Evaluation plan: University of Southampton - Dissertation retreats and student panels

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This is a comprehensive document that outlines the overall strategy and approach for evaluating an intervention. It is designed to align with and be linked to an Access and Participation Plan (APP) where relevant and appropriate and to give accountability to relevant staff and stakeholders within higher education providers (HEPs).

The evaluation plan should be developed collaboratively to ensure relevant perspectives are considered and will therefore involve input from practitioners, evaluators, and faculty staff, and should be signed off by a senior lead. It has been designed to inform the development of a research protocol - a detailed and specific document outlining a step-by-step guide to how each aspect of the evaluation will be carried out, including an analytical strategy. An example research protocol (template in TASO's resources) can be found here which details an evaluation of a curriculum reform intervention to address the ethnicity degree awarding gap. Depending on the capacity of individual HEPs, this evaluation plan may be shared internally or externally to support the development of the research protocol and subsequently to conduct the evaluation.

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> ### Section 1: Evaluation objectives
>
> *This section covers the purpose of the evaluation and provides justification for its undertaking. The scope of the evaluation in terms of the causal pathways to be evaluated and the primary, secondary and exploratory research questions. This section states the evaluations specific objectives and hypotheses.*

Evaluation objectives

Purpose

The purpose of the evaluation is to identify the impact of two activities at the University of Southampton (UoS), both of which target full-time UK domiciled Black undergraduate students and have the shared goal of reducing the ethnicity degree awarding gap (EDAG) for Black students at UoS.

1. **Dissertation Retreats:** This programme comprises a fully funded residential writing retreat (for approximately 20 participants), one 1.5-day mini writing retreat held on campus and a DIY 'retreat toolkit' held online which can be accessed asynchronously. It is expected that improving dissertation awarding would make a significant difference to the overall awarding outcome, as a double-weighted module. The retreats are open to a broad group of students (e.g., students fromIMDQ1 postcodes) that includes the target group of Black undergraduate students.

2. **Awarding Gap Project (AGP):** The project is centred around the 'three Cs' identified in previous internal research at UoS – Community, Culture, and Curriculum – as it seeks to build trust and a sense of belonging among Black students, factors crucial for academic success. The project is underpinned by a student panel comprising Black undergraduates, who lead the development of interventions like the Black Fresher's Guide to foster inclusivity.

Scope

The two activities are covered in a single evaluation plan due to their overlap in terms of the participants (i.e., the students on the AGP panel are also eligible for the dissertation retreats) and outcomes (i.e., both aim to improve Black students' sense of belonging and have a long-term goal of reducing the EDAG).

Research questions

Initial expectations for the dissertation retreats are that the programme will contribute to reducing the awarding gap through intermediate outcomes such as improved dissertation performance and enhanced academic skills, belonging, and confidence that

contribute to wider degree performance, compared to participants' baseline average. The evaluation of the **dissertation retreats** includes the following research questions:

- **Primary:**
  - Does participating in the dissertation retreat programme improve student awarding on their dissertation (compared to their previous awarding/academic trajectory and to students who did not attend the dissertation retreats)?
  - Does participating in the dissertation retreat programme improve students' degree outcome (compared to their previous awarding/academic trajectory and to students who did not attend the dissertation retreats)?
- **Secondary:**
  - Does attending the residential dissertation retreat improve students' academic self-efficacy and confidence in their academic skills (e.g., academic writing, project management, goal setting)?
  - Does attending the residential dissertation retreat improve students' sense of belonging?

With regards to the **AGP**, the student panel is expected to contribute to reducing the awarding gap by providing students with opportunities to build community and enact changes within the institution that authentically speak to their lived experiences and those of their peers. Outputs, like the Fresher's guide, are expected to signal that UoS is a welcoming space for Black students, improving their sense of social fit in the institution and their sense of belonging, which is positively associated with awarding. The research questions covered within the scope of this evaluation of the AGP are:

- **Primary:**
  - What is the impact of the AGP on the general sense of community and belonging amongst Black students at UoS?
  - How do the AGP outputs (e.g., events, Black Freshers' Guide, etc) contribute to Black students' experiences and outcomes?
- **Secondary:**
  - Does participating in the AGP panel promote a sense of community amongst participants?
  - Does participating in the AGP present participants with additional opportunities for professional development (e.g., for training, work experience, skill development, networking, etc)?

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Section 2: Intervention

This section describes the intervention being evaluated, to enable replication, and is taken from the associated Enhanced Theory of Change (EToC).

Intervention

Using dissertation retreats and student panels to improve Black student outcomes at the University of Southampton

Why was the intervention developed?

As part of their University Strategy, Access and Participation Plan (APP) and Race Equality Charter (REC) to address the racial inequities within the student experience, the University of Southampton (UoS) Widening Participation and Social Mobility (WPSM) directorate has developed three workstreams themed around Curriculum, Culture and Community, identified by sector research and current students as key areas of focus for change. From these areas, UoS has selected two activities to form part of a multi-intervention Theory of Change (ToC), both of which target full-time UK domiciled Black undergraduate students and have the shared goal of reducing the ethnicity degree awarding gap (EDAG) for Black students at UoS, with individual objectives that contribute to that overarching aim.

The two interventions covered in this evaluation plan (i.e., the dissertation retreats and the Awarding Gap Project (AGP)) align with the university's broader goals of reducing the EDAG between wand Black students to 10.9% by 2027-28, as part of its commitment to race equity, recognised in its Race Equality Charter (REC) award and the 2024-25 to 2027-28 APP.

*Rationale for the dissertation retreats***:** It is expected that improving dissertation awarding would make a significant difference to the overall awarding outcome, as a double-weighted module. More specifically, undertaking an independent research project such as an Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) positively impacts university awarding outcomes, but Black students are less likely to undertake an EPQ than white students. At UoS, a five-year aggregate period (2016-17-2020-21), shows the awarding gap between Black and white students who *had not* completed an EPQ was 15.4%, compared to 4.2% when students *had* completed the qualification. In some years the awarding gap was entirely reversed. As many parallels exist between the dissertation or final year project and the EPQ, developing and practising the skills required for completing a research project are expected to reduce the awarding gap.

External research into the impact of dissertation retreats (Murray, Rowena & Newton, 2009; Mattsson, Brandin & Hult, 2020; Edwards et al., 2020) shows that retreats boost confidence in writing ability and assists students by providing dedicated, quiet study

space, as well as accountability and skills support if needed. Retreats will demonstrate to students the importance of their writing and provide them with strategies which they will be able to use and adapt in future writing projects.

Rationale for the AGP student-panel: The AGP launched in 2021 and targets the 18.1% awarding gap between Black and white students. The project is centred around the 'three Cs' - Community, Culture, and Curriculum - it seeks to build trust and a sense of belonging among Black students, a factor crucial for academic success. The project is underpinned by a student panel comprising of Black UK domiciled undergraduates, who lead the development of interventions like the Black Fresher's Guide to foster inclusivity.

What is the intervention?

The **Dissertation Retreats** intervention is a dissertation development programme, comprising of a fully funded residential writing retreat (for approximately 20 participants held between the 29th – 31st of January 2024), one 1.5-day mini writing retreat held on campus, and a DIY "retreat toolkit" held online which can be accessed asynchronously. The retreat on campus was re-developed into a one day session with 0.5 delivered online due to adverse weather conditions preventing safe access to campus. The target participants of these retreats include other groups of students (e.g., students from IMDQ1 postcodes) as well as Black students. In tandem, ongoing personalised and enhanced support (such as that from Personal Academic Tutors) aims to empower students to excel.

The residential writing retreat will offer two structured days dedicated to writing the dissertation. Prior to the retreat, staff from the Post-Entry Academic Skills team will provide students with group coaching sessions to help them feel prepared and in the best position to make the most of the dedicated writing time.

On arrival at the location of the retreat, Cumberland Lodge, students will be asked to reflect on the progress of their dissertation and discuss what they would like to achieve over the course of the two dedicated writing days. The two days will be led by facilitators from the Post-Entry Academic Skills team and aligned to a clear schedule. The emphasis is placed on the processes of writing but there will be sessions to explore the practices, creativity, and skills involved in writing. The writing retreat will be structured so that writing sessions are collective and interspersed with regular breaks from writing to maintain momentum and flow. Writing and Maths & Stats specialists will also be available for students who wish to discuss the progress of their dissertation work.

The **AGP student panel** is made up of full-time UK domiciled Black undergraduate students who oversee the curation of student-focused interventions, with resources and support provided by staff. This is a paid position and the panel members' responsibilities

include facilitating student events and collaborating with key stakeholders to harness student voice in institution-wide projects.

Implementation of the AGP and its student panel includes:

- Running the application process and recruitment protocol.
- Inducting and training Black undergraduate students for the student panel, focusing on leadership and public speaking skills, higher education (HE) and racial equity information/terminology.
- Delivering a framework or schedule of events/activities (e.g., social events, networking, community-building, etc).
- Facilitating student events, activities and projects as informed by the AGP Student Panel (e.g., producing resources like the Black Fresher's Guide).
- Running student panels and engaging students in leading decision-making processes.
- Implementing awareness-raising communications and training (as relevant) for UoS staff and involving student inclusion coordinators and institutional leaders in project activities.
- Engaging in collaborative projects with UoS faculties and local organisations to extend the project's reach and impact.
- Utilising various communication channels, including student communications, emails, and social media, for effective promotion and information dissemination.

Who is the intervention for?

Dissertation Retreats:

The dissertation retreats are targeted at full-time UK domiciled Black undergraduate students. In addition to considering ethnicity, the eligibility criteria for the retreats also prioritises students on the *Awarding Gap Panel* (in the AGP), *Ignite Your Success* (IMDQ1 or care experienced) and any Black final year students. The nominations process for the retreats is tiered:

- Tier 1 – Nominated students who are supported by our Student Inclusion team (Ignite Your Success, Awarding Gap Project, Care Experienced and Estranged, and mature students). Students nominated by Student Inclusion staff.
- Tier 2 – Students involved in any of the following projects but have not been nominated by a staff member - Ignite Your Success, Awarding Gap Project, Care Experienced and Estranged, and mature students.
- Tier 3 – Any student who meets the retreat eligibility criteria (IMDQ1, Black/mixed Black ethnicity, Care Experienced and Estranged, and mature students).

Across all three groups, students on track for a borderline 2.1 or below are prioritised. Only students in their final UG year and home domiciled are eligible.

AGP:

The main beneficiary group is UK domiciled undergraduate Black students (both those on the Awarding Gap Panel and in the general student population). It should be noted that auxiliary beneficiaries may include all Black students because of the community-building elements of the AGP, even though the project is not formally monitoring the attainment of international Black students for example.

Who is delivering the intervention?

Dissertation Retreats:

Dissertation retreats will be delivered by the Writing and Study Skills Officers, who regularly run academic skills sessions, and will facilitate the tailored sessions with the students. The facilitators will manage the time and space, but students will be responsible for their own productivity during the workshops. The broader WPSM team will support funding and resourcing the retreats, as well as communications for recruitment, and there will be additional staffing from the Student Inclusion Manager. Personal Academic Tutors will provide auxiliary support for the programme aims re: dissertation guidance/advice.

AGP:

The AGP is primarily delivered by the Student Success and Inclusion Co-ordinator and the Student Inclusion Manager, as well as all panel members (both tiers 1 and 2), local organisations (including Black History Month South, Our Version Media, John Hansard Gallery and Southampton City Council), and 'guest' staff who request to consult with the panel (usually staff within Professional Services, for examples the Residences team).

How is the intervention delivered?

Dissertation retreats:

The dissertation retreats are delivered in a variety of formats to improve their accessibility. There is a residential retreat that allows students to remove themselves from their normal study environment and fully dedicate their time to improving their academic writing skills and/or focusing on writing their dissertation. The 1.5-day retreat was in-person and took place during core hours. Students will be asked to bring their own laptops. If they do not have access to personal laptops, arrangements will be made for these students. Writing materials will be provided by the Post-Entry Academic Skills team, including pens, notepads, large writing sheets for shared work, and marker pens.

In terms of procedure, the dissertation retreats involve coordination across multiple teams including the Enhancement Team and the Student Success team (both within the WPSM) as well as the Data, Analytics and Insight Team (to provide contact details for eligible students), the Centre for Higher Education Practice, and the Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice team. In developing the sessions, a number of key activities must take place including the development of a communication strategy to recruit target students, risk assessments, refinement of recruitment protocol (e.g., eligibility criteria, reviewing applications), and designing the programme contents, learning outcomes, and structure. While implementing this intervention, key tasks include training all delivery staff, running the individual retreat sessions, collecting demographic information from participating students, and engaging with students' Personal Academic Tutors. Alongside these, evaluation data will be collected throughout the delivery of the retreats and disseminated to related teams (e.g., REC and APP teams) and senior governing committees, as well as to colleagues delivering the sessions to inform the next iteration of the retreats.

AGP:

As it is in its third year, the AGP student panel has established recruitment and application procedures with potential participants. The opportunity to participate on the project is advertised at the beginning of the academic year through various internal student channels, at welcome week events, and in the Black Fresher's Guide. Students must complete a short application (in which they state whether they would like to apply to be a member of the panel, the Board, or both). Applications are shortlisted anonymously by the previous year's panel. Shortlisted candidates are then invited for group interviews. Following the interviews, candidates are assigned offers based on their overall performance (i.e., deciding which role to offer candidates who applied for both the Panel and the Board). Students from last year's panel are automatically offered a position on the Board the following year and are not required to undergo the recruitment process again (this is a recent change made to retain previous panel members, whilst ensuring recruitment for an entirely new student panel remained possible).

Upon being recruited to the panel, new participants receive training in leadership, public speaking, and HE and racial equity terminology. Training previously ran via a series of sessions covering different topics (e.g., intro to data session, race equity session, etc.) delivered in a mixed format (online and in person). For this and future years, training sessions will be delivered in person, as a single, three-hour group training workshop comprised of two parts:

- a general Awarding Gap Project induction (which covers important elements such as data) delivered by Student Inclusion staff; and

- a race equity session delivered by an external consultant (for instance, this year Don John delivered this part of the workshop).

Students are provided with a training handbook that has all the necessary induction information.

For Tier 1 panellists, there are weekly meetings, and monthly meetings for Tier 2 panellists. In addition to these meetings, the AGP panel:

- Oversees the updating and distribution of the Black Fresher's Guide.
- Multiple events throughout the academic year including 'The Debate', an evening hosted by AGP students to explore current issues around being Black at university, as well as an annual cultural gala, celebrating Black students and allies through music, talks, workshops and social activities.
- Events related to Black History Month.
- Gathering student opinions through surveys and focus groups on the panel and its projects.

Panel and Board meetings are delivered in a mixed format, both online and in-person. However, most of the panel (tier 1) meetings, tend to be online due to the smaller numbers and weekly frequency.

Where is the intervention delivered?

Dissertation Retreats:

The intervention is delivered in a variety of ways, including:

- 1 x residential retreat at Cumberland Lodge (29 – 31 January 2024), with accommodation and catering provided.
- 1 x on-campus mini retreat (1.5 days) at the University Conference Centre (31 October – 2 November 2023) with catering provided.
- 1 x online session hosted on 2 November 2023 (added in as half of the on-campus day could not be delivered due to a storm).

1 x asynchronous DIY "writing retreat" toolkit which will be accessible online.

AGP:

The intervention is delivered through panels and these meetings take place both online and in-person to balance flexibility, accessibility and maintaining participant engagement.

The events coordinated and hosted by the panel (i.e., The Debate and cultural gala) are mostly in-person and located on the UoS campus. Black History Month events are a combination of both in-person and online sessions and are hosted across the wider city.

How long is / how many times will the intervention be delivered?

The dissertation retreat programme includes:

- A fully funded residential writing retreat (for approximately 20 participants)
- 1x 1.5-day mini writing retreat held on campus
- A DIY "retreat toolkit" held online which can be accessed asynchronously.

With regards to the AGP, to make the panel accessible to a broader group of students, the AGP offers participants the opportunity to contribute at two levels of engagement:

- Tier 1 – Weekly meetings (a standard total of 2 hours of work per week, inclusive of pre-reading or follow-up tasks).
    - These meetings tend to be an hour long and an additional hour is reserved for work outside of meetings such as preparation tasks and hosting events).
- Tier 2 – Monthly meetings (a standard total of 5 hours of work per month inclusive of pre-reading or follow up tasks).

These meetings tend to be about two hours long and are co-facilitated by the Student Success and Inclusion Co-ordinator and the Tier 1 panel students. Other working hours are reserved for any preparation tasks or pre-reading, as well as involvement in other work (such as supporting Tier 1 panel with hosting events).

Will the intervention be tailored?

Dissertation Retreats:

- The intervention will be tailored by providing effective support and referral opportunities to students based on the tiered nomination process.
- Support can be tailored based on academic discipline and stage in dissertation process.
- Writing and Maths & Stats specialists will be available for students who wish to discuss the progress of their dissertation work, ensuring that students from a range of disciplines can engage with tailored support.
- The intervention is tailored by providing a range of joining options to fit with people's needs and commitments (residential. 1.5 days with catering, etc.)

AGP:

Activities, projects, and outputs are student-led via the panel. This ensures that students are central to the Awarding Gap Project decision making process. Year-on-year, these outputs are determined by students, ensuring they are tailored to students' needs.

How will the intervention be optimised?

There are four main strategies for optimising the delivery of the dissertation retreats:

- Training for all staff delivering the retreat sessions.
- Providing delivery staff with feedback from participating students, to be integrated into future iterations of the retreats.
- Developing an enhanced promotion and communication strategy to increase student awareness and participation in the retreats.
- Providing group coaching from the Post-Entry Academic Skills Team for students to help them to feel prepared and in the best position to make the most of the dedicated writing time.

With regards to the AGP, the following approaches have been implemented to optimise the performance of this group:

- Using staff to increase the visibility of the project across the university, city and sector, achieved through working with student communications teams, delivering internal staff training, networking at city-based events, and conference attendance.
- Disseminating the panel's work and outputs at conferences.
- Consistently monitoring student engagement patterns within the panels (e.g., this led to a move towards more in-person meetings last year to increase engagement and motivation of students).

Involving the panel in the development of other projects across the university, with students playing a consultancy role to amplify the Black student voice and provide insight into the diversity of student perceptions and experiences.

Section 3: Evaluation design

This section provides details on the recommended evaluation of the intervention, including the design of both impact evaluation and implementation and process evaluation, sample, outcome measures, and data collection.

Evaluation design

Methodological approach

This multi-method evaluation triangulates insights from multiple sources of information to address the research questions forming the impact evaluation (Table 1) and the implementation and process evaluation (IPE) (Table 2).

Impact evaluation

The impact of dissertation retreats on student attainment, academic self-efficacy, and sense of belonging will be addressed primarily through quasi-experimental methods that consist of several comparisons (i.e., difference-in-difference contrasts)[1] of student outcome and survey data.

The impact evaluation of the AGP will be based on a detailed interrupted time series analysis and semi-structured interviews with students on the AGP panel and students attending AGP events.

Implementation and process evaluation (IPE)

The main research question related to IPE relates to the *perceived* impact of these two interventions, as both work with relatively small samples of Black students (note that the university has a small Black student population in general). The perspectives of those implementing and facilitating the interventions will be explored to understand the nuanced and transformative activities and experiences the dissertation retreats and AGP provides students. Moreover, there is an overlap in the eligibility criteria for the residential dissertation retreat (i.e., tier 1) and participating in the AGP student panel, meaning that the groups are not mutually exclusive. As such, it is important to consider the reflections of staff leading these interventions to uncover anecdotal evidence for unevidenced pathways in the enhanced Theory of Change (e.g., that attending a residential dissertation retreat will contribute to students' sense of belonging), and identify ways to improve the implementation of these interventions in the future (e.g., whether there was sufficient time and appropriate space to deliver the sessions at the location of the residential retreat, whether the distinctions between the tiers in the dissertation retreat criteria and in the AGP panel were adequate, etc.).

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[1] https://taso.org.uk/evidence/evaluation-guidance-resources/introduction-to-quasi-experimental-designs/

Data collection

The evaluation will include the following methodologies:

Pre- and post-intervention comparisons for the dissertation retreat programme

Quantitative student outcome data, including end-of-year grades, writing assessments, dissertation grade awarded, and overall award outcome will be obtained from the Data, Analytics and Insight Team for: all students attending the 1.5-day and residential dissertation retreats; and Black students who applied to attend the residential retreat but were unsuccessful (due to space limitations). Demographic data and contextual information (e.g., subject area) will be obtained alongside student outcome data. As this is a small sample of students, several comparisons will be considered, to fully ascertain whether the attainment of students who attended the dissertation retreats truly differs from:

(i) Those who received a 'lighter dose' of the intervention (i.e., comparing attainment between students on the residential retreat to those on the 1.5-day retreat).

(ii) Students who applied to attend the residential retreat but were unsuccessful (i.e., a form of wait-list control group).

(iii) Black students in similar subject areas to those who participated in the dissertation retreats.

(iv) Their previous attainment (for those who attended the dissertation retreat(s) in their final year of study). Essentially, end-of-year grades and writing assessments from years 1 and 2 will be compared to year 3 to determine whether the intervention impacted their academic trajectory.

Pre- and post-intervention surveys

At the beginning of the residential retreat, participating students will complete a short survey exploring their current academic self-efficacy and confidence in their academic skills (e.g., academic writing, project management, goal setting). Survey items will include adapted items from the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (Pintrich, 1991) and Academic Behavioural Confidence Scale (Sander & Sanders, 2009) as well as items measuring students' sense of belonging (TASO Access and Success Questionnaire).

The post-intervention survey will be completed by participating students within two weeks of having attended the residential dissertation retreat. The post-intervention survey will also ask students about whether they left the retreat with useable samples of writing for their dissertations and how they expect to apply what they learned on the retreat to their studies.

If possible, students who applied to attend the residential retreat but were unsuccessful due to space limitations will be asked to complete the pre-intervention survey to serve as a wait-list control group and allow for a difference-in-difference comparison (though the sample size will limit the conclusions that can be drawn).

Interrupted time series analysis

Tracking Black students' ratings of belonging, trust (if available) and community using the university's student experience survey and the National Student Survey (NSS) from the last five academic years. Changes in Black students' perceptions and experiences over time will have the establishment (and expansion) of the AGP mapped onto it, along with other activities that aim to improve student belonging or address racial inequities (e.g., the University's Bronze REC award received in 2021, the establishment of Black student communities or networks, the implementation of an inclusive curriculum programme, and so on). Quantitative data related to (i) the number of events related to race, racial inequalities, celebrating Black student voices, etc.; (ii) the number of staff and students attending these events; and (iii) the outputs of the AGP and indicators of engagement with these outputs (e.g., the number of printed copies of the Black Fresher's Guide each year), will also be depicted in this analysis to paint a comprehensive picture.

Student interviews

Semi-structured interviews with (i) Black students who are actively participating in the AGP and student panel, and (ii) Black students who are not part of the AGP, will be used to collect narratives on the Black student journey (and the role that the AGP and its outputs have played in this).

The interviews with Black students engaged with the AGP (both Tiers 1 and 2, which vary in terms of their time commitments) will be used to explore how participating in the AGP has influenced their sense of community and belonging as well as the number (and type) of opportunities they have encountered (e.g., networking, dissemination of research, work experience, training, project management, partnerships with local businesses, etc).

The semi-structured 'conversations' (labelled as such as opposed to interviews as these will be impromptu at AGP events and informal) with Black students not involved in the AGP. Conversations will explore the impact of the AGP on Black students' general sense of community and specific experiences and outcomes and take place across multiple AGP events to ensure the representativeness of this convenience sample. In particular, at least some of these conversations will take place during the first two weeks of term to ask students about the Black Fresher's Guide and whether this resource has supported their sense of belonging and community.

Reflective journals

Observations and experiences of staff delivering the dissertation retreats and leading the AGP will form the primary data collection method for the IPE. These will also provide insight into whether the residential retreat generated a sense of community amongst participating students and how the delivery of these can be improved or adapted to make them more accessible.

Sample selection

There are multiple samples represented in the current evaluation, including:

- Students participating in the dissertation retreats, both the 1.5-day session (n = 24) and the residential retreat (n = 20).
- Students participating in the AGP (both Tier 1 and Tier 2) (n = 10 out of 27 panellists, target number for interviews n = 8).
- Black students attending AGP events / engaging with AGP outputs (n = 120).
- Staff delivering the dissertation retreats (n = 4) and AGP (n = 2).

With regards to the comparisons of student outcome data to identify the impact of the dissertation retreats on awarding, some eligibility criteria have been applied to: (i) the sample of students attending the residential retreat through the tiered nomination process to be accepted onto the programme; and (ii) the sample of students attending the 1.5-day and residential retreats will be limited to Black students. Additional matching on subject area, sex, and socio-economic background will be applied if possible.

For the student surveys, this will be limited to the students who attended the residential dissertation retreat, due to the timing of the evaluation and the 1.5-day session having already taken place. Evaluation of this intervention in future academic years will survey both populations using the same pre- and post-design.

The student narratives will be limited to: (i) Black students actively involved in the AGP; and (ii) a convenience sample of Black students who currently attend UoS and are not actively engaged in the AGP. Students may be in any year of their undergraduate studies, from any subject and may be international or UK domiciled (as not to further limit the pool of potential participants). Overall, the evaluation will aim to include a total of eight AGP students (roughly balanced across both tiers) and eight non-AGP students in the sample.

Outcome measures and data collection

Tables 1 and 2 summarise the outcome measures, data sources and points of collection for each of the research questions addressed in the impact evaluation and IPE respectively.

- **Primary** – those related to the the intended short- and intermediate-term outcomes of the dissertation retreats (i.e., student attainment and awarding) and the AGP (i.e., improved sense of belonging amongst Black students at UoS). Alongside this, primary questions related to implementation and the efficiency of the programmes (e.g., the eligibility criteria, the timing and staffing resources, etc) are addressed.
- **Secondary** – those that measure change at the individual level, seeking to understand whether the intervention generated improvements in students' academic self-efficacy, confidence, and belonging (dissertation retreats) and the opportunities encountered by Black student panellists (AGP).

Table 1. Research questions encompassed by the impact evaluation, methodological approach and target sample.

Type of Research question	Research question	Outcome measure / data source	Sample	Point of collection
Primary	Does participating in the dissertation retreat programme improve student awarding on their dissertation (compared to their previous awarding/academic trajectory and to students who did not attend the dissertation retreats)?	Quantitative student outcome data; dissertation retreat attendance data (student IDs)	Centralised data services/ dissertation retreat participants	End of 2023-24 academic year
Primary	Does participating in the dissertation retreat programme improve students' degree awarding (compared to their previous awarding/academic trajectory and to students who did not attend the dissertation retreats)?	Quantitative student outcome data; dissertation retreat attendance data (student IDs)	Centralised data services/ dissertation retreat participants	End of 2023-24 academic year
Secondary	Does attending the residential dissertation retreat improve students' academic self-efficacy and confidence in their academic skills (e.g., academic writing, project management, goal setting)?	Surveys	Residential dissertation retreat participants	Pre- and post-intervention
Secondary	Does attending the residential dissertation retreat improve students' sense of belonging?	Surveys	Residential dissertation retreat participants	Pre- and post-intervention

Primary	What is the impact of the AGP on the general sense of community and belonging amongst Black students at UoS? In other words, since the panel's establishment, has there been steady improvements in Black students' sense of community and belonging?	Annual NSS and student experience survey data for previous five academic years	UoS Black undergraduate students	End of 2023-24 academic year
Primary	How do the AGP outputs (e.g., events, Black Fresher's Guide, etc) contribute to Black students' experiences and outcomes?	Student interviews	UoS Black undergraduate students; AGP students	Second half of 2023-24 academic year
Secondary	Does participating in the AGP panel promote a sense of community amongst its participants?	Student narratives	AGP students	Second half of 2023-24 academic year
Secondary	Does participating in the AGP present participants with additional opportunities for professional development (e.g., for training, work experience, skill development, networking, etc)?	Student narratives	AGP students	Second half of 2023-24 academic year

Table 2. Research questions encompassed by the IPE, methodological approach and target sample.

Type of Research question	Research question	Outcome measure	Sample	Point of collection
Primary	Were the durations of the 1.5-day and residential dissertation retreats sufficient to cover the proposed content?	Reflective journals	Dissertation retreat delivery staff	Immediately post-residential retreat
Primary	Was the communication strategy to recruit students to the dissertation retreat programme effective (i.e., what was the uptake for both the full-day and residential sessions)?	Reflective journals	Dissertation retreat delivery staff	Immediately post-residential retreat
Primary	Did students appear engaged in the content of the dissertation retreat sessions (and were there any differences between the 1.5-day and residential sessions)?	Reflective journals	Dissertation retreat delivery staff	Immediately post-residential retreat
Primary	With regards to the application process, was the tiered eligibility system applied sufficient in distinguishing between students and ensuring all spaces were taken up?	Reflective journals	Dissertation retreat delivery staff	Immediately post-residential retreat
Primary	Does the tiered approach to the amount of time engaging in the AGP work (i.e., were these students limiting their hours, finding time to contribute difficult, etc)?	Reflective journals	AGP project leads	End of 2023-24 academic year

Primary	Is the size of the student panel manageable given its recent growth?	Reflective journals	AGP project leads	End of 2023-24 academic year
Primary	Can the recruitment and selection process of new AGP team members be refined and improved in any way?	Reflective journals	AGP project leads	End of 2023-24 academic year
Primary	Were there communication strategies for the different outputs and events that worked better than others? Can the collection of engagement statistics be improved upon?	Reflective journals	AGP project leads	End of 2023-24 academic year

Section 4: Project management

This section is designed to ensure relevant staff and stakeholders are held accountable for their involvement in the evaluation and that findings from the evaluation are disseminated internally (and externally) as appropriate. It should be used internally for HEPs to address issues such as buy-in and accountability and allows HEPs to provide a breakdown on the budget and resources needed to secure sign-off from senior stakeholders.

Project management of the evaluation

Evaluation stakeholders

List the key stakeholders the evaluation is designed for and how they will use the findings

Audience *(Who are the audiences for the information from the evaluation? e.g., students, teachers, management, staff, partners, etc.)*	How evaluation findings will be used *(How can they apply new knowledge from the evaluation study?)*
Widening Participation Operations Group (senior leadership within Widening Participation and Social Mobility directorate, and faculty/professional services representations) & Widening Participation Sub-Committee	New knowledge and insights from reports used to inform strategy and plans (such as APP). AGP related to APP target (strategy 5).
REC Committee	Contributes to monitoring of race equality activities and their impact for future REC applications.
Office for Students	Commitment to publish findings as part of Access and Participation Plan. These will be part of the growing sector body of 'what works' evidence for interventions.
Students	Sharing the findings with students will enable transparency around the initiatives and steps being taken to enhance opportunities, empower student voice, and enable belonging and success, particularly for Black students. Communicating findings allows us to support future participation (e.g. - next year promoting to prospective students that students who attended a retreat last year went on to receive X grade).

Reporting requirements

Specify any outputs that will be developed as part of the evaluation, such as interim and final reports, and the stakeholders who will review the findings.

Date	Report type	Writer/s	Audience
Spring 2024	Blog post/interim report	Head of Enhancement and Writing Skills Officer	(External stakeholders- to be hosted on TASO as a blog entry
End of 23/24 academic year	Final report (dissertation retreat pilot)	Student Success and Inclusion Coordinator, Student Inclusion	Internal audience with scope to publish externally
End of 23/24 academic year	Progress report (AGP)	Manager and Head of Student Success	Internal audience with scope to publish externally
Summer 2026 (shared annually from this date)	Interim report (on broader APP EDAG objective)	Head of Student Success, Evaluation Manager and other contributors from faculties (staffing tbc)	Shared with sector
Summer 2027	Final report (on broader APP EDAG objective)	Head of Student Success, Evaluation Manager and other contributors from faculties (staffing tbc)	Published externally on website

Budget and staff resources

Specify the funding and resource capacity for the evaluation. Include materials, travel, external evaluators etc.

Budget for the evaluation study *(What is the budget allocated to the evaluation?)*

Internal staff resources *(List the staff resources in the Evaluation Team)*	Position	Approximate time and / costs required
Heather Mozley	Evaluation Manager	0.1 FTE
Linh Hoang	Research and Evaluation Officer	0.1 FTE
External human resources *(If applicable. External consultants to be managed by the Evaluation Team to undertake data analysis, focus groups etc.)*		**Approximate time and cost required**
N/A		N/A
Other resources required *(E.g. materials, travel etc.)*		**Cost estimates**
N/A		N/A

Time schedule

This section supports accountability and formulating a plan. What are the key timelines, key activities and milestones for the evaluation?

Key milestones	Due date
Conduct pre- and post-intervention surveys for Dissertation Retreats	Pre- and post- residential retreat dates (29/1/24 - 31/1/24)
Dissertation Retreat Staff complete reflective journals	Immediately post-residential retreat (ends 31/1/24)
Conduct AGP Student interviews	Second half of academic year (Mid-April to avoid clash with exams and end of year events)
AGP Panel members complete objective logs from year on post	Compiled end of May 2024

Reporting to Widening Participation Sub-Committee	Current schedule for 23-24 academic year: • January 2024 • April 2024 • July 2024

References

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