

stakeholder interviews

Both programme coordinators

ToC

evaluation framework

Mapped against Imperial's Theory of Change outcomes

ALSO DRAWN ON

Student journals (pre-task) · Literature review · Internal data review · Programme satisfaction surveys

What the research told us – and what it means beyond Imperial

01

Identity & lived experience shape programme choice

Black Heritage students self-selected into STEM Futures for cultural fit - for community, role models, and not to be the only Black student in the room. Programme naming and framing carry weight.

02

Personal development is as important as the STEM content

Resilience, self-efficacy, social skills and mental health emerged as core outcomes. STEM Futures' explicit focus on personal development was its strongest differentiator.

03

Programmes broaden students' understanding of STEM

Both programmes moved students from a narrow view (often Medicine only) toward a diverse range of degree and career options. They now want more depth on niche routes - Engineering, Computing, Biomedical.

04

The coordinators are the programme

Trusted, long-running relationships with coordinators were highly valued & celebrated by both cohorts. For STEM Futures, the coordinator became a culturally relevant role model and advocate.

Belonging in STEM ≠ belonging at Imperial

An honest, unintended outcome - and one of the most transferable lessons from this evaluation.

WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

Belonging in STEM: Both programmes successfully build STEM identity and confidence - most ToC outcomes met or nearly met.

Belonging at Imperial: A clear gap remains. STEM Futures students became acutely aware of Imperial's 4% Black student population.

The unintended outcome: Exposure to a positive Black Heritage cohort raised the bar - some are now deterred from applying.

Compounding factors: Imperial's rigorous admissions and London cost of living add to drop-off risk at the application stage.

46% → 21%

*Year 13 STEM Futures students agreeing
'people similar to me go to Imperial'
before vs. after STEM Futures · Source: internal survey*

37% STEM Potential 29% STEM Futures
of Year 13s confident they'd get a place at Imperial if they applied

For evaluators: success in one ToC outcome can complicate another - and the gap only shows if you track it explicitly.

For others designing pre-enrolment programmes

FOR ANY PRE-ENROLMENT PROGRAMME

01

Build theory of change tracking into rolling surveys

Not just end-point evaluation. Tensions between outcomes show up over time - and have the potential to be missed if you only ask at the end.

02

Pair external qualitative evaluation with internal data

Independent voice creates space for honesty and lets students speak openly. Triangulate with internal surveys to reduce bias.

03

Be open about unintended outcomes

Including findings that may not flatter the host institution. They are often where the biggest learnings are gained.

FOR PROGRAMMES DESIGNED FOR BLACK HERITAGE STUDENTS

01

Embed cultural representation at every level

Coordinators, mentors, ambassadors and content. STEM Futures' impact came from culturally grounded design - not just from adding diverse speakers alone.

02

Build belonging at the institution, not just within the programme

Strong programme-level belonging can highlight, rather than close, the institution-level gap. Plan for the application stage from the start.

COSMOS

External Evaluation

Cosmos

W www.cosmosltd.uk

E hello@cosmosltd.uk

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Research and Evaluation | Higher Education Access & Participation | Recruitment

Nexus, University of Leeds, Discovery Way, Leeds LS2 3AA

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The impact of understanding your place: Hepp's regional data dashboard

Tom Broom & Alex Bairstow

Higher Education Progression Partnership

The impact of understanding your place:

Hepp's regional data dashboard

Alex Bairstow and Tom Broom

TASO, 12th May 2026



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Sheffield Hallam University
and the University of Sheffield

**Sheffield
Hallam
University**



**University of
Sheffield**

Who are the Higher Education Progression Partnership (Hepp)?

- Formed in 2011 by the two Sheffield Universities, Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Sheffield
- Works across South Yorkshire to encourage more children, young people, and adults to consider higher education opportunities
- Additionally hosts our regional, government funded Uni Connect partnership and our locally driven South Yorkshire Children's University partnership
- As a collective, with our university funding partners we work together to increase and widen participation of our region's learners to higher education



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Introduction/context

South Yorkshire, like all places, is not one homogeneous region

Historically, our outreach programmes haven't always recognised this

This risks a “one size fits all” approach

This in turn risks an overgeneralised programme theory, which doesn't account for how context shapes change mechanisms and outcomes



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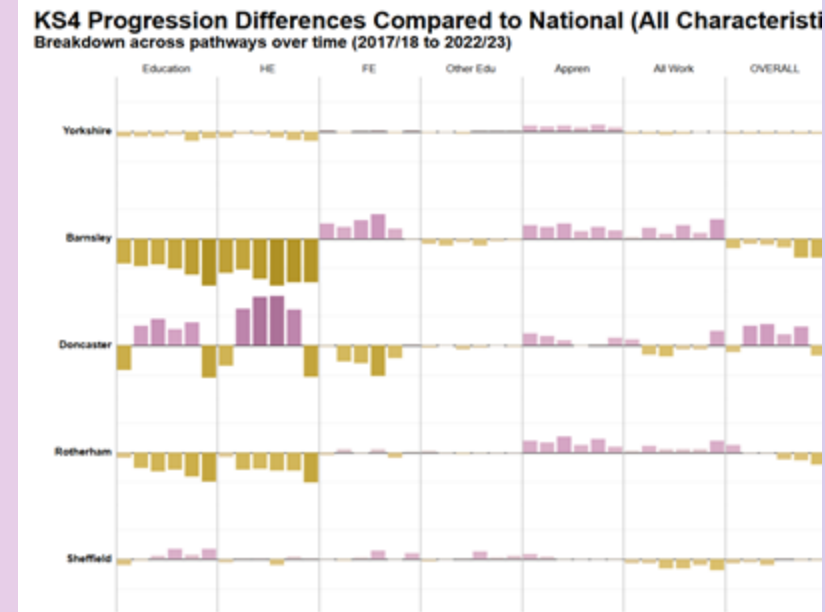
What is the Regional Data Dashboard and why was it developed?

Partnership for dashboard development

Hepp partnered with Visualising Data Ltd to build a multi-year data dashboard to inform our partnership outreach interventions.

Understanding and addressing diverse educational needs

The dashboard was created to enable us to understand the distinct educational contexts across South Yorkshire's varied areas.



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What data does the dashboard include?

Demographic mapping indicators

Demographic data includes POLAR, TUNDRA, Adult HE participation.

Tracking progression destinations

After both Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 - by region, time, and disadvantage.

Layering

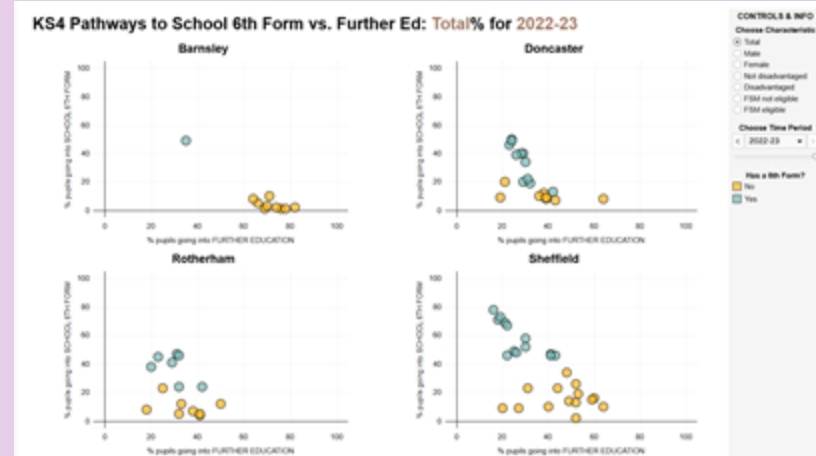
Multiple data sets can be integrated for more nuanced analysis.

Multiyear analysis

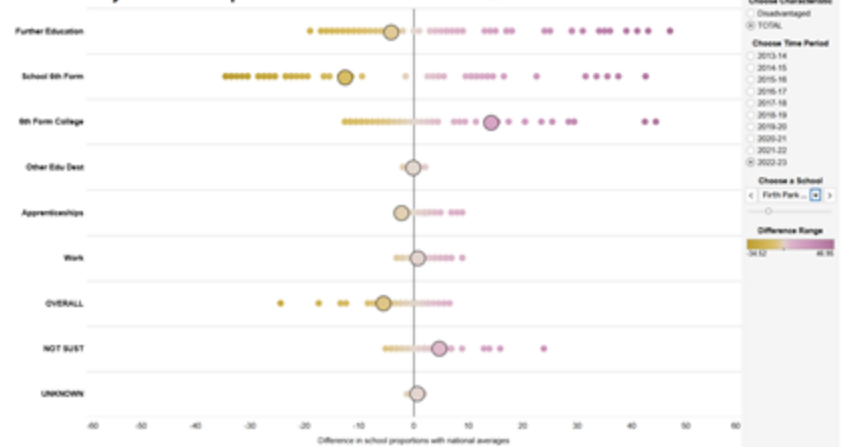
Data sets of up to 10 years to allow for longitudinal analysis

Institutional comparison

This data can be filtered at regional, sub regional and centre level.



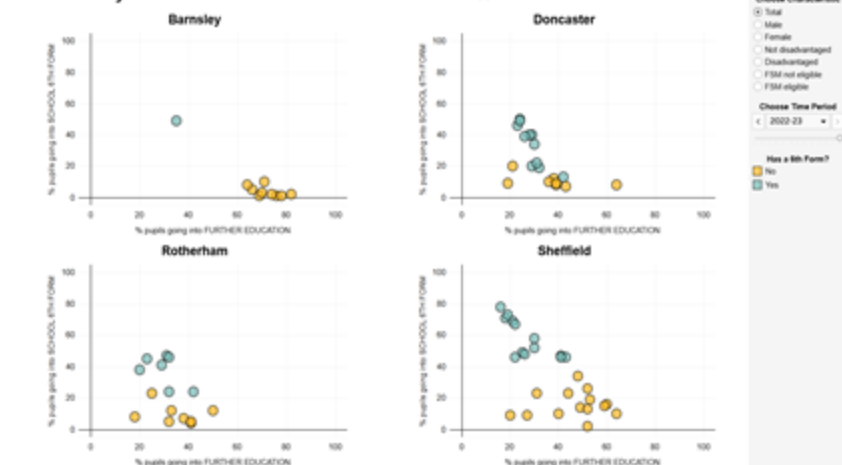
KS4 Pathway School Comparisons with National: TOTAL% for 2022-23



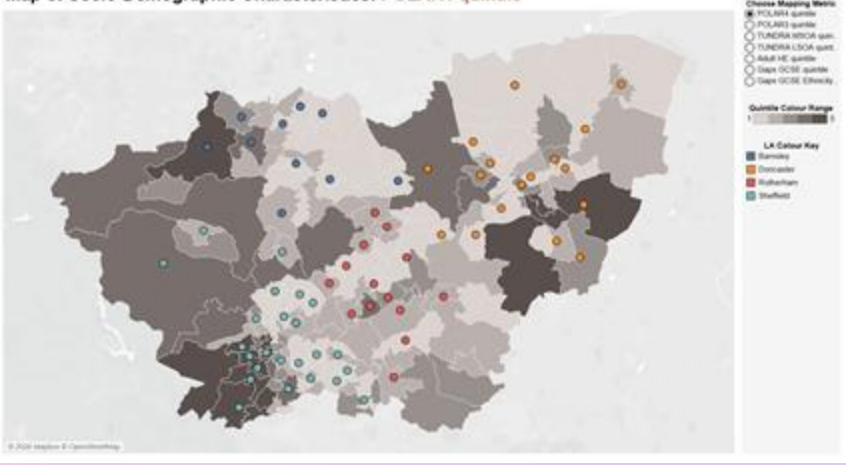
KS5 Progression By Region and LAs (All Characteristics) for 2022-23



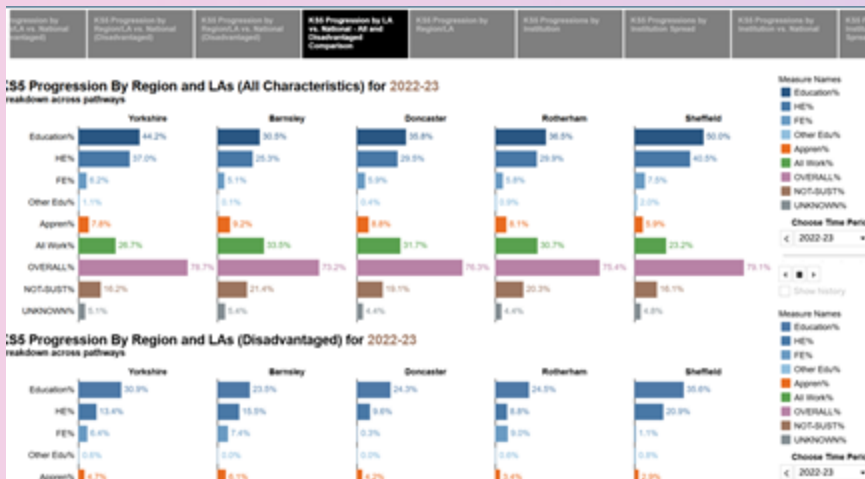
KS4 Pathways to School 6th Form vs. Further Ed: Total% for 2022-23



Map of Socio-Demographic Characteristics: POLAR4 quintile



How will our partnership use the dashboard?



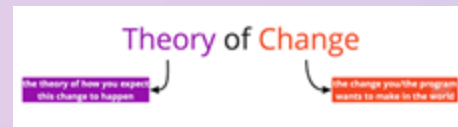
Targeting



Activity Development



Evaluation Planning



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Specific examples of where it has informed our approach

Targeting

Sheffield schools feature much more predominantly in our ranking if we target solely using FSM. However, when factoring in HE progression metrics such as TUNDRA, schools located outside of Sheffield (Rotherham, Barnsley, Doncaster) feature much more predominantly.

Program development

Insight re: increased likelihood of students from schools with sixth forms attending a sixth form, and students from 11-16 schools attending a FEC have informed program and activity development.

Evaluation planning

Building a more context-sensitive programme theory strengthens our analysis and our ability to understand differential programme effects. By integrating our monitoring and evaluation returns into the dashboard, we can further our understanding of how outcomes and causal mechanisms vary across different settings.



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What next?

- Encouraging our partnership to use the dashboard and explore the data
- Working with partners to identify additional relevant data sets:
 - OFSTED rating
 - School attainment metrics
 - Progression to HE by type
- Ensuring most up to date data sets are being used
- Incorporating our own data into the dashboard



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Impact beyond our partnership

Encouraging critical evaluation

The dashboard inspires stakeholders to critically assess their understanding of local educational contexts beyond basic metrics.

Promoting place-informed outreach

Showcasing contextual data helps foster more nuanced and effective outreach strategies tailored to specific environments.

National and international influence

The approach aims to influence educational outreach practices, encouraging adoption of similar tools for equity.



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Questions?



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Panel discussion

Paper presentations: pre-entry interventions

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Lunch break and networking

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> **Dr Jake Hinks and Vikki Potts**, Wolverhampton University

> **Shivani Wilson-Rochford and Cain Clark**, Birmingham City University

> **Professor Sonia Ilie**, University of Cambridge

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Is everything ok? Success in using compassionate comms in nudge emails

Eleanor Turpin

Nottingham Trent University



Nottingham Trent
University

Is everything ok? Success in using Compassionate Comms in nudge emails

Dr Eleanor Turpin

Learning Analytics Research Manager, The Centre for Student and
Community Engagement, Nottingham Trent University

12th May 2026

NTU Attendance and Engagement policy

- Escalating levels of support for students with repeated non-engagement. Policy is not punitive
- First stage: students who have not engaged with their studies for 7 days are sent a nudge email to encourage re-engagement and signpost to support.
- Universal design of service for all UG students, but particular benefit to APP target groups as 1.2 to 1.5 times more likely to be sent a 7-day nudge.
- Engagement and non-engagement monitored through an instance of StREAM from Kortext
- Emails sent via manual mail merge



Compassionate Communications

- Guidance launched by Academic Registrar's Council following work by the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce
- Requirement for *'clear, empathetic, action-focused and supportive'* communications.



- 1 We commit to adopting a **Culture of Kindness** and incorporating it into student-facing policies, processes, and communications.
- 2 We commit to **Mindful Communications** which are clear, empathetic, action-focused, and supportive.
- 3 We commit to **Timely Communications** ensuring that careful consideration has been given to both delivery and timings, enabling students to access advice and support when they most need it.
- 4 We commit to **Inclusivity** by actively identifying and addressing barriers to engagement, as well as carefully considering the impact of processes and communications on all student groups.
- 5 We commit to the principle of **Reflection and Continuous Improvement** by dedicating time to review challenges and successes in delivering student-facing policies, processes and communications with compassion and empathy.

Prompted to review wording of nudge email

Original wording

- Subject: NTU Support
- General introduction acknowledging common challenges
- Signposting to support services
- Inoffensive to avoid causing alarm or irritation

Amended wording

- Subject: Is everything ok?
- Explicitly references 7 days of no engagement and the link between low engagement and the risks to progression
- Signposting to support services

Trial details

- AB trial
- Alerts calculation runs continuously during teaching periods
- Dates: 27th Jan – 27th March 2025 (term 2 24/25) and 22nd Sept – 5th Dec (term 1 25/26)
- Outcomes:
 - Escalation to next stage of Engagement and Attendance policy due to further periods of sustained non-engagement
 - 10/14-day alert
 - 10/14-day alert within the same period of non-engagement

Trial details: Randomisation

Trial Arm	A		B		Total
Term 2 24/25	13,642	50.1%	13,599	49.9%	27,241
Term 1 25/26	14,897	49.8%	14,992	50.2%	29,889
Combined totals	20,787	49.9%	20,835	50.1%	41,622

Trial details: Outcomes

	Term 2 24/25				Term 1 25/26				Combined			
	A		B		A		B		A		B	
Initial Population	13,642		13,599		14,897		14,992		28,539		28,591	
7-day alert	3,134	23.0%	3,089	22.7%	4,574	30.7%	4,576	30.5%	7,708	27.0%	7,665	26.8%
10/14-day alert	875	6.4%	922	6.8%	1,613	10.8%	1,735	11.6%	2,488	8.7%	2,657	9.3%
10/14-day alert same period	550	4.0%	623	4.6%	922	6.2%	1,050	7.0%	1,472	5.2%	1,673	5.9%

Analysis

- Logistic regression to model the relationship between email wording A or B, and the outcomes of further periods of sustained non-engagement.
- Models included gender, academic school, new /continuing/ repeating, clearing application, ethnic group, disability and IMD.
- Fee status (home or international), age and entry qualification excluded as did not enhance model
- Combined results analysed using mixed effects method to account for some students triggering 7-day alerts in both terms; disability and IMD excluded to aid convergence.

Result

- A student with the amended wording is 14% less likely to generate a 10/14-day alert, with a statistical significance of $p=0.00007$, if all other factors are the same.
- A student with the amended wording is 18% less likely to generate a 10/14-day alert within the same period of non-engagement, with a statistical significance of $p=0.000003$, if all other factors are the same.
- The amended wording had a **small, but statistically significant effect** on additional periods of non-engagement.

But that's not all...

- Between Sept 2023 and March 2025 ~26,000 emails sent with original wording with no single reply to StudentEngagement@ntu.ac.uk inbox.
- 200+ direct email replies to new wording - including many where students went on to receive meaningful support.



Is everything ok?

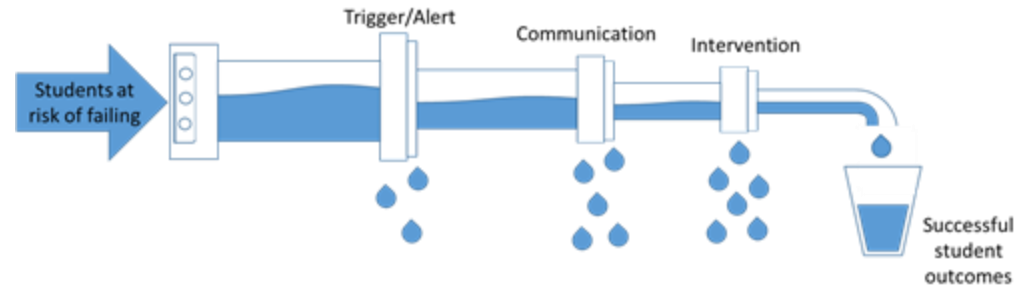
Hi,

We have noticed that you haven't been engaging with activities such as attending class or using NOW over the last seven days. We know that active student participation is a core element of learning and teaching at NTU. Consistently low engagement can make it more challenging for you to pass the year. This might be because you are studying in a way where you haven't needed to attend or use online resources, or you are on a short-term placement.

Reflections



- Focus on ‘wellbeing’, but comparable work as triggers were non-attendance and engagement score, and outcomes were increased attendance for two HEIs.
- *‘The assumed link between light-touch communication based on analytics data, wellbeing and academic engagement is not supported by the evidence from these trials’*
- Number of participants 1-2 orders of magnitude smaller.
- Conflates communication with intervention; previous work by our team identifies these as distinct steps on causal pathway (<https://oflaproject.eu/>)



Summary

- Wording of nudge emails redesigned following Compassionate Comms guidance
- New wording resulted in a small but significant reduction in periods of sustained non-engagement, as evaluated via AB trial.
- New wording also resulted in an increase in opportunities to offer meaningful support to students

Panel discussion

Paper presentations: post-entry interventions

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> **Shivani Wilson-Rochford & Cain Clark**, Birmingham City University

> **Professor Sonia Ilie & Dr Ellie Greer**, University of Cambridge

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Peer-led poster session with refreshments

Collaboration in practice: risks and rewards

> Chaired by **Dr Omar Khan**, TASO

> **Professor Paul Morgan**, Buckinghamshire New University

> **Leanne Taher-Bates**, Liverpool John Moores University

> **Dr Morag Duffin**, The University of Law

> **Jared Patel**, Loughborough University

In-conversation

- > **Professor Eunice Simmons**, Vice Chancellor, University of Chester
- > **Will Gaines**, President-elect, VP Student Life, Chester Students' Union

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Reflections and close

Dr Omar Khan

CEO, TASO

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Thank you for joining us!

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Drinks reception
