

Liverpool Plus: supporting first year transition into university with a theory of change and learning from pilot interventions

Deborah Fish, Evaluation and Impact Manager, deborah.fish@liverpool.ac.uk

Context

In Liverpool's Access and Participation Plan 2025–2029 (APP), our primary focus has changed from supporting access to supporting student success. For our three main target groups (IMD Quintile 1 students, black, Asian and minority ethnic students and disabled students), there are gaps in all stages of the lifecycle from continuation to awarding.

At the time of writing the APP, there was no dedicated support programme at Liverpool for these groups. Student feedback indicated that there would be a demand for a support programme for students from these groups to support them in finding other students from a similar background, and to find the support they need as a WP student.

Liverpool Plus was named as an activity in 4 of our APP intervention strategies, to support with students' continuation, completion and the awarding gaps. At the time of writing the APP, the programme was only in its scoping phase – we knew there was a need for an intervention, and that this intervention would take place outside the curriculum.

Design of the intervention took place over the academic year 2023/24, including 2 sessions with the APP Student Panel, gathering their thoughts on what the programme should look like and what specific support they felt that they would have needed during first year. Other contributions to the design of the intervention included taking on board learning from presentations and conversations about the Lancaster Success Programme, Leeds Plus and the Manchester 10/10 programme. Feedback from participants and the APP student panel continues to inform the delivery of the programme, and adaptations will be made using this insight and staff reflections going forward.

The initial plan is being piloted in 2024/25, with an anticipated full rollout in 2025/26. In this pilot year, students who were previously known to the Widening Participation team were invited to sign up to the programme, and other students had the opportunity to sign up to the programme through targeted emails and at the welcome fair.

Going forward, we are investigating the option of having eligible students automatically enrolled into the programme (with the option to opt-out at any time), following feedback from some students who did not know about the programme, and would have benefitted from activities that had already happened.

Eligible students include:

- students who have taken part in pre-entry access programmes at Liverpool
- students who have disclosed a disability prior to registration
- black British students
- students who have experience of social care
- mature students
- IMD Quintile 1 students who came through the foundation year programme.

Theory of change



Evidencing impact

As this is a new intervention, in the pilot year, the focus of the evaluation is on implementation and processes. Ad hoc feedback from students has been monitored by the delivery team, and semi-structured interview check-ins have taken place with staff over the year. A final process evaluation discussion will take place after the final activity in June. To assess impact, the objective is to achieve type 2 standard of evidence, through undertaking pre and post surveys with participants through the year, using the TASO Access and Success Questionnaire as appropriate. However, most of the evaluation will be undertaken through secondary analysis.

Secondary analysis will be undertaken using a matching process (exact process to be determined), comparing students who participated in the programme to those who did not. Matching is likely to be done using ethnicity, domicile region, course, entry tariff and IMD deprivation quintile. However, issues are likely to arise due to the number of students per course in the underrepresented groups eligible for Liverpool Plus, so some nuance may need to be applied.

Outcome	Type of analysis	Date data available
Increased continuation of participants compared to non-participants	Secondary analysis of continuation rates – using year after entry registrations as a proxy	December following year of entry
Increased attainment in year 1 assessments	Secondary analysis – comparison of module grades	December following year of entry
Increased engagement with curriculum	Secondary analysis – comparison of attendance at timetabled sessions and VLE	July in academic year of interest
Increased engagement with support services	Secondary analysis – comparison of engagement with libraries, careers, global opportunities, wellbeing	July in academic year of interest
Increased sense of belonging for participants	Survey	July in academic year of interest

Next steps

Following the final events of this year, a formal process evaluation discussion will take place with the project team, to discuss the successes and challenges of the pilot year, and what changes need to be made going forward. Student feedback from the APP student panel and ad hoc feedback will be incorporated into these recommendations.

Ethical approval needs to be sought for the impact evaluation of this project, so work will be undertaken to ensure ethical principles are applied when students take part in the activities.

An internal evaluation of student attainment and continuation will be undertaken from October, once module grades for the year are finalised after September resits.

The programme is due to run again in 2025/26.

References

- Davis et al., Students' Sense of Belonging: The Development of a Predictive Retention Model, *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, Vol. 19, No. 1, February 2019, pp. 117–127. doi: 10.14434/josotl.v19i1.2678
- Kantanis, The role of social transition in students' adjustment to the first-year of university, *Journal of Institutional Research in Australasia and JIR*, Vol. 9, No. 1, May 2000
- Locks, Angela M, et al. "Extending Notions of Campus Climate and Diversity to Students' Transition to College." *The Review of Higher Education*, vol. 31 no. 3, 2008, p. 257–285. *Project MUSE*, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2008.001>.
- Sundqvist, A. J. E., Nyman-Kurkiala, P., Ness, O., & Hemberg, J. (2024). The influence of educational transitions on loneliness and mental health from emerging adults' perspectives. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, 19(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/10482631.2024.2422142>
- Thomas, L, What works? Facilitating an effective transition into higher education , *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, Special Issue/ Winter 2012–13, pp. 4–24(21), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL14.5.4>
- Thompson, M., Pawson, C., & Evans, B. (2021). Navigating entry into higher education: the transition to independent learning and living. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(10), 1398–1410. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1933400>