



TASO annual conference 2026

Collaborate to evaluate

Paper presentations and poster abstracts

May 2026

Agenda

The conference sessions include panel discussions, short talks, colleague presentations and a peer-led poster session, followed by a drinks reception at 16:30.

Section	Description	Speakers
Opening and welcome		Omar Khan, <i>CEO, TASO</i>
Improving equality of opportunity: the role of collaboration	Chris Millward will discuss regional collaboration in light of the the government's recent post-16 education and skills white paper. What does best practice collaboration look like? And how can it support equality of opportunity in higher education?	Chris Millward, <i>Interim Director for Fair Access and Participation, Office for Students</i>
How do we address the higher education postcode lottery?	As participation in higher education increases, regional inequalities in access remain the same. This panel will explore the need for renewed focus on collaborative strategies that target areas with the largest disadvantage gaps and longstanding cold spots. Drawing on their experience and insights, the panelists will discuss how evaluation can support regional strategies and help reduce inequalities in access to higher education.	Graeme Atherton, <i>Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Regional Engagement, University of West London; Vice-Principal, Ruskin College, Oxford; and Director, World Access to Higher Education Network</i> Alex Proudfoot, <i>Chief Executive, Independent Higher Education</i> Shaid Mahmood MBE, <i>Chair, Association of Colleges; Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, Durham University</i> Kate Wicklow, <i>Director of Policy and Strategy, GuildHE</i>
Refreshment break and networking		
Higher education sector paper presentations: pre-entry	Sector representatives will present their evaluations, followed by a facilitated panel discussion with a TASO team member. A randomised controlled trial of a multi-intervention outreach programme: what happened next? Elisabeth Moores, <i>Aston University</i> Lowering financial barriers to higher education: Evidence from the 'Access fee waiver' Sirin Tangpornpaiboon, <i>The Open University</i> Examining success for multi-touch point, pre-enrolment STEM programmes Sarah Dirrane, <i>Cosmos</i> The impact of understanding your place: Hepp's regional data dashboard Tom Broom and Alex Bairstow, <i>Higher Education Progression Partnership</i>	Panel chaired by Molly Rowlands, <i>Research Manager, TASO</i> Elisabeth Moores, <i>Aston University</i> Sirin Tangpornpaiboon, <i>The Open University</i> Sarah Dirrane, <i>Cosmos</i> Tom Broom and Alex Bairstow, <i>Higher Education Progression Partnership</i>
Lunch break and networking		
Higher education sector paper presentations: post-entry	Sector representatives will present their evaluations, followed by a facilitated panel discussion with a TASO team member. Is everything ok? Success in using compassionate comms in nudge emails Eleanor Turpin, <i>Nottingham Trent University</i> Empowering student success through assessment choice to reduce inequalities in attainment Jake Hinks and Vikki Potts, <i>Wolverhampton University</i> Journey of institutional assessment redesign and transformation: Implementation to evaluation Shivani Wilson-Rochford and Cain Clark, <i>Birmingham City University</i> Learning from evaluation failure but intervention success Sonia Ilie and Ellie Greer, <i>University of Cambridge</i>	Panel chaired by Katherine Drew, <i>Evaluation Officer, TASO</i> Eleanor Turpin, <i>Nottingham Trent University</i> Jake Hinks and Vikki Potts, <i>Wolverhampton University</i> Shivani Wilson-Rochford and Cain Clark, <i>Birmingham City University</i> Sonia Ilie, <i>University of Cambridge</i>
Peer-led poster session with refreshments – Posters will showcase evaluations addressing equality of opportunity in higher education.		
Collaboration in practice: risks and rewards	This session will focus on how collaboration works in practice. Hear from TASO and higher education providers that have collaborated effectively and what were the steps of putting that in place.	Panel chaired by Omar Khan, <i>CEO, TASO</i> Paul Morgan, <i>Pro Vice-Chancellor (Pedagogy and Practice), Buckinghamshire New University</i> Leanne Taher-Bates, <i>Head of Access Participation and Student Success, Liverpool John Moores University</i> Morag Duffin, <i>Director of Student Success at The University of Law</i> Jared Patel, <i>Access and Participation Impact and Policy Manager, Loughborough University</i>
In-conversation with Eunice Simmons , <i>Vice Chancellor, University of Chester</i> and Will Gaines , <i>President-elect, VP Student Life, Chester Students' Union</i>		
Reflections and close		
Drinks reception until 18:00		

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Paper presentations: pre-entry

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

Elisabeth Moores, Aston University

Rob Summers, TASO

Adrian Burgess, Aston University

Amy Slater McGill, Aston University

Abstract

Multi-intervention outreach programmes are widely used to support progression to higher education, yet robust causal evidence of their effectiveness remains limited. Evaluation is typically based on pre- and post-programme surveys or comparisons with non-participants – approaches that are vulnerable to self-selection bias. As investment in outreach comes under increasing scrutiny, there is a growing need for more rigorous evidence.

This paper presents findings from a randomised controlled trial of a multi-intervention outreach programme conducted over two years at Aston University, in collaboration with TASO. In a pathway to healthcare programme, eligible pupils were randomly allocated to either receive or not receive a place on the programme. Participants were tracked longitudinally using HEAT, with progression outcomes linked to newly available HESA data.

Initial findings – from the first cohort only – suggest that the treatment group were no more likely than controls to obtain a place on healthcare programmes, and no more likely to progress to higher education overall. GCSE grades were the most consistent predictor of both of these outcomes. Possible explanations, other results, and next steps will be discussed.

Contributors

Elisabeth Moores is associate Deputy Vice Chancellor at Aston University and holds responsibility for implantation and evaluation of the university's access and participation plan. She has research interests in the evaluation of education.

Rob Summers is currently Head of Evaluation at TASO and previously led on this project as a postdoctoral researcher at Aston University.

Adrian Burgess is Emeritus Professor of Psychology at Aston University and has an interest in statistical challenges.

Amy Slater McGill is the Outreach Manager in the Student Recruitment and Outreach Team at Aston University. She has extensive experience of designing and delivering collaborative education interventions for children, young people and mature learners from less advantaged backgrounds.

Lowering financial barriers to higher education: Evidence from the 'Access fee waiver'

Sirin Tangpornpaiboon, The Open University

Abstract

The 'Access fee waiver' (AFW) is a pre-entry financial support intervention offered by the Open University that enables eligible students from low-income backgrounds to study an Access module for free. The Access modules are below FEHQ level 4 and aim to prepare and inspire students to progress to degree level. The AFW therefore aims to reduce financial barriers to entry by removing the upfront costs associated with enrolment.

A mixed-methods approach was employed to understand the fee waiver's impact on three key outcomes: (1) enrolment onto Access modules, (2) continuation from Access modules to degree-level study, and (3) academic performance in the first degree-level module for those who progressed.

Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with 33 students (mix of fee waiver recipients and non-recipients) using a Qualitative Impact Assessment Protocol (QulP) approach to understand how the financial support factors into students' decision to enrol. Quantitatively, the evaluation exploits a change in the waiver's income eligibility criteria, treating this as a natural experiment, to assess change in student composition and outcomes. Logistic regression was used to predict newly eligible students (n=1,737), whose outcomes were compared with previously eligible students (n=1,849) to estimate the impact of AFW.

Findings show that while the AFW supports students from low-income backgrounds to start with the Access modules, it may be creating an unintentional adverse effect on continuation to degree study. Many students signed up to Access without making plans to progress to degree-level. As the eligibility threshold changed, more students studied the Access course on the waiver. More completed and passed, but most did not return to degree level.

Contributors

Sirin Tangpornpaiboon is an Insight and Evaluation Manager at the Open University. She is leading a data-led approach to the design, implementation, and evaluation of the university's access and participation plan. Sirin is a mixed-methods researcher whose interests include quasi-experimental methods and participatory research.

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

Alexandra Lyons, Imperial College London

Sarah Dirrane, Cosmos

Emma Watson, Imperial College London

Abstract

In 2025, Imperial College London commissioned Cosmos to evaluate the impact of two of our STEM cohort programmes, STEM Potential and STEM Futures. This year, we are sharing a practitioners' toolkit based on this work. This toolkit aims to amplify student voice in shaping programmes, so that it may inspire STEM interventions at other organisations.

STEM Potential, launched in 2014, is a pre-enrolment intervention offering multiple touch points for students in Year 10-11 and Year 12-13. The programme aims to develop young people's interest in STEM and support informed decisions for their future subject choices. This is enabled by academic and university application support.

STEM Futures was designed collaboratively with Black students to address underrepresentation of Black students in higher education and on STEM degrees. While following a similar multi-touchpoint format to STEM Potential, STEM Futures centres on a culturally competent STEM curriculum for Black heritage students with an added emphasis on belonging, identity, and community-building.

These programmes aim to build confidence, belonging and STEM identity for participants so that they can make informed decisions about their future. Working with those underrepresented in STEM HE, we hope to diversify the Imperial student body.

Cosmos was chosen to conduct this research to limit internal evaluator bias, as well as create a space where students can speak openly about their experiences of Imperial programmes.

Cosmos conducted 7 online focus groups with a total of 49 participants from Year 11-13; 27 students from STEM Potential and 22 from STEM Futures.

Cosmos found evidence that these programmes help students understand future options open to them and how to get there; young people select programmes based on identity and lived experience; and the personal development content of the programmes is as important as the STEM content. In this session, we will share more key insights from the research and recommendations for others hoping to run pre-enrolment STEM interventions for underrepresented students.

Contributors

Sarah Dirrane is the Co-Founder and Research Director at Cosmos, leading research on access, participation, and student outcomes. She works with educators to drive meaningful change.

Emma Watson is an Outreach Evaluation Officer at Imperial College London supporting the evaluation of a range of widening access programmes, including partnerships with other organisations.

Alexandra Lyons is the Outreach Evaluation and Research Manager at Imperial College London. She utilises mixed-methods comparative analysis to evaluate Imperial's portfolio of outreach activities and understand their impact on attainment, STEM skills and progression into STEM pathways.

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

Tom Broom, Higher Education Progression Partnership (Hepp)

Alex Bairstow, Higher Education Progression Partnership (Hepp)

Abstract

South Yorkshire is made up of Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield, all of which face their own distinct challenges. While these differences are widely recognised, outreach activity and evaluation often rely on national benchmarks and broad targeting criteria – which can limit both impact and understanding of how local context mediates programme effects.

Hepp – a collaboration between Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Sheffield – has developed a regional data dashboard. The dashboard aims to:

- Support Hepp and our partners to explore and understand local educational contexts.
- Inform smarter, more nuanced and impactful outreach.
- Ensure our partnership's approach to WP is evidence-led.

The dashboard brings together publicly available progression data from KS4, KS5 and beyond, and demographic data, including socioeconomic and HE participation metrics. It contains over 25 metrics for 77 schools in South Yorkshire, over more than ten years. These are available at a regional, sub-regional and school level, allowing for detailed comparisons and analyses – in particular, we can see how outcomes differ for disadvantaged students across different levels and institutional settings.

This allows us to understand the changing picture of progression in our region over time and how demographics and institutional provision have affected this. We can also add our own monitoring and evaluation data to further contextualise our impact and better understand our operational context.

By grounding evaluation in a detailed understanding of local need, the dashboard supports more contextualised targeting, clearer articulation of theoretical assumptions and change mechanisms, and more careful interpretation of outcomes.

Our presentation will demonstrate how regional data infrastructure can improve evaluative reasoning in WP. We will share examples of how insights from the dashboard have shaped programme targeting, activity design and evaluation planning, and discuss the implications for partnerships seeking to adopt a similar approach.

Contributors

Tom Broom is the Data and Evaluation Coordinator for Hepp, a regional partnership between the University of Sheffield and Sheffield Hallam University. Since joining in 2022 he has worked to embed evaluation throughout Hepp's widening participation activities and to ensure that Hepp's work is supported by robust evaluation planning and activities.

Alex Bairstow has worked in the higher education sector for over 20 years, managing teams and projects across a variety of areas including: information, advice and guidance, student recruitment, school and college engagement, and outreach and widening participation. In his current role as Operations Manager at Hepp, Alex is responsible for Hepp's collaborative programme of activities and ensuring we can understand and demonstrate our impact.

Paper presentations: post-entry

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

Eleanor Turpin, Nottingham Trent University

Abstract

Under Nottingham Trent University's Student Engagement and Attendance Policy, students who have not engaged with their studies for seven days are sent a nudge email designed to encourage them to re-engage with their course and access support. While this policy covers all undergraduates, the universal design provides particular benefit to underrepresented groups from the NTU access and participation plan, as students in IMD quartile 1, Black students, and those with declared mental health conditions are 1.2 to 1.5 times more likely to trigger nudges compared with the total student body.

Early versions of the email did not explicitly reference the period of non-engagement that triggered the nudge for fear of causing alarm or irritation. However, one of the principles of compassionate communications outlined by the Higher Education Mental Health Implementation Taskforce in November 2024, is 'clear, empathetic, action-focused and supportive' communications. It was therefore desirable to make direct reference to the seven-day period of non-engagement to align with this principle, coupled with a new email subject: 'Is everything ok?'. It was hoped that more personalised wording would increase student action, as it would increase awareness that their (non-)engagement was being monitored by the institution.

The impact of the changed email wording was evaluated through a randomised AB trial, run between January and December 2025. Across two terms, 15,287 nudge emails were sent, with 50.1% of these using the amended wording. Logistic regression modelling has been used to analyse the relationship between the email wording and the probability of the student having additional periods of non-engagement. Those with the new wording were 15% less likely to have an additional period of non-engagement during a term, with a statistical significance of $p=0.0006$. In addition to the increase in engagement, an unexpected outcome was the number of students choosing to reply to the new wording; there had never been a reply to the original email, but over 200 responded following the change.

Contributors

Eleanor Turpin is the Learning Analytics Research Manager at Nottingham Trent University. Her role focuses on developing, implementing and evaluating interventions that are targeted using information from the student learning analytics system, and other institutional data sources. This includes overseeing the work of the Contact and Engagement Service, a dedicated team of six staff that offer individualised coaching-style support and signposting to students who are at risk of non-engagement and withdrawal.

Empowering student success through assessment choice to reduce inequalities in attainment

Jake Hinks, Wolverhampton University
Vikki Potts, Wolverhampton University

Abstract

Persistent inequalities in higher education continue to affect students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including disabled, Global Majority and BTEC-entrant students. This study evaluates the introduction of assessment choice as a strategy to reduce these disparities. A within-cohort comparative design was implemented across two Level 6 Law modules taken by the same cohort, offering a built-in control for student differences and enhancing comparison validity.

The intervention module (6LW004), previously assessed solely by a closed-book exam, introduced assessment choice in 2024/25, allowing students to select either the exam or a Time Constrained Assessment (TCA). A comparison module (6LW012) contextualised the impact by retaining a consistent TCA format in 2023/24 and 2024/25. This design enabled year-on-year comparison within 6LW004 and within-year comparison across both modules, strengthening the inference that observed changes were associated with assessment choice rather than wider cohort effects.

Quantitative analysis showed clear equity gains. Pass rates increased across all APP priority groups from 2023/24 to 2024/25 in 6LW004, eliminating the attainment gaps previously observed relative to the consistently high-performing 6LW012. For disabled students, the 4.8-point gap recorded in 2023/24 was removed in 2024/25. Global Majority students saw their 7.5-point gap eliminated, while BTEC entrants achieved the largest improvement with the closure of a 21.1-point gap. The comparison module remained stable across both years, reinforcing that these gains were linked to the introduction of assessment choice.

Qualitative thematic analysis (n=36) indicated increased autonomy, reduced stress and enhanced belonging, with students reporting that choice made assessment feel fairer and more accessible. Overall, the findings demonstrate that assessment choice is a scalable, equity-driven intervention with particular benefits for marginalised groups.

Contributors

Jake Hinks is a Senior Lecturer in Law at the University of Wolverhampton, specialising in constitutional law, inclusive curriculum design and equity-focused assessment. His work on assessment choice has informed institutional strategy, contributed to the TEF submission, and supported efforts to close attainment gaps. A Fellow of Advance HE and member of the Wolverhampton Law Research Centre, he leads initiatives on inclusivity, retention and student experience, and has published research on executive dominance in UK constitutional law.

Vikki Potts is the Head of School, Business and Law at University of Wolverhampton. She is an experienced academic leader with a strong record in business education, partnerships and regional engagement. Her work centres on connecting academia and industry, inclusive workforce development, and future-ready educational provision. She also plays an active role in regional economic collaboration and external partnership work.

Journey of institutional assessment redesign and transformation: Implementation to evaluation

Shivani Wilson-Rochford, Birmingham City University
Cain Clark, Birmingham City University

Abstract

Birmingham City University (BCU) joined TASO's Ethnicity Degree Awarding Gap Project, developing an intervention for our current access and participation plan. BCU's new approach to assessments moves away from deficit models, focusing on improving institutional processes. What began as a small pilot now informs institution-wide policy, supported by a comprehensive assessment package, and bespoke staff development.

This structured approach facilitates clearer, inclusive, and academically robust assessments while academics have reflective space and guidance to design meaningful learning experiences. In 2024/25, BCU's Package of Assessment Redesign was successfully delivered on 43 modules at Levels 5 and 6. Following revision of the intervention's proposed evaluation plan, and application of robust statistical methods to post-resit data, type 3 evidence of efficacy has now been achieved.

A difference-in-differences quasi-experimental design was used to estimate causal effects by comparing changes over time between treatment and control groups. Estimates show a positive and statistically significant improvement in attainment on treated modules compared to non-treated modules. The results provide causal evidence of improved attainment outcomes, with credible proxies for EDAG, and evidence of statistically significant improvements in attainment for Black, Asian, and vocational and technical qualifications (VTQ) students. The findings provide empirical support for the theory of change underpinning the intervention.

Collaborating across academic and professional spaces, BCU has turned complex and opaque assessment practices into something consistent, equitable and sector leading, rethinking and transforming how learning experiences in higher education are designed. Work is now underway to gather qualitative evidence that enhances our understanding of this intervention's impact upon staff and student experiences as part of a mixed-methods approach.

Contributors

Shivani Wilson-Rochford is Head of Curriculum Development at Birmingham City University where she leads on academic staff development with particular focus on feedback, assessment literacy and design, artificial intelligence in higher education and academic integrity.

Cain Clark is Academic Lead for Research, Enterprise, Engagement, and Innovation (Life and Sport Sciences) at Birmingham City University. He leads strategic activity across research culture, partnerships, impact, and innovation. He is an Associate Professor in Applied Statistics, with expertise in epidemiology, research methodology, and applied data science across education, health, sport, and life sciences research. His work focuses on advanced statistical modelling, quasi-experimental evaluation, and compositional data analysis to inform policy and practice.

Learning from evaluation failure but intervention success

Sonia Ilie, University of Cambridge
Ellie Greer, Hughes Hall

Abstract

This paper reports on a planned but partially unsuccessful evaluation of a programme to support undergraduate and postgraduate students at Hughes Hall, a University of Cambridge College. The intervention, The Pathways Programme, was developed in response to observed student needs around academic, personal development, and professional skills. The intervention is multi-strand (Pathways to Learning/Living/Leading) and multi-modal (self-paced online elements, large-group sessions, small seminars, one-to-one support) and embedded with the wider academic and pastoral support offer in the College.

The evaluation was developed alongside the intervention's pilot iteration and aligned to the intervention structure and theory of change. The impact evaluation was planned as a multi-arm, factorial, wait-list-design randomised control trial, with academic, cognitive and metacognitive outcomes captured through self-report data provided in a survey. The trial was pre-registered on the Open Science Framework and received ethical endorsement via the Faculty of Education.

Response from students specifically to the evaluation was, however, limited. Less than 50% of the eligible participants consented to take part at baseline. Only 40% of initial participants returned for endline data collection. This rendered the trial biased due to self-selected non-response.

Alongside the trial, the evaluation intended to engage qualitatively with students, to understand their experience of the intervention, and its perceived impact. Engagement with in-person data collection was also limited, though it yielded important insights around what students valued: timeliness of sessions, alignment with academic disciplines, level and depth of content, and online design.

These qualitative insights were later incorporated into updates to the intervention. The intervention has continued, with an evaluation approach that relies exclusively on monitoring and qualitative data. This suggests increasing take-up, high levels of student satisfaction, and provides evidence of substantial self-reported impact.

Contributors

Sonia Ilie is Professor of Education at the Faculty of Education University of Cambridge. She researches social inequality in education, including around higher education access, participation, learning, and outcomes.

Ellie Greer is Head of Student Development at Hughes Hall, responsible for designing and leading the College's Pathways Programme. Her aim is to support all Hughes Hall students to develop the knowledge and competencies required to succeed academically and personally at Cambridge and beyond. She is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.

Poster presentations: pre-entry

[1] It starts at home: Widening access to university through adult and family learning

Emily Magrath, IntoUniversity

Alex Quinn, IntoUniversity

Chloe Cheetham, IntoUniversity

Abstract

A collaboration between the Universities of Glasgow, Edinburgh and third sector organisation, **Into**University, the Adult and Family Learning programme aims to enable better support of young people's learning through equipping the adults in their families, providing whole family learning opportunities and widen access to university. The poster will showcase how the project was developed, piloted, and evaluated at three sites in Scotland.

Activities were designed to support four outcome areas identified as barriers to wider university progression and developed in the project's theory of change:

- Improve understanding of educational pathways in the local area
- Improve confidence to support their children's learning
- Improve positive attitudes to learning
- Have opportunities to learn and reflect on educational opportunities for themselves and children

Activities took place in **Into**University centres, the local area, online, and at the universities, and were a combination of group and 1:1 sessions. Themes included transition from primary to secondary school, storytelling, learning about Additional Support Needs, and navigating the education system, including applying to university. The pilot programme was designed to bring together the partners' combined expertise in adult learning and attainment-raising programmes with understanding of the specific needs of local communities and supporting some co-design from participants.

230 adults attended at least one activity during the initial pilot, all of whom completed an evaluation for that activity. 98% said they had improved their understanding of education options and 86% said they felt more confident supporting their young person's learning. The initial pilot has been continued with evaluation continuing and informing the continuation of the project.

The evaluation uses a mixed-methods approach, including entry and exit surveys, post-session evaluations, interviews, delivery observations and team reflections.

Contributors

Emily Magrath is the Director of Programme Development & Impact at **Into**University and a member of the Senior Leadership Team. She has previously managed an **Into**University Centre and led on evidence-led practice and staff training on delivery approaches. Emily completed her PhD at the University of Aberdeen.

Alex Quinn is the Head of Data, Impact and IT at **Into**University and a member of the Senior Operations Team. Over the past 12 years, he has led the development of the charity's impact measurement work, including building systems for data collection and processing, managing evaluation projects, and producing impact reports.

Chloe Cheetham is the Impact and Evaluation Manager at **Into**University. Her current projects include evaluating the Adult and Family Learning programme in Edinburgh and Glasgow, and she is working with Emily and Alex on developing a programme to improve primary school-aged pupils' metacognitive skills. She completed her PhD at Goldsmiths, University of London.

[2] Strengthening support for care-experienced students: Evaluating a multi-institution conference

Anna Wooley, Edge Hill University

Abstract

Care-experienced and estranged students (CEES) face persistent inequalities in access and success across further and higher education. To strengthen sector capability in addressing these challenges, we developed a regional annual conference supported by a structured theory of change. The intervention aimed to build practitioner knowledge and confidence among local authority staff, designated teachers, and further education/higher education practitioners; embed CEES voice into support development; and foster sustainable cross-institution collaboration.

Before the event, we facilitated cross-sector theory of change workshops with colleagues from further education and higher education institutions, Local Authorities and charities working with CEES students. These workshops mapped shared long-term outcomes, identified mechanisms of change and shaped the programme around evidence-informed themes, including educational pathways, awareness of support offers across sectors and coordination of support processes. The theory of change also guided the evaluation design.

A mixed-methods evaluation used pre- and post-conference surveys, session-level feedback and qualitative comments. In 2024–25, the conference engaged 56 delegates from 42 institutions, with 46 completing both surveys (82.1% completion rate). Quantitative measures assessed confidence and perceived knowledge gains, while qualitative analysis explored alignment with theory of change pathways and engagement with the event format.

Key outcomes included increased confidence in supporting CEES students, improved understanding of further education and higher education pathways, stronger cross-institution networks and positive feedback on student-led contributions.

Findings show notable increases in practitioner confidence across all themes, with qualitative insights identifying the event as a catalyst for ongoing collaboration, with the conference continuing to run annually with consistently strong engagement. This evaluation demonstrates that structured, multi-institution practitioner conferences can strengthen sector capacity to support marginalised groups, particularly CEES students.

Contributors

Anna Wooley is Widening Access Manager at Edge Hill University, supporting care-experienced, estranged and other students with diverse lived experiences. She leads cross-sector collaboration and evidence-informed practice to enhance access, engagement and outcomes within higher education.

[3] More appealing, not more firm: initial evidence of the impact of contextual offers

Elisabeth Moores, Aston University

Abstract

Contextual offers are widely used in UK higher education as a mechanism to widen participation, yet there remains limited evidence on how applicants perceive these offers and how they influence decision-making. This study presents initial evidence examining whether contextual offers at Aston University are perceived as more attainable and attractive by applicants, and whether they are associated with different acceptance behaviours compared with other types of offers.

Using market research survey data collected from both acceptors and decliners of Aston offers, responses were analysed from 947 applicants. The survey was distributed to 20,391 applicants, with a 7% response rate (n=1,571), but there were lots of missing or "don't know" responses. Key outcomes included perceived impact of the offer on institutional appeal and applicants' reported decision status (firm accept, insurance accept, or decline).

Results indicated a significant association between offer type and perceived appeal ($\chi^2=42.99$, $df=4$, $p<.001$). Applicants receiving contextual offers were substantially more likely to report that their offer made Aston more appealing (65.7%) compared with those receiving standard conditional offers (39.9%).

There was also a significant association between offer type and decision status ($\chi^2=20.58$, $df=4$, $p<.001$), with contextual offer holders less likely to decline and more likely to select Aston as an insurance choice. However, when acceptance was dichotomised to firm versus non-firm, no significant association remained ($\chi^2=4.60$, $df=2$, $p=.10$).

These findings suggest that contextual offers from Aston University may function primarily as a "safety net" rather than a driver of firm choice. The study highlights the need for further analysis using administrative admissions and enrolment data, and for comparative evaluation of alternative contextual offer models

Contributors

Elisabeth Moores is currently associate Deputy Vice Chancellor at Aston University and holds responsibility for implantation and evaluation of the university's access and participation plan. She has research interests in the evaluation of education.

[4] Impact of multi-intervention outreach on intentions and perceptions of university

Laura Harvey, Loughborough University

Abstract

This research evaluates the impact of a multi-intervention outreach programme for eligible Year 12 students to support the application and transition to university. Eligible students are from low-income backgrounds, measured by IMD or FSM status. The programme consists of skill development workshops, open days, and application support delivered during the year through both online and in person. The aim of the evaluation is to examine how elements of the programme influence students' perceptions of higher education and their intentions to apply over time, extending the traditional pre-post framework by incorporating several novel elements.

First, baseline questions on intentions to apply to higher education are collected from all applicants, regardless of eligibility. A more comprehensive baseline survey is then administered to accepted participants, capturing both intentions and perceptions of what studying at university would be like. These perception measures are aligned with specific skills sessions delivered throughout the programme, allowing us to assess the impact of individual workshops on changes in perceptions over time. A mid-point survey is conducted at the end of Year 12, followed by an endline survey at the conclusion of the programme after decisions regarding applications have been made.

As part of the evaluation, we also follow up with ineligible applicants and programme dropouts to collect endline data. This allows us to compare outcomes between programme participants and non-participants, accounting for natural changes in intentions that occur over Year 12. Key outcome measures include intention to apply and intention to apply to an "elite" institution. In the longer term, the evaluation aims to link survey responses to HEAT progression outcomes. Overall, 360 students applied to the programme, of whom 160 were eligible and 102 ultimately enrolled. The control group is formed from applicants who were not eligible for the programme but expressed interest.

Contributors

Laura Harvey is Lecturer in Economics; her research focuses on understanding and measuring inequalities both in education and the labour market. She is also passionate about supporting outreach and inclusion in higher education. Having previously been Widening Participation Academic Officer working to support the implementation of institutional APPs.

[5] Benchmarking the design of a widening participation pathway programme at a UK university

Zhe Li, Queen's University Belfast

Abstract

This systematic scoping review project benchmarks the Pathway Opportunity Programme (POP), a widening participation (WP) pathway initiative at Queen's University Belfast (QUB), against analogous programmes across multiple national contexts.

A comprehensive search of eight databases identified 10 scholarly records (doctoral theses or journal articles published between 2015 and 2025) documenting the practice of pathway initiatives across five different countries. By extracting and synthesising empirical evidence on the interconnections between programme design components and student outcomes (e.g. retention rate, academic attainment, social skills, self-confidence, etc.), this research identified nine aspects relevant to the design and implementation of widening participation pathway programmes. These comprise (1) financial support and connection to learning resources; (2) online virtual learning environment; (3) training on academic literacies; (4) guidance and support for university life, study, and career pathway; (5) peer modelling and mentoring; (6) social networking and interaction, (7) assessment as learning; (8) programme atmosphere; (9) provision of grade reduction.

These aspects provide an evidence-based framework for developing pathway programmes aimed at supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds in accessing higher education.

This research also highlights five potential shortcomings that need to be overcome by WP practitioners. These include (1) misalignment and disconnection between programme modules and intended learning outcomes; (2) overwhelming assessment; (3) insufficient communication opportunities for parents/families; (4) uninformative online synopses for potential applicants; (5) not user-friendly online virtual learning environment. Overall, the synthesis of evidence on the advantages and shortcomings of existing pathway initiatives yields feasible, empirically grounded guidance for WP practitioners seeking to refine programme design and enhance the programme impact.

Contributors

Zhe Li is a PhD student at Queen's University Belfast. His research uses systematic review and meta-analytic methods to generate evidence on what works in educational settings, bridging research and practice.

[6] Widening access to medical degrees: A collaborative evaluation of the BrightMed programme

Sierra Smucker, University of Brighton
Mauricio Rivera, University of Brighton

Abstract

BrightMed is a widening participation initiative designed to support underrepresented young people across Sussex who are interested in pursuing medical careers in the future. Delivered by Brighton and Sussex Medical School (BSMS) and evaluated jointly by the University of Brighton and University of Sussex, the programme targets students from underrepresented backgrounds – including students from low income backgrounds and care experience – ensuring that those facing social or educational disadvantage receive tailored guidance and opportunities. The goal of this collaborative mixed-methods evaluation is to better understand if and how the BrightMed program reaches its goals and supports students who participate.

Contributors

Sierra Smucker is a social policy researcher and the Senior Evaluation Officer at the University of Brighton. Her work focuses on understanding the impact of public services and interventions on young people, using primarily qualitative, participatory, and mixed-methods approaches. In her current role, she leads evaluations of components of the University of Brighton's Access and Participation Strategy to understand how they work together to shape the student experience.

Mauricio Rivera is the Research and Evaluation Manager and a Doctoral Researcher at the University of Sussex. In his role, he leads the planning and implementation of research and evaluation projects with a focus on quantitative methods and the evaluation of the university's access and participation plan. His doctoral research examines higher education inequity through a social identity perspective, specifically focusing on the experiences of working-class students. He has extensive experience in the higher education sectors of both Chile and the UK, with a focus on equity, fair access, and participation.

[7] Future Maths tutoring: supporting girls to continue in the maths excellence pipeline

Alexandra Lyons, Imperial College London

Catherine Long, London School of Economics and Political Science

Abstract

Future Maths is a pilot partnership programme developed by the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and Imperial College London to address underrepresentation of girls in the maths excellence pipeline. An initial literature review identified gender and socioeconomic status as factors impacting progression in the maths excellence pipeline, in particular with girls from disadvantaged backgrounds less likely to be high attaining in GCSE maths and less likely to continue in maths beyond GCSEs regardless of attainment.

In response, LSE and Imperial co-designed a multi-touchpoint tutoring and enrichment programme for girls from disadvantaged backgrounds in Years 8-9. The programme aims to address both academic and non-academic barriers, including confidence and self-concept in maths, gender differences in attainment, and persistent preconceptions about who maths is for and where it can lead.

The programme combines targeted small group maths tutoring with enrichment activities designed to build enjoyment of maths and increase awareness of future education and career pathways. Participants from four partner schools engage with both LSE and Imperial, providing positive engagement with current undergraduate students and staff and exposure to a wide range of possible career and education pathways spanning both STEM and the social sciences.

The evaluation framework focuses on understanding changes in academic self-confidence and resilience, enjoyment of maths, and awareness of maths-related pathways. In the long term, we are working with schools to track attainment and subject choice for participants.

This programme is still in its pilot phase. We would like to share insights from the process of developing an evidence-based intervention, formulating a theory of change and designing an evaluation framework in the context of a multi-stakeholder partnership between universities, schools, and an external tutoring support agency.

Contributors

Alexandra Lyons is the Outreach Evaluation and Research Manager at Imperial College London. Ali oversees evaluation of Imperial's wide portfolio of Outreach activities, utilising mixed-methods comparative evaluation to understand the impact of these programmes on attainment and STEM skills and progression into STEM pathways.

Catherine Long is the Evaluation Manager for Access at the London School of Economics and Political Science. Catherine leads the evaluation of widening participation and supports the evaluation of contextual offers and means-tested financial support, using evidence to strengthen access and impact.

[8] Evaluation, data and reporting: Regional collaboration in South Yorkshire

Harry Podro, University of Sheffield

Marie Kendrew, Sheffield Hallam University

Tom Broom, Higher Education Progression Partnership (Hepp)

Jessica Whitby, HeppSY

Abstract

The University of Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam University, and partners Hepp and HeppSY (Uni Connect) as a regional partnership are addressing inequalities across Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham, and Sheffield. This partnership works to address cold spots and unequal outcomes for specific groups, for example, white working-class boys, care-experienced students, those from IMDQ1&Q2 and pupils eligible for free school meals. Practitioners work across-lifecycle and deliver interventions jointly and individually.

Partners independently employ a theory-based evaluation framework. We use a combination of mixed-methods data collection through surveys, focus groups and creative evaluation techniques; and contribute to longitudinal data tracking (HEAT). Following a regional practitioner workshop, the evaluators identified a need for collaboration. In 2025, we established the Regional Partnership Data, Evaluation and Reporting Group. The group meets monthly to share learnings, tackle challenges, discuss external research and government reports. Key objectives include:

- Regional ToC: Developed to map intervention coverage and shared outcomes against key areas: Raising Attainment, Reducing Barriers to HE, Enhanced Informed Decision-Making, and Application Process Mastery.

- Evidence Synthesis & Benchmarking: We are building a centralised regional evidence bank to facilitate meta-analysis and comparative benchmarking across local authorities.
- Quality Assurance & Peer Review: Established formal channels for the critique of individual theories, research designs, and reporting standards to ensure rigorous internal validity.
- Governance Integration: The group sits within the regional Strategy and Innovation hierarchy, ensuring that evaluation findings directly inform executive decision-making.

Setting up a group like ours can be tricky, it involves getting buy-in from senior leaders across the partners and people taking time out of their busy calendars to attend meet ups. We will address some 'Top Tips' in our poster to support colleagues if they want to do something similar.

Through the group we have created a dedicated space to help the regional partnership understand our intervention outcomes, identify regional needs and tracking progression to higher education for those from underrepresented groups. We hope to inspire evaluation colleagues to adopt a similar collaborative model.

[9] The reality of randomisation: Navigating Year 1 of a multi-school RCT

Madeleine le Grice, University of East Anglia

Abstract

Make It Count (MIC) is a metacognition project launched in 2022/23 by the University of East Anglia (UEA), in partnership with Structural Learning. Through eight in-school workshops led by UEA Outreach Officers, Year 7 students explore the ways they learn and develop a set of learning tools. The aim is to help students become more independent, confident and resilient learners and, in doing so, raise their attainment. Participants must attend a UEA Outreach target school, be eligible for free school meals, and demonstrate limited self-confidence or resilience when faced with learning challenges.

To help address the lack of causal evidence in widening access and test whether MIC truly 'works', UEA began a multi-year, multi-school randomised controlled trial (RCT) in 2025/26. The aim is to establish whether students who participate in MIC have increased self-reported skills and higher levels of attainment when compared with similar students who do not take part. The RCT will be run over three academic years to achieve a sufficient sample size – in total, the aim is to have 90 participants in the intervention group and 90 in the control group. All 180 participants will complete Likert-scale pre- and post-surveys to assess their confidence with the six learning tools covered in MIC. The groups' end-of-Year-7 attainment grades in English, Maths and Science will also be compared. After the survey responses and attainment grades have been recorded, the control group will take part in a 'lite' version of MIC.

This poster outlines the challenges UEA faced when developing the RCT, and the additional difficulties encountered once it was up and running. Key issues included addressing ethical concerns, securing school participation, gaining consent from students/parents/carers, and attrition. It also describes how UEA overcame these issues (where possible) and summarises the planned refinements for Year 2.

Contributors

Madeleine le Grice is an APP Evaluation Officer at the University of East Anglia (UEA). Her primary role is evaluating activities named in the university's access and participation plan. In doing so, she produces evidence that enables UEA to gauge the impact of these activities in relation to APP outcomes.

Poster presentations: post-entry

[10] Impact of financial support on student outcomes

Laura Harvey, Loughborough University

Abstract

This study investigates how financial support (FS) influences a range of student outcomes, including continuation, annual marks, and final degree award. Using ten years of institutional data (2013–2023) from a high tariff university in the Midlands, the research draws on detailed information about student backgrounds and academic performance. Eligibility for FS is determined by household income reported to Student Finance England, and students are informed of their bursary only after enrolling, receiving a single lump sum payment each November. The main sample includes all undergraduate recipients of FS, excluding those who received support during foundation or placement years, as well as any postgraduates. Early descriptive patterns indicate that FS may affect not only academic attainment but also student attitudes, behaviours, and longer term trajectories.

By leveraging variation in FS eligibility both across cohorts and between academic years, the study identifies a positive impact of receiving FS on stage marks, which represent a student's average mark at the end of each year. Initial comparisons between FS and non FS groups suggest that students who receive support – or receive larger amounts – tend to have slightly lower standardised marks overall. However, further analysis reveals that FS students improve relative to their peers in later stages, with particularly positive effects emerging in Years 2 and 3. Individual fixed effects models highlight meaningful within student gains: in the years they receive FS, students achieve higher marks. These results capture both the direct benefits of FS and the associated shifts in household income status.

The study also exploits the institutional feature that first year marks do not contribute to final degree award, allowing exploration of a “hidden channel” of FS. Receiving FS in Year 1 appears to be negatively associated with eventual degree marks – particularly when Year 2 results are excluded – while interactions with first year performance point to a more complex set of mechanisms influencing overall degree award.

Contributors

Laura Harvey is Lecturer in Economics; her research focuses on understanding and measuring inequalities both in education and the labour market. She is also passionate about supporting outreach and inclusion in higher education. Having previously been Widening Participation Academic Officer working to support the implementation of institutional access and participation plans.

[11] Student-led solutions: How feedback shapes financial support in times of change

Elen Rose, University of Leeds

Abigail Smith, University of Leeds

Jessica Burgess, University of Leeds

Abstract

Rising living costs and widening financial inequalities mean many students now enter university already experiencing significant financial stress, which is closely linked to poorer wellbeing and academic performance. Effective support therefore requires a genuine understanding of students' lived financial experiences. In response, the University of Leeds developed its Financial Wellbeing Programme, grounded in the principle that students are experts in their own financial realities.

The programme is open to all undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of Leeds (an eligible population of approximately 40,000 students), with targeted outreach to priority groups including Plus Programme students and international students. It combines workshops, 1:1 guidance and practical resources, and was shaped from the outset through student consultation groups exploring priorities, challenges and preferred approaches to financial education. These early insights informed all aspects of the programme's design, ensuring support aligned with real – not assumed – needs.

Following launch, the programme embedded continuous feedback mechanisms to remain responsive. Ongoing focus groups, a Student Steering Group and regular informal conversations with students using the service enable iterative refinement of content, structure and delivery. This supports rapid responses to emerging pressures, including rising living costs, and reflects the diverse ways students experience financial strain and engage with support.

A further layer of evaluation comes from a reflective diary project, in which participating students document their financial habits, help-seeking behaviours, confidence and decision-making over time. Data are collected through diary entries over a four-month period (March–July 2026), framed by two focus groups at the start and end of the study. This qualitative, longitudinal method captures subtleties in everyday financial behaviour and changes in self-reported skills and confidence, offering insights not easily captured through surveys alone.

Together, consultation, ongoing feedback and reflective accounts create a holistic picture of how students engage with financial wellbeing support and what most contributes to their sense of stability and empowerment. Evaluation measures include perceived relevance of resources, engagement with workshops and one-to-one support, help-seeking behaviours, and self-reported skills and confidence. Student feedback has already shaped changes in content emphasis, delivery style and resource formats.

Contributors

Elen Rose is a Plus Programme and Financial Wellbeing Senior Lead Officer at the University of Leeds specialising in students' financial wellbeing and helping learners build confidence through practical financial skills.

[12] Understanding the impact and effectiveness of financial support on undergraduate students at ARU

Bilal Hazzouri, ARU Anglia Ruskin University

Abstract

This evaluation assesses the impact and effectiveness of financial support on undergraduate students at Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), with a particular focus on the ARU Bursary. The ARU Bursary provides up to £300 per year to eligible undergraduate students, primarily those from lower-income households, and is paid in instalments during the academic year. Between 2020/21 and 2022/23, ARU provided more than 13,700 bursaries.

Using a Type 02 mixed-methods evaluation design, the study combined a quantitative survey of bursary recipients with qualitative semi-structured interviews. The survey was completed by 853 students, representing a 14.78% response rate, and 19 students took part in interviews. Data were drawn from students who received the ARU Bursary in 2021/22 and/or 2022/23. The evaluation was conducted in line with the Office for Students (OfS) Financial Support Evaluation Toolkit and standards of evidence.

Findings show that financial support plays an important role in helping students manage essential living costs, reduce financial anxiety, participate more fully in university life, and continue their studies. Over 70% of respondents rated financial support as important or very important for their ability to continue studying, while 66% reported that they would struggle to meet essential living costs without support. The evaluation also found that many students continue to rely on paid work, loans, savings, and family support, indicating that bursaries reduce but do not remove financial pressure.

The findings highlight the need to improve awareness of financial support before enrolment, review support levels in light of the cost of living, and develop more tailored support for groups with higher financial need.

Contributors

Bilal Hazzouri is an Impact and Evaluation Manager at Anglia Ruskin University. His work focuses on the design and evaluation of access and participation plan interventions, using mixed-methods and theory-driven approaches to assess impact on student access, progression, and employability. He works closely with academic and professional services teams to embed evaluation at the design stage of interventions, strengthen the use of student voice, and support evidence-informed decision-making at institutional and senior management level.

[13] The impact of bursaries on opportunity and career progression for undergraduates

Adam Drew, The Sutton Trust

Abstract

The Sutton Trust commissioned ImpactEd Group to conduct a mixed-methods evaluation of its Opportunity Bursary (OB). Awarding between £2500-£5000 per recipient, the bursary and associated programme of wrap-around check-in calls, optional mentoring, and events, aim to address barriers that students from less advantaged backgrounds face in accessing career-building opportunities. The programme targets the trust's theory of change outcome on supporting participants to develop essential skills to access and succeed in professions. The methodology was inspired by TASO's guidance on small n evaluations. Eligible students were identified using markers of socio-economic disadvantage such as free school meal eligibility, first generation in higher education, or area-based measures. The evaluation covered 154 bursary recipients. The evaluation addressed the programme's contribution on employment destinations; career confidence, self-efficacy; employability skills, and financial barriers to career access and progression.

Data included a document review, workshops with programme staff, interviews with bursary recipients and mentors, surveys (n=154), and qualitative coding of end-of-programme written and video reports. Outcome measures included: self-reported employment readiness and skill development; assessment of reduced financial barriers; uptake and perceived value of programme components; and destination data.

The bursary was found to be the primary mechanism enabling students to access otherwise unaffordable enrichment opportunities such as training and work experience. The bursary reduced financial barriers by covering essential costs and enabling students to reduce part time work. Funding provided access to paid training and specialist equipment, producing tangible outputs that participants successfully leveraged in job applications.

Students showed significant increases in confidence and employability skills. Outcomes were equitable across demographic groups. Award size did not significantly correlate with outcomes, suggesting a threshold effect once essential costs were met. Wrap around supports added value. Overall, the OB provided transformational access to career building opportunities and delivered consistently positive outcomes in confidence, skills, and early career progression.

Contributors

Adam Drew is Senior Impact and Evaluation Manager at The Sutton Trust, he is responsible for evaluating Trust programmes via a mix of methods, internal analysis and external commissions.

[14] Building a shared EToC for student retention and success interventions

Rianna Elmhirst, University of Bath

Abstract

Care leaver, care experienced, estranged, young adult carer, refugee and asylum seeker students often face interconnected financial, academic, and social challenges that may affect their access to, transition through, and success in higher education. The OfS' Equality of Opportunity Risk Register identifies several risks that disproportionately affect these student groups, including insufficient information, advice and guidance, insufficient academic and personal support, mental health challenges, cost pressures, and lack of suitable accommodation (OfS, 2024).

At the University of Bath, the Student Retention and Success (SRS) team delivers a targeted, holistic support offer to address these challenges through personalised guidance, a structured support programme, financial bursaries, and coordinated referral systems. This approach strengthens students' understanding and awareness of available support, supports academic achievements and enhances' sense of belonging, in order to improve continuation, completion, and progression outcomes.

This poster presents a collaborative theory-based evaluation project between the SRS team and the APP Impact team. In 2025/26, the first phase of the evaluation commenced to support understanding how SRS interventions contribute to student outcomes. Staff workshops, administrative data analysis and external evidence mapping informed the development of an Enhanced Theory of Change (EToC). The emerging EToC is presented to illustrate the phased contribution analysis approach being applied and how this framework will inform the focus of the second phase, which will involve new data collection during 2026/27.

Contributors

Rianna Elmhirst is an Access and Participation Impact Manager at the University of Bath. Her role focuses on the development and delivery of evaluation projects that support the university's access and participation plan, advancing institutional strategies.

[15] Embedded skills provision evaluation pilot

Rianna Elmhirst, University of Bath

Abstract

Embedded academic skills provision, delivered via the University of Bath's Skills Centre, moves away from a deficit model of academic support by integrating skills development within disciplinary practice. Embedded provision has been shown to enhance student success and belonging, and specifically to promote academic literacy, self-directed learning, and social inclusion.

The Skills Centre, in collaboration with the APP Impact Team, has developed a theory of change framework, identifying short-, medium-, and long-term outcome measures to evidence the impact of its work. Completion of a theory of change cycle highlighted gaps in data collection and missed opportunities to demonstrate potential impact within reporting returns.

In 2025/26, a pilot evaluation project commenced. This collaboration between the APP Impact Team, the Skills Centre and the School of Management has developed a cohort survey utilising validated scales. Survey findings alongside attendance monitoring and Year 1 grades will be used to explore whether engagement with embedded academic skills provisions equips students' academic self-efficacy, cognitive skills, and sense of belonging, and whether this contributes to on-course attainment. Where possible, a non-random comparison group will also be identified to strengthen analytical depth.

This poster will reflect on the design and implementation of the pilot and outline potential future directions for strengthening evaluation culture across the University. It will offer delegates practical insights and actionable reflections on implementing evaluation tools and measuring impact of student success interventions effectively.

Contributors

Rianna Elmhirst is an Access and Participation Impact Manager at the University of Bath. Her role focuses on the development and delivery of evaluation projects that support the university's access and participation plan, advancing institutional strategies.

[16] Shaping student wellbeing through co-creation: How ChangeBusters helped students map what works

Christine Khalil, University of East London
Yi Fen Tan, University of East London

Abstract

This evaluation examined the co-creation of a Student Wellbeing Service (SWS) strategy at the University of East London (UEL) using a participatory theory of change (ToC) approach operationalised through the ChangeBusters framework. Rather than drafting a strategy in isolation, this activity involved students as strategic partners in mapping causal pathways between wellbeing activities (e.g., counselling, CBT, EMDR, etc.) and intended outcomes.

Over recent years, the demand for mental health support has increased significantly, yet it lacked a unified framework or an impact-focused strategy identifying how its diverse interventions contribute to equitable student outcomes. The service, therefore, sought to formalise its approach through a ToC model. The primary aim was to develop a student-informed wellbeing strategy grounded in lived experience, while strengthening evaluation through shifting strategy development from a top-down model to an authentic student partnership.

Adopting a participatory research design, two co-creation workshops were conducted with eight students who had a direct engagement with the service. To enhance credibility, the revised ToC was then reviewed by a further panel of nine student voice ambassadors through focus groups. ChangeBusters' interactive ToC Building tool was used to reconstruct and challenge the draft logic model's implicit assumptions. A qualitative analysis of the discussions revealed that students identified trust as both a central mechanism and a core outcome, alongside timeliness and personalisation of support.

Outcomes extended beyond reduced clinical symptoms to include belonging, confidence, and sustained academic engagement. The process generated actionable service improvement suggestions, including reviewing the allocation system and streamlining cross-department communication. Overall, the project shows how structured student partnerships enhance the rigour, relevance and equity of wellbeing evaluation, contributing sector-wide insights into collaborative evaluation practice.

Contributors

Christine Khalil is a Monitoring and Evaluation Officer at the University of East London, working within the What Works Team. She leads on the evaluation of access and participation plan initiatives and supports student services practitioners and strategic project leads to understand, enhance and share the impact of their work.

Yi Fen Tan is the International Wellbeing Advisor at the University of East London, who has a strong interest in empowerment and sustainable change. She delivers wellbeing coaching, leads service development initiatives, and enhances monitoring and evaluation processes. She advocates for student involvement, ensuring support reflects their experiences and needs.

[17] Piloting a study on mental health and wellbeing: Help-seeking behaviours and helpfulness of support

Linh Hoang, London School of Economics and Political Science

Abstract

In 2025, LSE piloted a study in collaboration with the Students' Union to measure the awareness, usage, and helpfulness of mental health and wellbeing support within and beyond the school. The study aimed to contribute to the cross-institution evidence base for the Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework as set out in the APP and the University Mental Health Charter.

A survey instrument was adapted from the 2013 Mental Distress Survey by the National Union of Students. There are 140 respondents representing a mix of ethnic backgrounds, gender identities, sexualities, and disability and health conditions. Descriptive analysis was used to summarise overall responses, while cross-tabulations explored variation across demographic groups.

Overall, findings indicate the contrast between the high awareness of overall support services and the relatively low usage rates. Students' lack of understanding whether their problem was serious enough remains to be the biggest barrier to accessing support. There are also persistent disparities across demographic groups, particularly among students with disabilities or mental health conditions. This group tends to report higher levels of distress and distinct barriers to accessing support. Regarding helpfulness, advice and support from private counselling/therapy and LSE support services rank the highest.

These findings call for a whole provider approach to improving mental health and wellbeing, in which services such as academic mentoring can be integrated to support students alongside pastoral support. The findings also raise considerations about the effectiveness and inclusivity of current communication and support to align with the lived experiences and expectations of minority groups and international students at LSE. Findings from the survey have led to the adjustment of questions in key student experience surveys for LSE, and the inclusion of questions on mental health and wellbeing in the LSE Welcome Survey to develop cross-institution monitoring indicators.

Contributors

Linh Hoang is an evaluation manager at the LSE Eden Centre for Education Enhancement. Linh is responsible for designing and implementing evaluations for various interventions on mental health and wellbeing, accessibility, and inclusion. She also works with colleagues across LSE to develop evaluation resources and guidance for creative evaluation approaches.

[18] “It’s a weird dynamic” – the how and why of what works in reverse mentoring programmes

Zahara Chowdhury, Buckinghamshire New University
Jenni Jones, University of Wolverhampton

Abstract

This poster will explore the dynamics and impact of Reverse Mentoring Programmes in higher education through case studies at Buckinghamshire New University and the University of Wolverhampton. The BNU programme had 14 participants (7 reverse mentors and 7 mentees) and the UoW programme had 22 participants (11 reverse mentors and 11 mentees).

These initiatives paired students from minoritised backgrounds as mentors with senior leaders as mentees to challenge traditional hierarchies, promote empathy, and influence institutional culture.

Evaluation used mixed methods, including surveys, an online anonymous journal for mentors and mentees, and feedback and reflection groups to capture changes in attitudes, skills, and experiences.

Findings reveal increased cultural humility among senior leaders and enhanced confidence, agency, and employability skills among student mentors.

The poster will invite participants to reflect on power dynamics, embedding learning institutionally, and developing reverse mentoring literacy through interactive discussion, and will consider how institutions can implement a reverse mentoring scheme to increase participation and access for minoritised students.

Contributors

Zahara Chowdhury is Senior Inclusive Education Lead at Buckinghamshire New University, co-leading the access and participation plan. She led BNU's pilot reverse mentoring scheme and supports school inclusion, equity and belonging across mainstream education. She is author of *Creating Belonging in the Classroom* (Bloomsbury, 2025).

Jenni Jones is Professor in Coaching and Mentoring at the University of Wolverhampton Business School. A National Teaching Fellow and Principal Fellow of Advance HE, she teaches, researches and consults on coaching, mentoring, leadership, change and diversity, and designs and evaluates programmes across sectors.

[19] From insight to action: Reducing awarding gaps through praxis, partnership and culture change

Rehana Awan, The Open University

Soraya Kouadri Mostéfaoui, The Open University

Abstract

Evidence-informed praxis can turn insight into action to address awarding gaps which continue to be a persistent challenge in UK higher education. At the Open University these are magnified by the intersection of part-time, distance, and 'nontraditional' student profiles. Disparities for Black students, students from areas of high deprivation (IMDQ1), and those declaring mental health conditions are especially entrenched.

A further challenge is evaluative: how can we measure progress when the goal is not just intervention but culture change? This poster offers a concise overview of the work of the Awarding Gaps Implementation Group (AGIG) in the school of Computing and Communications, highlighting how evidence-informed praxis has begun shifting both practice and culture, and how we are attempting to evaluate this shift.

Contributors

Rehana Awan is Academic Lead for Access, Participation, and Success, specialising in equitable curriculum design, student belonging, and closing awarding gaps. She leads strategic initiatives that enhance outcomes for underrepresented learners and champions evidence-based practice to strengthen institutional approaches to inclusion, progression, and student success.

Soraya Kouadri Mostéfaoui is Senior Lecturer in Computing at the School of Computing and Communications at The Open University. Her research interests include the design and uptake of human-centric digital systems, with a focus on the relationships between people and the digital world, addressing issues surrounding AI ethics, education and EDI.

[20] Institutionalising TASO's Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (MEF)

Rebecca Siddle, Nottingham Trent University
Kerry Gough, Nottingham Trent University

Abstract

At Nottingham Trent University (NTU) our aim is to empower staff to produce high-quality evaluations of pedagogic and access and participation initiatives across the institution. To this end, a new 'NTU Evaluation Framework' has been collaboratively developed to sit alongside in-person training and digital resources. The NTU Evaluation Framework is strongly aligned with TASO's Monitoring and Evaluation Framework (MEF), but it does not replicate it. Instead, it scaffolds the existing TASO resources for institutional use. Producing local guidance has enabled us to do the following:

- To set a minimum requirement for all evaluations conducted; all colleagues are required to complete a Core Theory of Change (CToC) for their initiatives – and are supported in doing so.
- To provide a checklist for 'gold standard' evaluation; the framework contains a 19-item checklist with links to further information for each. Colleagues can access resources flexibly, as required, or use in its entirety.
- To incorporate institution-specific resources and processes into TASO advice; for example, NTU branded templates and guidance about GDPR compliance, ethical approval, risk management and the inclusion of student voice.

Whilst producing this local guidance we have been cognisant that evaluation does not come naturally, and its benefits are not necessarily self-evident, to all. We have stated the 'why' as well as the 'how'. We know culture change is needed to support colleagues in effectively evidencing the impact of their work and scholarship, whilst generating evaluation that will be worthy of publication on the Office for Students' Higher Educational Evaluation Library. The framework was produced using a combination of the experiences and expertise of colleagues involved in the evaluation of access and participation plan initiatives and colleagues involved in staff development and culture change.

Contributors

Rebecca Siddle is Research and Insights Manager (Access and Participation) at Nottingham Trent University (NTU). Rebecca manages the team responsible for the evaluation of all initiatives detailed in NTU's access and participation plan. Rebecca uses mixed methods to assess impact, whilst specialising in quantitative analysis.

Kerry Gough is Head of Academic Development at Nottingham Trent University (NTU). Kerry is responsible for leading learning and teaching professional development and pedagogic innovation at NTU. Kerry is an AdvanceHE Principal Fellow and a Fellowship Committee member of the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA).

[21] Belonging in practice: Decolonising the curriculum – University of Bath APP evaluation

Jenny Boyle, University of Bath

Abstract

This project explores how the University of Bath's curriculum enables students' sense of belonging through representation, knowledge structures, and inclusive pedagogical design. Positioned within the university's access and participation plan (APP) and Race Equality Charter commitments, the evaluation takes a realist, theory-based approach to understand what works, for whom, in what contexts, and why. The realist evaluation involves collaboration between academic staff, professional services, and institutional stakeholders engaged in curriculum design and student experience.

Belonging is measured using quantitative and qualitative indicators, including relevant items from the National Student Survey alongside internal student surveys and institutional data. Drawing on programme and module materials, committee minutes, and UK-wide examples of embedded decolonising the curriculum practice, the project identifies patterns and underlying mechanisms through which curriculum design relates to students' recognition, connection, capability, autonomy, and purpose – core elements of belonging.

The methodology involves the development and refinement of a causal pathway, testing how specific curriculum interventions (such as inclusive content, diverse representation, and participatory pedagogies) activate mechanisms that contribute to students' sense of belonging in different contexts. The study's insights will inform recommendations for future curriculum enhancement strategies, including the development of a practical toolkit to support institutional interventions for more equitable and inclusive learning environments.

Contributors

Jenny Boyle is the Head of Impact at the University of Bath, leading institution-wide impact and performance frameworks supporting delivery of the APP. She provides strategic oversight of ten core APP research and evaluation projects, as well as analysis of student and survey datasets, using this evidence to inform strategy, delivery and continuous improvement, and to strengthen APP governance.

[22] Students as partners: lessons from a participatory process evaluation

Tamara McNeill, Oxford Brookes University

Abstract

This contribution reports on learning from a process evaluation conducted in partnership with students. The study explored the delivery of an enterprise activity included within our access and participation plan (APP) to support more equitable progression outcomes for students from Black and Asian ethnic backgrounds and those from IMD Quintiles 1-2. As the first evaluation of our 2025-29 APP, the project offered an opportunity to put our commitment to collaborative and participatory evaluation into practice.

Through Oxford Brookes University's Student Consultant programme, we recruited six paid student partners. Two experienced consultants co-designed the evaluation approach and tools; four new consultants supported data collection and verification. While findings informed decisions about the future of the activity within the APP, the most valuable learning came from the experience of conducting the evaluation with student partners. This prompted reflection on practical and ethical considerations for meaningful partnership working in APP evaluation.

Three key areas of learning emerged:

- The importance of recruitment, onboarding and training – ensuring compliant and inclusive recruitment; providing structured induction and APP-specific orientation; supporting students to draw on lived experience appropriately
- Navigating equality, ethics and data protection – maintaining transparency with stakeholders; protecting anonymity in small-number datasets; managing data securely and ethically
- Realistic resource planning – allocating staff and consultant time for collaborative work; ensuring stakeholder availability; budgeting for fair payment of student partners

The poster will expand on these lessons and show how this participatory process evaluation has informed changes to our procedures, strengthened support for student partners, and enhanced our capacity for collaborative evaluation within APP delivery.

Contributors

Tamara McNeill is Head of Impact Evaluation and Insight (maternity cover) within the Centre for Evaluation of Access Participation and Student Success and a Research Fellow at Oxford Brookes University. With nearly twenty years' cross-sector experience, she specialises in mixed-methods evaluation grounded in beneficiaries' perspectives and values.

[23] Collaborating with student researchers on the evaluation of APP initiatives

Siobhan Thompson, University of East Anglia
Kayleigh Lampard, University of East Anglia

Abstract

Student engagement in university initiatives and response rates to evaluations of these initiatives continues to be a challenge for those working in access and participation spaces. Therefore, the Access and Participation Plan (APP) Team at University of East Anglia (UEA) established a pilot programme of paid student researcher interns to help embed student voice and collaboration in the evaluation of APP initiatives. The programme aims to build a collaborative working relationship with students to help the team better understand low student engagement with initiatives and evaluation and to have a deeper understanding of the overall student experience. For the students, the programme aims to provide an opportunity for them to develop academic and employability skills, gain real world research experience, and contribute to APP programme development.

Seven second and third year undergraduates from the School of Psychology have been recruited and are being supported by professional services and academic staff to work in small groups on their own qualitative research projects. The research projects are using interviews to explore students' awareness of initiatives, barriers and facilitators to engagement, and the impact of university initiatives on academic self-efficacy and sense of belonging for disadvantaged students.

This presentation reflects on the experience of establishing the pilot, barriers and facilitators experienced in the process, and reflects on its theory of change to demonstrate how access and participation professionals and academics can collaborate with students to embed student voice and engagement into their programme of activities and evaluation.

Contributors

Siobhan Thompson is an Access and Participation Evaluation Officer at UEA. This role focuses on evaluating activities across the student lifecycle that are named in the University's APP, producing evidence that enables UEA to gauge the impact of these activities in relation to APP outcomes.

Kayleigh Lampard is the Head of Access and Participation at UEA and works across UEA on the development, implementation, and evaluation of the access and participation plan.

[24] Evaluating the University of Staffordshire's APP: A collaborative and decentralised approach

Juan Raman Mullor, University of Staffordshire

Abstract

Our approach to evaluating University of Staffordshire's 2024–2028 access and participation plan (APP) was developed amid sector pressures on resource, capacity and evaluation capability. We established a decentralised, collaborative model to address institutional and regional challenges, strengthen evidence based practice and reduce inequities across the student lifecycle. Central to this are an APP Operational Groups and Project Board, bringing together academic, professional services, senior leadership and student expertise to ensure governance and accountability. Bimonthly updates feed into annual and summative reports, enabling real time monitoring, RAG rating of risks and responsive decision making.

Our Inclusive Education and Impact (IE&I) team oversees decentralised delivery through co-created tools, guidance, templates and automated analysis protocols, ensuring activity leads can evaluate effectively. A mixed-methods strategy underpins our evaluation, combining pre- and post- intervention surveys, focus groups, interviews, monitoring logs and randomised controlled trials (RCTs). Theory of change models were co-produced for each activity, mapping key outcomes to tailored evaluation frameworks. This work generated a suite of tools, including 16 surveys, six focus groups, four monitoring logs, an RCT and plans for future Type 3 analyses, and standardised reporting templates.

The poster outlines our institution-wide model, highlighting a pathways programme using a theory of change and mixed-methods framework incorporating surveys, focus groups and an RCT. Early findings show positive impacts for marginalised groups, including higher access rates for disabled students and those from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Student participation is embedded throughout, including design consultation, research assistant roles and innovative dissemination such as impact comics. This strengthens the authenticity of findings and ensures interventions reflect lived experience. The presentation shares insights into doing "more with less", demonstrating how collaborative infrastructures can drive progress in reducing inequities across access, continuation and progression.

Contributors

Juan Raman Mullor is a researcher and evaluator at the University of Staffordshire with an MA in International Relations and a background in education, social justice, and international development. He specialises in delivering participatory mixed-methods research, covering inception, tool design, data collection, and reporting to evaluate projects aimed at reducing student inequities.

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