



# Contribution Analysis case study: Evaluation of Creative Pathways Programme

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# Contribution Analysis

## Impact Evaluation with Small Cohorts

### Case Study

This Contribution Analysis was conducted as part of a TASO programme to pilot the use of a series of small  $n$  methodologies within widening participation (WP). The nature of the Contribution Analysis approach means that there is no single 'correct' way of applying this methodology. The example presented here should be considered as illustrative of the approach rather than as a definitive model.

### Methodological Guidance

*Impact Evaluation with Small Cohorts: Methodological Guidance* (pp.43–48)

Mayne, J. (2008). *Contribution Analysis: An approach to exploring cause and effect. Brief 16, Institutional Learning and Change (ILAC) Initiative* Available at <https://nonprofitbuilder.org/storage/377/Contribution-analysis-An-approach-to-exploring-cause-and-effect-ILAC.pdf> (Open Access)

### Contribution Analysis case study: A contribution analysis of a creative arts access intervention

#### Programme overview

The Creative Pathways Programme (16+) is offered by Leeds Arts University, a small, specialist creative arts university based in the North of England. There are around 2,500 students across the university's further and higher education provision. The University offers entry points in further education at Year 12 for the Extended Diploma in Creative Practice, and after Year 13 for the Foundation Diploma in Art and Design (FAD) and/or HE study with a range of undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in arts, design and performance.

The programme was strategically designed and developed in 2020-21 as a response to access targets for underrepresented groups within the University's Access and Participation Plan (APP). These target groups comprise students from more disadvantaged socioeconomic

backgrounds and students of minoritised ethnicity. The Creative Pathways Programme aims to support students from underrepresented groups to access higher education (HE) in the creative arts by providing information, advice and guidance (IAG) around creative HE study and careers, support to develop their creative practice and meet entry criteria, and the possibility for financial support for Foundation Diploma study. The 16+ programme starts in Year 12 and continues into Year 13.

The programme comprises several activities; a launch event, a creative industry and careers session, a creative and visual research session, a post-18 options session, a summer creative brief, application and interview preparation, and a graduation and celebration event. During the evaluation period, the programme was delivered mainly online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Communication and links to the online provision were sent across the duration of the programme to the participants, parents/carers/guardians and teachers to help triangulate the knowledge and support available.

The programme was evaluated retrospectively focusing on eighteen participants who engaged between 2020 and 2022 and using pre-collected evaluation datasets. Contribution Analysis was deemed an appropriate method for understanding the contribution of the programme to participants' outcomes regarding progression to HE, alongside other influencing factors. The method provided a clear set of steps focusing on a Theory of Change which was already in place and also did not specify data collection methods, enabling the use of pre-collected data. Evaluation of the programme was intended to be used to support decision-making about the impact of the programme, its continuation, inform future changes required, and continue the development of the institution's Theory of Change on meeting its access targets.

### Step 1: set out the attribution problem to be addressed

*The first step in the process is to define the 'attribution problem' to consider what aspects or components of the programme might be attributed to (understood to contribute to or cause) its outcomes.*

The project team was interested in whether the choices that programme participants made, following the intervention, were informed by their learning and experiences on the programme. They were also interested in what role the programme plays, for example, if and how it contributes, or enhances, students' decision-making processes regarding higher education, pursuing the creative arts, and subject choices. Following discussion of this attribution problem, the project team determined the following specific cause-effect questions they were asking through this evaluation: *Did the Creative Pathways Programme contribute to progression to creative arts higher education study for those who participated? If so, how did it do so and for whom?*

They also determined the level of confidence required, acknowledging the small number of the cohort who had regularly participated and the difficulty of engaging with sustained programmes over the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic. The project team therefore knew that the findings would need to be considered alongside these factors. To explore the type of contribution expected, the team acknowledged aspects that would show the programme had made an important contribution: participants attending with regularity, participants engaging with the

delivery team members (e.g., sending in examples of work, answering evaluation surveys, exchanging emails, asking questions), participant feedback indicating satisfaction, data from the pre- and post-surveys showing increases (e.g., in intentions to pursue the creative arts, feeling better informed about the process for applying to university, creative arts subjects they could study), evidence of application, offers, and enrolment at the university, and being informed of progression to other creative arts or higher education institutions.

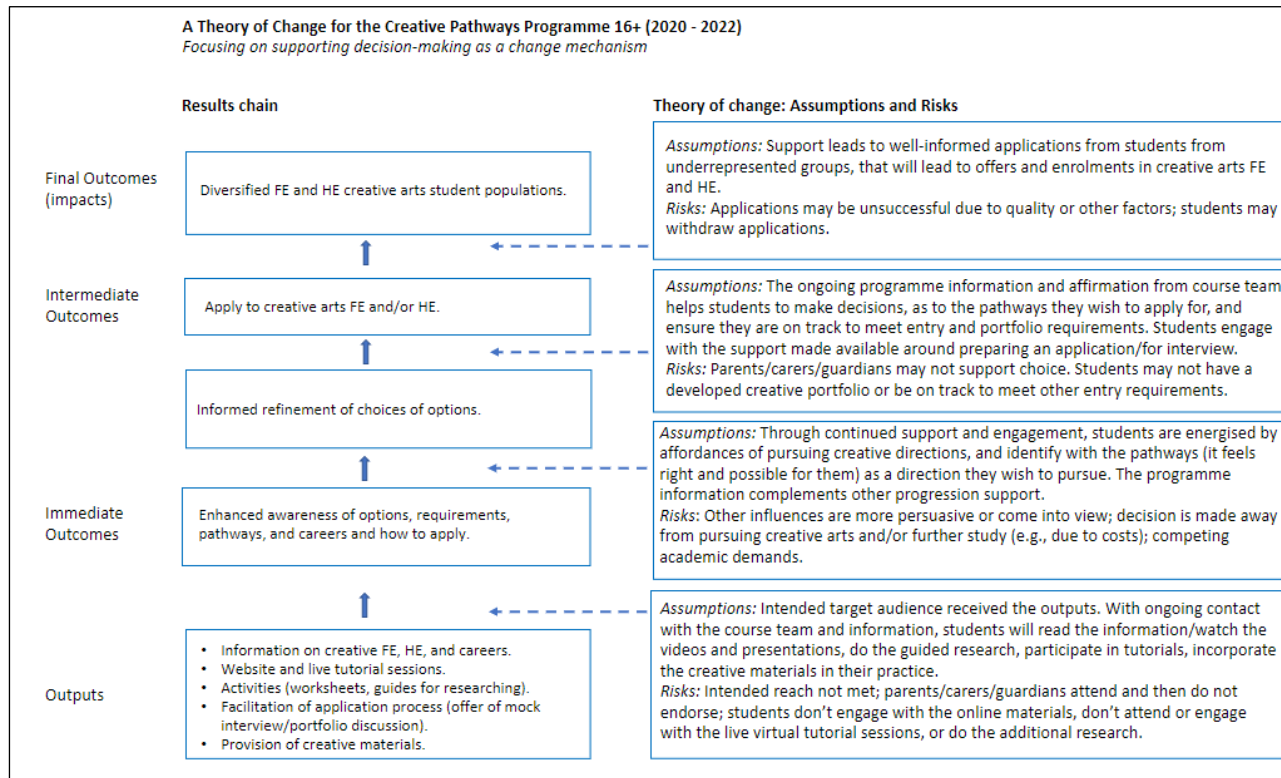
Across each of these elements, the project team would need evidence that these outcomes were due to the programme offering information, experience and influence that was above and beyond what participants may have accessed were they not part of the programme, and additional to what they were receiving as part of careers, information, advice and guidance in their sixth form provision or through their key influencers (e.g., parents, guardians, carers). Part of this included determining other key influencing factors, which ranged from personal attributes (e.g., engagement, perception of self), intervention-related factors (e.g., relevance, digital fatigue), external influences (e.g., societal views regarding creative careers), factors related to the process of applying to higher education (e.g., qualifications, applying), and alternative plans and pathways for progression (e.g., changing mind). Finally, the project team assessed the plausibility of contribution relative to the size of the intervention, noting the other influencing factors, programme design, and existing evidence for similar interventions.

## Step 2: develop the Theory of Change and identify associated risks

*The next stage in the process involves working through and developing a Theory of Change to map how the programme is assumed to deliver its outcomes.*

The programme already had a Theory of Change, in the form of a logic model, designed by the programme delivery team prior to the small  $n$  pilot. This had not been tested with stakeholders and was developed further during the pilot alongside mid-level theory to try and explain how and why programme components contribute to the intended outcomes. Potential change mechanisms were identified, and the project team prioritised exploring how the programme works by *supporting decision-making*, through the provision of high-quality first-hand information and resources about creative arts study and careers.

Drawing from the Contribution Analysis literature, the project team developed the following diagram indicating key steps in the results chain, along with assumptions and risks.



### Step 3: gather existing evidence on the Theory of Change

*This stage in the process is designed to generate research outcomes to support and evidence the assumptions made in the Theory of Change.*

The process of gathering evidence for or against a particular contribution chain or change mechanism would normally involve engaging with other stakeholder groups to test and interrogate the Theory of Change. These external perspectives help refine the Theory of Change and the change mechanisms identified. Within the timescale of the pilot evaluation, and given that the evaluation was done retrospectively, it was not possible to further involve other stakeholders, such as programme beneficiaries, or external stakeholders. Moreover, as a small and

specialist institution, the institutional stakeholders were all in the same team, and had a shared perspective on the programme, limiting options to challenge to the Theory of Change.

### **Evidence base for the Theory of Change**

A review of all programme outputs and resources (sessions delivered, webpages, videos, programme resources and curated external resources) and the schedule of delivery confirmed that the programme had been fully implemented as planned. It was not possible to evidence full engagement and participation by all beneficiaries, however.

Although this particular evaluation is retrospective, the project team felt that sufficient evaluation data had been gathered from programme beneficiaries to provide an understanding of how participation contributed to the decision to progress into creative arts higher education. Data was originally gathered throughout the programme to collect evidence of results or outcomes. This primarily took the form of survey responses (a pre-programme survey, Y12 to Y13 continuation survey, post-survey, and a destinations survey). In addition, the team were able to access 2022-23 university application data to establish if any of the programme cohorts had made an application to Leeds Arts University.

The engagement of programme participants was evidenced through programme delivery records, engagement monitoring and survey responses. This evidence was strengthened by interviews with a teacher from a participating school/college, and a Progression Support Worker (PSW) responsible for delivering the programme.

In addition, some evidence about the impact of alternative contribution factors emerged from participants' qualitative survey responses to surveys, but mainly the teacher and Progression Support Worker interviews. Alternative contribution factors working for or against the intended outcomes included:

- illness
- the challenges of balancing programme participation with schoolwork and other commitments
- parental/carer/guardian influence
- challenges in prioritising future planning, IAG and its timing within partner schools/colleges
- school advisors' perceptions of the creative arts
- financial concerns about the additional costs of a pre-degree level Foundation Diploma
- considerations around university location (e.g., participants wanting to study away from home)

**Step 4: assemble and assess the contribution story, and challenges to it**

*The Theory of Change, informed by the research outcomes in step 3 was mapped onto a 'contribution story' table, which describes each link in the causal chain, including evidence for and against the contribution of that link to the programme's outcomes.*

The project team assembled the contribution story by identifying which causal mechanisms in the results chain were strong or had good evidence available, which were weak, and how credible the story was overall.

The contribution story is therefore based on observed results and research data. The available evidence confirmed assumptions about the role of direct influencers on participants. The evidence also supported the contributory role of indirect external influence, albeit to a lesser extent. The team felt more research and evaluation would be required to generate clear evidence about the contribution of external influence.

The contribution story confirms that the Creative Pathways programme contributed to an increased rate of progression to creative arts higher education study for those who participated and regularly attended the programme sessions. It did this by providing multiple resources (i.e., information on creative FE, HE, and careers), and by supporting participants' decision-making. This was evidenced through participants self-reporting that the programme had enhanced their awareness of options, requirements, pathways potential careers and the application process. By refining their choices, Creative Pathways supported participants in making applications to creative arts FE and/or HE. By increasing the number of applications from underrepresented groups, the programme contributed to the diversification of FE and HE creative arts student populations.

The project team note that the retrospective nature of the evaluation means that participants were no longer accessible for further data collection. In addition, the compressed timescale of the pilot evaluation prevented further consultation with participants, teacher and Progression Support Worker regarding the credibility of the resulting contribution story. They suggested that further consultation with these stakeholders, as well as senior management, would be likely to provide further areas for consideration and challenge.

#### **Step 5: seek out additional evidence**

*Contribution analysis usually includes an iterative stage of evidence gathering to help strengthen confidence in the constructed causal chains and conclusions reached.*

The constrained timeframe of the pilot meant that, beyond consulting with one of the teachers and one of the programme delivery team, the project team was unable to seek out additional evidence or further challenge, to help them revise and strengthen their Theory of Change and contribution story.

However, based on the contribution story compiled so far, and reflecting on the weaker areas of the results chain, the project team identified areas where additional data would be helpful in strengthening the contribution story for future iterations and development of the programme:

- The capture of better data regarding participant engagement with online materials (number of downloads, videos watched etc.). This would enable more detailed assessment of the contribution made by these particular resources to programme outcomes.
- The tracking and capture of post-programme trajectories for all participants.
- Consultation with a wider range of stakeholders to further assess and interrogate the contribution story and Theory of Change.

### Step 6: revise and strengthen the contribution story

*This stage of contribution analysis often involves a review of the draft contribution story and associated causal chains. This can involve review by a range of stakeholder groups (sometimes including an external evaluation expert) as part of an open and critical discussion. This process can help challenge and strengthen key elements of the causal chains.*

Due to timeframe constraints for this pilot evaluation, the project team was unable to seek out additional evidence or carry out additional consultation to further revise and strengthen the contribution story.

Given more time and resources, the project team would explore the four additional change mechanisms they identified (in addition to the focus on supporting decision-making detailed here). This additional work would increase understanding of the programme's impact by exploring more of the multiple change mechanisms at play across the programme as a whole.

### Evaluation outcomes

The project team concluded that the contribution analysis approach enabled and encouraged them to identify and engage with previously implicit programme change mechanisms and causal chains. This has resulted in an enriched understanding of the some of the core elements of the intervention that contribute to intended outcomes. This enhanced knowledge about change mechanisms facilitates both potential future development of the programme and guides to future evaluation approaches.

The evaluation confirmed that the programme's support of participant decision-making (by providing them with access to specialist resources, personalised support and application advice) did contribute to positive outcomes and, by testing these against external influences, demonstrated that the programme was successful in increasing the likelihood of programme participants progressing into creative arts study.

### Adaptions to the methodology

The project team concluded that contribution analysis approach they used was largely appropriate for their purpose and evaluation questions, therefore adaptations to the methodology were not needed.



Resources and time limitations meant that some aspects of a contribution analysis approach had to be curtailed or ignored. This included the opportunity to iteratively test and develop the Theory of Change with a wider range of programme stakeholders, as well as the opportunity to investigate additional potential change mechanisms.

### Team reflections on using Contribution Analysis methodology

Contribution Analysis did not prioritise a particular type of evaluation evidence. This enabled the project team to conduct a retrospective evaluation and use pre-, continuation and post- survey data and participation and attendance monitoring data that had already been collected.

The available contribution analysis guidance provided a clear set of steps to take, and also allowed some flexibility to incorporate a variety of evidence sources.

With the constraints of time and team capacity, adhering to steps 5 and 6 presented a challenge for the project team. The need to operate within the time constraints of the school year suggests that WP teams without evaluation officers or additional evaluation support might struggle to conduct a sufficiently rigorous and detailed evaluation of sustained programmes, such as Creative Pathways.

The team suggested that it would be important for other institutions considering contribution analysis not to assume that small cohort methodologies are less resource-intensive than other evaluation approaches.

Understanding the methodology and the level of detail required to evaluate the Creative Pathways programme was resource-intensive and limited the team's ability to engage in other more routine evaluations. The experience of the team was that it was time-consuming to focus on even a single change mechanism strand and projects focusing on multiple change mechanisms will need sufficient resource. Nonetheless, the deep dive focus on decision-making has produced knowledge and understanding that can be applied to other and more routine evaluation approaches, potentially enriching the team's outcomes in future.

### Conclusions

In conducting this pilot, the project team had the opportunity to develop their understanding of evaluation terminology and concepts, including change mechanisms, how to create a mid-level Theory of Change and develop a one-page logic chain model into a detailed Theory of Change. They also learned more about contribution analysis as a methodology.

The complexity of the Creative Pathways Programme quickly became apparent as the evaluation progressed. The Theory of Change originally constructed on a simple template, became increasingly wide-ranging and complex, with outcomes that were difficult to measure, particularly over the longer term.

In terms of the next steps, the project team will test the decision-making change mechanism and similar evaluation outputs through a closer partnership with target schools/colleges. Reflection on some of the negative external contributory factors has encouraged the project team to consider whether the programme's reliance on sustained extracurricular engagement over the two final years of schooling is the most effective form of delivery. Evaluation outcomes suggest that the programme might be more effectively delivered as a tightly scheduled one-year programme taking place in school time. This would require deeper partnerships with schools, including an increased understanding of effective timing for the provision of progression and application IAG.