Supporting Students with Self-Declared Learning Difficulties and/or Disabilities: An evaluation of the Role of a Higher Education Tutorial Supervisor

December 2023

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Funded by the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO)

Executive Summary

City College Norwich (CCN) is a general Further and Higher Education College with almost 1000 students studying Higher Education (HE). As one of our strategic measures, following from our own assessment of performance through the Access and Participation Plan (APP) process, we developed a Higher Education Tutorial Supervisor (HETS) role to help drive the closure of gaps and develop support systems for students. Our data on continuation and attainment has shown that there were gaps between students with self-declared learning difficulties and/or disabilities (LDD) and their peers. Specifically, there was previously a gap of 10% in continuation and 6% in attainment between students with a self-declared LDD and their peers. Following the intervention of the HETS role, we observed a closure in these gaps. Scale within college based higher education (CBHE) makes robust data collection and evaluation difficult in practice. We felt that the development of Small-n methodologies in this space could provide scope for more robust evaluation of what works to explain how and why an observed result occurred. Therefore, this pilot project evaluated what contribution, if any, the HETS role had on the outcomes of self-declared LDD students in CBHE. Contribution analysis was conducted in line with Mayne's (2008) six steps. We have strong evidence that suggests the HETS role makes a contribution to closing the observed gaps between students with a self-declared LDD and their peers. Within this work, we also include our reflections on the use of this Small-n methodology within this context.

Background to the Intervention

City College Norwich

CCN is a large, mixed economy, general Further and Higher Education College, serving Norfolk and North Suffolk. It is rooted in the local community tracing its foundation as a technical school for Norwich to 1891. There are between 8,000 – 10,000 students enrolled at the College, with almost 1,000 studying HE courses. Within HE, students are studying on full-time courses (60%), part-time courses (13%) and Higher or Degree Apprenticeships (27%) containing Foundation or Bachelor degrees. As a CBHE institution, we are a community-based provider which focuses on career based, vocational and land based HE. All our courses are developed with employment and progression in mind, meaning we pride ourselves of equipping our students with the skills and qualifications needed for students to develop their career within areas such as Agriculture, Additional Needs and Disabilities, Animal Sciences, Aviation, Business Management, Construction and Engineering, Early Years & Childhood Studies, Healthcare, Policing, Public Sector Leadership, Sport, and Wildlife & Conservation.

98% of CCN HE students come from Norfolk and Suffolk, an area of many wards of low HE participation, providing challenges to social mobility. We have a strong widening participation track record and ethos, 49% of our students, using the Office for Students (OfS) published metric of young entrants, come from low participation POLAR4 postcodes (Quintiles 1 and 2). This rises to 73% when Quintile 3 is included. In terms of deprivation 35% of our students come from the two most deprived Index of Multiple Deprivation Quintiles (Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2019). Some 22% of our students declare a LDD, and 61% of our students are mature (over 21 years of age) on entry. These figures compare to the national picture of 28.3% of students from POLAR4 Quintiles 1 and 2; 43% from areas of deprivation (Index of Multiple Deprivation Quintiles 1 and 2), 17% of students with a declared LDD, and 32.8% mature on entry.

Our HE delivery offers students an environment where they benefit from high levels of support and individualisation, small class sizes and a student-centred seminar style teaching that allows them to achieve strong outcomes and realise their career ambitions.

As a small HE provider, we have not had the resources, up until this point, to use more than Type 1 and Type 2 evaluations (such as pre/post intervention surveys). The scope to carry out Type 3 evaluations using the methodologies as proposed by this project was exciting for us as a School of HE.

Higher Education Tutorial Supervisor Role

As one of our strategic measures, following from our own assessment of performance through the APP process, we developed a HETS role to help drive the closure of gaps and develop support systems for students. This role was introduced to maximise equality of opportunity over the *Success* element of the *Access, Success and Progression* student lifecycle, through targeted support of students from underrepresented groups. OfS define Underrepresented Groups as groups of students who share the following particular characteristics where data shows gaps in equality of opportunity in relation to access, success or progression:

- students from areas of low HE participation, low household income or low socioeconomic status
- some black, Asian and minority ethnic students
- mature students
- disabled students
- care leavers

In our context, the role of the HETS aims to:

- Raise awareness amongst students and academic staff (who may need to refer students) of the support available.
- Identify undisclosed (at the point of entry) support needs through a student survey.
- Hold 1:1 tutorials with students with a self-declared LDD to identify any support needs / areas for concern. These occur individually when the students require the support.
- Signpost students to additional services e.g., wellbeing both within the College, as well as wider support from external bodies.
- Support students to apply for academic support (for example, utilising Extenuating Circumstances and Special Allowances / Reasonable Adjustment policies).
- Organise Study Skills workshops where appropriate to support academic performance.
- Support students to apply for additional financial support through the HE Hardship Fund.
- Work with support teams and students to ensure the effectiveness of policies.

Data on continuation and attainment has shown that there were gaps between students with a self-declared LDD and their peers. For continuation rates (measured as the rate at which students from different groups remained in HE for 1 year and 14 days from commencing

their programme of study) and attainment rates (measured as the rate of students achieving Good Honours, 1st or 2:1 degree classifications or equivalent) these were 10% and 6% respectively.

This research evaluated the impact that the HETS role has had on the outcomes specifically of students with self-declared LDD in CBHE. Anecdotal evidence suggested that underrepresented groups of students at CCN were not actively engaging with student support services within the wider college, and this was one explanation for gaps in continuation and attainment rates for specific groups, including students who had a self-declared LDD.

Evaluation Issues for Smaller Providers

Scale within CBHE providers makes robust data collection and evaluation difficult in practice. Often there may be small groups of underrepresented students within the overall student body i.e., there may only be a small number of students within a particular underrepresented group, meaning that individual students can disproportionately influence metrics (i.e., reported gaps can be fairly significantly impacted by individual students both positively and negatively). OfS acknowledge this and have tried to resolve this issue by aggregating data over three and five-year periods, but this is still problematic in practice. Equally, the smaller number of staff working in the APP / APP Evaluation teams at CBHE (and other smaller providers) has tended to limit the scope for evaluation to Type1 and Type 2 Evaluations (Narrative and Empirical) rather than Type 3 (Causality) (Office for Students, 2023).

We felt that the development of Small-n methodologies in this space could provide scope for more robust evaluation of what works and was therefore an area that was worthy of further exploration through the TASO Small-n pilot projects. This paper both outlines the Contribution analysis approach that we have used in our research and reflects on the learning that we have taken from the pilot that will help future evaluation work.

Methodology

This evaluation was conducted in line with Mayne ‘s (2008) six steps to Contribution analysis. Each of the six steps were taken chronologically, to build upon each stage.

An Introduction to Contribution Analysis

Statistics alone are not enough to infer causality; one also needs good explanatory causal theory (Pearl and Mackenzie, 2018; Mayne, 2019). The aim of contribution analysis is to infer causality through assessing the contribution a programme is making to observed results (Mayne, 2008, pg.1). This is useful to assess complex programmes which are non-

experimental in nature and where there may be multiple causes contributing to an observed result (Pearl and Mackenzie, 2018). If an analysis is looking to understand the cause behind an observed result, it is important to assess the contribution of external causal factors to understand the causal package (Leeuw, 2003). This causal package will explain the contribution a programme is making to observed results.

Contribution analysis can be used to explain how and why an observed result occurred, which could be used when there is a need or desire to replicate an intervention that has led to positive change. To conduct a contribution analysis evaluation, it is necessary to build a ToC, including a chain of expected results, the underlying assumptions (what conditions have to exist for x to lead to y) and associated risks (what could prevent x leading to y). Contribution analysis is an iterative approach in which each step helps guide the process, but these steps are not prescriptive, meaning that you can return to a previous step when required.

To test the proposed ToC, empirical evidence is used to "confirm the ToC of an intervention including the chain of results, assumptions behind the causal links and the related causal narratives explaining how causality is inferred" (Mayne, 2020, pg.2). Where there is enough evidence to link the intervention/programme and the observed results, contribution claims can be made.

It is worth highlighting that the terms used in contribution analysis are not always defined and there is no universal agreement on them. This can make it challenging when using contribution analysis and would be a useful area for the research and evaluation community to focus on.

Steps in Contribution Analysis

Step 1: Set out the attribution problem to be addressed:

TASO suggest: *It is important to determine the specific cause-effect question being addressed and the level of confidence required before exploring the type of contribution expected and assessing the plausibility of the expected contribution in relation to the size of the programme.*

As previously stated, data showed that there was a gap of 10% in continuation and 6% in attainment between students with a self-declared LDD and their peers. Following the intervention of the HETS role, we observed a closure in these gaps. We believed that this could, in part at least, be as a result of the impact this role has on student outcomes.

Therefore, the aim of this project was to understand the following:

1. What contribution, if any, has the HETS made to module and degree outcomes in students with self-declared LDD?
2. What contribution, if any, has the HETS had on continuation in students with self-declared LDD?
3. What contribution, if any, has the HETS had on wellbeing in students with self-declared LDD?

We also considered other causal factors outside our intervention that may have had a contribution to the observed result (closure in the gaps). We believed these could include, but were not limited to, internal support mechanisms (module and personal tutor support; library support services; wellbeing support services) and external support mechanisms (private academic tuition, wellbeing support (e.g., counsellors)), and financial support (e.g., Hardship fund, Disabled Students Allowance (DSA)).

Due to the complexity of the factors that impact students over the period of their studies, we believed that the level to which we could claim, with certainty, the HETS role had contributed to the immediate outcomes, intermediate outcomes and final outcomes may be different. This is because we anticipated that the closer the outcome (e.g., an intermediate outcome, such as an increase in wellbeing) to the intervention (the HETS role), there are potentially less other influencing factors that could be present and contribute, and therefore the greater any contribution claims for the intervention. Conversely, the further the outcome (e.g., final outcome, such as degree attainment) from the intervention (HETS role), the greater the number of other influencing factors that could be present and contribute to the observed result.

It was anticipated that the results of this study would provide information on the factors that contribute to improving student continuation, wellbeing and degree attainment in students with self-declared LDD. This could be used by decision makers in CBHE, along with the wider HE sector, to plan and implement strategies to impact on these areas and improve the outcomes for students with self-declared LDD. Additionally, understanding the assumptions and underlying mechanisms for why the intervention has the impact it has will allow decision makers to ensure that they are present when implementing a similar role elsewhere. In addition, it will allow decision makers to consider the risks present and provide information on elements that should be considered to mitigate risks to successful implementation.

Step 2: Develop the Theory of Change and the risks to it:

TASO suggest: *Contribution Analysis is based on a well-developed Theory of Change that specifies the results chain that links the programme to outcomes.*

Our ToC development process started with the TASO CORE ToC template (The Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education, no date) which set out the current situation, the aims and expected outcomes of the intervention being adopted, as well as the underlying rationale and assumptions. This led to the first ToC and supporting narrative for the project which details the roles and responsibilities of the HETS, including link to academic research (Appendix 1).

However, following work with colleagues at Manchester Metropolitan University within the pilot, we refined this to increase the emphasis on the underlying mid-level theory / theories, and to show the ToC as a flow chart rather than the first iteration which can perhaps be seen as a Logic chain (A leads to B, B leads to C). Greater emphasis in the revised ToC was placed on the mid-level theories / underlying mechanisms of change that underpin the intervention, such as increased self-efficacy. This is covered as a supplementary document to the ToC detailing the assumptions, mid-level theory and counterfactuals.

Literature informed the initial theory of change. This is a useful step in the process as it provides a robust baseline ToC that is informed by existing evaluation, theory and literature in the area relevant to the effectiveness of the intervention. Whilst the HETS role is unique to the college, the activities that this role engages in, covers a broad range of areas that other roles within an educational setting may do. Therefore, literature relating to the role that pastoral tutors engage in, plus literature surround student wellbeing and student support in HE was used to inform the ToC.

As we progressed through the project, we developed two ToC models. The first of these was designed around student support with the HETS playing a central role, which was essentially a post-intervention view of our student support approach (Appendix 2). The second of these covered student support covering the services students can access without the HETS role, which was essentially a pre-intervention view of our student support approach (Appendix 3). The intent was that we would end up with a hybrid view following data collection and testing. This ToC would detail the elements of the HETS role where we see a strong contribution whilst also recognising other causal factors that may contribute to the observed results.

Step 3: Gather existing evidence on the Theory of Change:

TASO suggest: *“The evaluator should next gather evidence to assess the logic of the links in the Theory of Change. Evidence will cover programme results and activities as well as underlying assumptions and other influencing factors”.*

Having produced two ToC models, the process focussed on gathering evidence to support the ToC and other causal factors. The project took various steps in data collection. The design of the data collection phase consisted of both qualitative and quantitative data.

The data collection phase took place between November 2022 and January 2023. This phase of data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews with 9 students who were current students studying a HE degree course at CCN. Participants interviewed were students who had a self-declared LDD and had engaged with our HETS. Students were studying a range of HE courses, including both foundation and bachelor's degrees, in subjects including, Psychology with Sociology, Leadership and Management and Health Studies. All students were female and volunteered to participate in the study. The interviews lasted between 15 – 45 minutes. Practical constraints of the data collection phase meant that we could only interview students who were current students that were enrolled on a HE course. We were unable to speak to students who had graduated.

The contribution pathways developed in the previous stage needed to be tested to understand the credibility of the contribution claims we were making. Therefore, interview questions were based on the contribution pathways. For example, "Did you receive support from the Higher Education Tutorial supervisor for wellbeing?" We also wanted to ensure that there was opportunity for students to discuss other plausible influences who may have contributed to their success. Therefore, they were asked questions such as "Did you receive wellbeing support from external sources to the college?" Attention was also given to the perception of the support received by HETS, to therefore, not only understand that *what* activities students engaged in with the HETS, but also to understand the underlying mechanisms of *why* these have an impact.

After conducting the interviews with students, we also wanted to look to confirm our causal pathways with other stakeholders in the college, who also regularly engaged with the HETS. Therefore, two focus groups were conducted with academic staff, including HE management, course leaders, lecturers and support staff working in the HE department. One focus group had 5 staff members and the other had 9 staff members. Each focus group had a variety of staff from different roles, to ensure that there was an array of experience. These were conducted face to face on college premises and lasted on average 45 minutes. Staff were asked to confirm their understanding of the HETS role and the activities that they engage in with students to provide support. This allowed us to confirm our causal pathways to clarify the sequence of steps in the causal chain of events.

Ethical approval was sought from City College Norwich. All students and staff participating in the interview, or the focus group were provided with a participant information sheet and

provided informed consent. After consent was provided, participants were either interviewed (students) or participated in a focus group (staff). Participants taking part in the interview and focus group remained anonymous, and a unique identifier code was generated by each participant for use if their data was requested to be withdrawn.

Data was recorded and initially analysed and reviewed by the lead facilitator of the data collection. However, discussion with other researchers within the project was regularly undertaken to ensure reliability.

In these interviews, students were asked to reflect on their perception of the impact that the HETS role was having on them. This qualitative data allowed us to understand why the HETS role was having an impact – the underlying mechanism for the outcomes occurring. Staff focus group data also looked to corroborate the information provided by the students. Data demonstrated a positive student perception of self-efficacy, motivation to study and sense of belongingness for students. These key elements had an impact on the intermediate outcomes of continuation on programme and improved wellbeing.

This resulted in the formulation of the causal chains.

Our evaluation led to the understanding that for students with self-declared LDD, attending 1-1 tutorials can include support with 5 key areas: academic policies, academic skills, live assessments, finance and wellbeing. These are the areas in which the HETS role has a positive impact on students and can lead to improved continuation and improved wellbeing of students.

Attendance of a 1-1 tutorial with the HETS includes support and/or signposting can lead to the following outcomes:

A. Provided students with the knowledge on where to find academic policies, guidance on how to complete application forms and providing suitable evidence to support the application. This also includes supporting students to obtain a SpLD (Specific Learning Difference) appointment once the application form has been submitted. This grows students' confidence with completing these and provides access to reasonable adjustments through processes such as extenuating circumstances. This also supports students to have a sense of belonging and feel empowered. Supporting with applications for extenuating circumstances can also lead to students remaining on programme.
B. Supported students with academic and study skills. As part of this support, the HETS supported students with skills such as time management and organisation. This also included signposting students to internal services such as the library to aid with

academic skills such as researching and referencing. This support provides students with increased knowledge, therefore making them feel more confident. It also meant that students were less worried and increased their motivation to complete their academic work.

C. Supported students with live assessments, including observing and providing feedback on presentations. This, therefore, allows feedback to improve presentation skills and reduces anxiety around live assessments.
D. Supported students to apply for financial support, such as the HE Student Hardship Fund. This included sharing the required form, support with completing, checking completed forms prior to submission and support with submission. This provided reassurance to students that needed financial support as it is often difficult to ask for help. Having a good relationship with the HETS is integral to this support being accessed and can also result in students remaining on programme.
E. Supported students with their wellbeing. This includes supporting students directly with their wellbeing which includes signposting to wellbeing services, completing wellbeing referrals and arranging internal wellbeing support. The HETS also supports students directly by talking to them at times of heighted challenge which helps students compose themselves. Students' wellbeing is also supported indirectly by the HETS being accessible and responsive, which reduces students' anxiety with a range of other challenges and/or queries and leads to students feeling more positive. An improvement in students' wellbeing can also lead to students continuing their studies rather than withdrawing.

Step 4: Assemble and assess the contribution story and challenges to it:

TASO suggest: *"The contribution story can now be assembled and assessed critically. This will involve examining links in the results chain and assessing which of these are strong and which are weak, assessing the overall credibility of the contribution story and ascertaining whether stakeholders agree with the story."*

At this stage, we examined the links in the results chains and assessed which were strong and which were weak. We used the evidence collected from stakeholders (students and staff) to complete this.

The following analysis work-through example is limited to a single causal chain within the contribution story:

Causal chain B): Participating in a tutorial with the HETS supported students with academic and study skills, increasing students' transferable skills and academic skills. This increased students' knowledge and made them feel more confident and motivated.

Discussions with staff and students confirmed our assumption that students with self-declared LDD can experience challenges with areas of academic study including writing, researching, notetaking and organising essays.

Evidence: This is primary evidence, considered strong, and confirms the need to support students with academic and study skills.

There is also evidence that with the right guidance, the challenges that students with SpLDs may face means that they do not need to limit academic attainment.

Students from the interviews confirmed that the HETS supports directly with skills such as time management and organisation. It was shared that this supported students to be able to see where the deadlines were. This led to feeling less worried about the deadlines and feeling more motivated. Key to this support from the HETS was the communication skills with the student. This included listening to how students are feeling and responding promptly and with useful information to help. This is also considered strong evidence.

There is other evidence that other factors, such as tutor support and students accessing the library services directly are likely to also contribute to closing the attainment gap between students with a self-declared LDD and their peers.

Furthermore, students have stated that the HETS has led to students being able to remain on programme (continuation) and managed to help students exceed their module grades. This is considered strong evidence.

Contribution Claim:

The 1-1 tutorial with the HETS supports students with academic and study skills, and supports students with continuation, wellbeing and module assessment attainment. There is strong evidence from participants that students with a self-declared LDD can experience challenges with areas of academic study and that the intervention helps them develop these skills and improves motivation. However, there is evidence that other factors (tutor support and students accessing the library services directly) that supports students in closing the gap for this causal chain. Therefore, the 1-1 tutorial with the HETS to support students with academic and study skills makes a contribution to closing the attainment gap between students with a self-declared LDD and their peers.

Step 5: Seek out additional evidence:

TASO suggest: *"Based on the assessment of how robust the contribution story is, the evaluator should next identify the new data needed to address challenges to the credibility of the story. At this stage, it may be useful to update the Theory of Change or look at certain elements of the theory in more detail. If it is possible to verify or confirm the Theory of Change with empirical evidence, then it is reasonable to conclude that the intervention in question was a contributory cause for the outcome (Befani and Mayne 2014)".*

The project research team discussed what additional evidence was needed to strengthen the confidence in the contribution claim. Further data collection was undertaken by the lead data collection facilitator. Using multiple sources of primary data strengthens the reliability of findings, and in conjunction with existing literature, increases the potential of the generalisability and transferability of our findings to other CBHE. It should be acknowledged that this evaluation is based on an intervention designed to meet the need of CCN's HE students, however, the activities that the HETS role engages in may have some generalisability to other support roles of a similar nature.

To further assess our ToC, we collated attendance data for the students we interviewed to see if there was a relationship between engaging with the HETS and the student's attendance. Additionally, we used our students Individual Learning Plan (ILPs) as evidence. At CCN, staff use ILPs to record dialogue from tutorials with students, whether this is face to face or by telephone. We record the details of the tutorial to keep a log of the support that a student receives. Using this platform, we were able to search for dialogue between students with a self-declared LDD and the HETS. The records indicate that the subject of the tutorials often included supporting students to return to study (continuation), academic support directly from the HETS, and discussions about the students' wellbeing.

We were also able to use our Virtual Learning Environment (Blackboard) to further confirm the interactions and activities between students and the HETS role. There was good evidence to support the assumptions that our HETS role offers support for academic needs, financial support, wellbeing support and for academic policies, as announcements offering this type of support were listed on Blackboard. Announcements on Blackboard posted by the HETS were also signposting students to other sources of academic support, such as the library and the academic workshops that the library offer. Furthermore, we were able to conduct building walkarounds to see 1-1 tutorials happening with students. This triangulation of data helped to strengthen the credibility of the contribution claims we were making.

As a result of different phases of data collection, three members of the project team were involved in the development of the final ToC.

Step 6: Revise and strengthen the contribution story:

TASO suggest: *"Contribution Analysis works best as an iterative process and should, ideally, be seen as an ongoing process that incorporates new evidence as it emerges."*

At this step the contribution story was assessed, including consideration of other causal factors that contributed to the observed results. To assess the contribution story and ToC that had been developed, we used the four conditions needed to infer causality in contribution analysis (Befani and Mayne, 2014, pg.21):

1. Plausibility. The intervention is based on a reasoned ToC: the chain of results and the assumptions behind why the intervention is expected to work are plausible, sound, informed by existing research and literature, and supported by key stakeholders.
2. Fidelity. The activities of the intervention were implemented as outlined in the ToC.
3. A verified ToC. The ToC is verified by evidence: the chain of expected results occurred, and the causal assumptions held.
4. Accounting for other influencing factors. Context and other factors influencing the intervention are assessed and are either shown not to have made a significant contribution or, if they did, their relative contribution is recognised and included in the ToC, as part of a larger causal package that the ToC captures as faithfully as possible.

To assess these conditions, we used a table to consider each of these (Appendix 4). This included a breakdown of the way in which we assessed these, whether that condition was confirmed (the degree to which the condition has been met) and the confidence in the analysis (the quality of evidence to substantiate whether the condition was confirmed). Within the table, we also included a description of the evidence that we had collected and an explanation of this too.

During the analysis, we followed the three broad steps outlined by Befani and Mayne, (2014). These included carrying out hoop tests and smoking gun tests for the causal mechanism under analysis (HETS role) and the other causal mechanisms external to the intervention. For information on these tests, please see Table 1 below.

The hoop test, also referred to as the disconfirmatory test, is used to assess whether there is evidence that something could be a possible cause and is therefore retained as a possible cause. Hoop tests involve evidence that is certain but not unique (Bennett and Checkel, 2015). We found evidence that the intervention was necessary, that is, that the intervention

(HETS role) was present, and a causal connection could be established. Therefore, the intervention (HETS role) passed the Hoop Test and was retained as a possible cause.

		Is evidence sufficient (uniquely able) to establish causation?	
		No	**Yes**
Is evidence necessary (certain) to establish causation?	**No**	**Straw in the Wind** Passing affirms the relevance of hypothesis but does not confirm it. Failing suggests the hypothesis may not be relevant, but does not eliminate it.	**Smoking Gun** Passing confirms hypothesis. Failing does not eliminate it.
	Yes	**Hoop** Passing affirms relevance of hypothesis but does not confirm it. Failing eliminates it.	**Doubly Decisive** Passing confirms hypothesis and eliminates others. Failing eliminates it.

Table 1: Four Tests of Causation used in Process Tracing (TASO, 2022, based on Van Evera, 1977 and Bennett, 2010)

We asked ourselves the following questions to assess the linkages in the results chains:

- Was the support from HETS well received by students?
- Was the support from HETS offered to students in the way in which the role was designed?
- How likely would these improvements have been without the support from HETS?
- Can students relate in specific ways their increased self-efficacy, motivation and sense of belonging to the support from HETS?
- Is the support among the factors that stakeholders (students, lecturers, support staff, managers) point to when explaining the improved outcomes for students, particularly when prompted in a way that reduces the probability of them mentioning the support from HETS?

Smoking gun tests are unique, but not certain and passing a smoking gun test strongly affirms a hypothesis. As the answers to the above questions were positive, the associated mechanisms associated with the support constituted ‘smoking gun’ evidence that at least in some part, the intervention (HETS role) contributed to the observed results.

As we collected evidence that the introduction of the intervention (HETS role) could have triggered the steps in the causal chain, it becomes difficult to identify another explanation that would have led to each of the steps in the causal chain occurring sequentially without the intervention (HETS role). The chances of each of these events occurring simultaneously, in the sequence identified in the ToC are low. In particular, they are low if the introduction of the HETS role did not have an impact and the events are triggered by other causal mechanisms unrelated to the intervention (Befani and Mayne, 2018). This step is attempting to show that the intervention could be a contribution to the observed outcomes, not that it was the only cause. It is the strength of the evidence that is collected to provide the basis on which to assess if the intervention was the 'main cause' of the outcomes (Befani and Mayne, 2018).

As we were also interested in other factors that may have contributed to the observed outcomes, we followed a similar procedure to build smoking gun evidence. If any of these other factors were related to our intervention (HETS role), this means that they would not take away from the contribution that the HETS role contributed. However, if these other factors were unrelated and external to the HETS role, it is important to recognise this. At this step, if other factors are discovered and seen to have a significant impact on the observed results, then this would take away from the contribution that the intervention (HETS role) played in the outcomes. However, it is possible that these other factors are not significant, and it is the sum of the intervention and the causal factors that together create a causal package that has led to the observed results. If this is the case, then it can be challenging to identify and/or suggest which of these has the greatest contribution.

As part of this pilot study, there was not sufficient time to return to previous stages and repeat this process multiple times to refine the draft contribution story and causal factors in the ToC. However, we were able to revise the ToC using the empirical evidence collected, including the assumptions that were needed, the risks avoided and include other causal factors, resulting in our final ToC (Appendix 5). We felt that we had good evidence on the relevant causal factors and were able to test the whole ToC in a doubly decisive test. To do this, we asked ourselves the following question: "Was it the intervention (HETS role) with the help of supporting factors, in addition to the other causal factors, all included within the ToC, that best explains the observed results?" According to Befani and Mayne (2018), this stage is more logical than the hoop test or smoking gun test and is more of a synthesis of the understanding that has been gained. If this test is passed, then this confirms that the working assumption is confirmed, and the alternative assumption is automatically rejected. Therefore, this confirms the working ToC is valid as all other plausible factors have been discounted.

Main Findings / Evaluation Outcomes

As highlighted in the assessment of conditions (Appendix 4), we assessed plausibility, fidelity, verified ToC and accounting for other influencing factors. We confirmed that the intervention was based on a reasoned ToC and was based on research. We were also able to confirm that the activities of the intervention were implemented as outlined in the ToC. This meant that the first two conditions were passed.

When conducting the analysis, we looked at each of the causal chains in isolation. This included considering other causal factors and looking at the strength of the evidence we had collected. This allowed us to understand the contribution that each of the different elements of the programme made to the observed outcomes.

The final ToC included five causal chains that linked the intervention and the observed result. Strong evidence from stakeholders during the data collection stage and from the research literature was found for all of these.

Prior to the intervention being implemented and having an effect, it is important for the HETS to approach students for whom we are aware have a self-declared LDD. This is important because it provides reassurance to students that needs support that it is acceptable to receive help, as students often feel it is often difficult to ask for help.

We had strong evidence that students received individual support from the HETS which included individual tutorials, phone calls and email correspondence. We also had strong evidence to confirm our belief that the reason for this support was in relation to one of the following: academic policies, academic skills, live assessments, financial, wellbeing. It was highlighted that the HETS either provided support themselves with each of these or provided signposting to other services to support with these areas.

This support provided knowledge/information, guidance and help in completing and submitting documentation. As a result of this, this research showed that this led to a decrease in students' anxiety and an increase in student's knowledge, self-efficacy, confidence, motivation and their sense of belonging. In order for this to have maximal impact, it is important for there to be a positive relationship between the student and the HETS, and for the HETS to have strong communication skills and being accessible and responsive.

In most cases, students highlighted that the involvement of the HETS led to support being accessed, which otherwise may not have been possible or as quick without the involvement of the HETS.

Whilst verifying the final ToC that we had created (Appendix 5), we found that the closer to the output of the intervention, the more direct impact the intervention had. This is concurrent with Ton *et al*., (2014) who states that where there are likely to be multiple causal factors at play, the uniqueness of the effects of the intervention may only be apparent for proximate effects.

Reflection on Using Contribution Analysis as an Evaluation Methodology

Universal Terminology

There are limited practice-based peer reviewed journal articles or reports that concretely discuss the application of the steps in contribution analysis, and even fewer in the education sector to evaluate students' outcomes. We did feel that there was ambiguity and a lack of consistency in the terminology used in contribution analysis; each article appears to use differing or overlapping terms. This has made it difficult to know which terms to use and therefore would be a useful area for the research and evaluation community to focus on. The guidance on the steps of contribution analysis, however, are clear and well-defined.

Practicalities: Time and Resource

As a CBHE institution, colleges typically do not have a research or evaluation team in order to undertake Type 3 evaluations. Nonetheless, the CCN team were fortunate to have a leadership team with qualitative, quantitative and evaluation experience to form the evaluation team for this pilot project.

The iterative process of testing and re-testing the ToC as suggested in the steps of contribution analysis by Mayne (2008) can be time consuming. It needs to be acknowledged that contribution analysis is not a quick evaluation process, but a process that can take months of data collection and analysis, both of which likely need to be repeated and re-visited. This is an advantage of the methodology as the process is reflective and critical in nature, but it is important that the evaluation team has the time and space to conduct both the data collection and continual analysis. Time and scope to carry out this process is often something that an evaluation team, who may need a quick answer to questions such as, “What contribution has the Higher Education Tutorial Supervisor had on module and degree outcomes in students with self-declared LDD?”, may not have.

Strong theory of change

The steps in developing a ToC of this project again, can take a long time to ensure that they are robust. This is through ensuring that they are informed by academic literature and/or previous evaluations from the beginning of the ToC development. This means that the

research team needs to be fluent in the social sciences literature, and journal article database searching.

Theories of change also depend on the use of results chains to understand the contribution pathways. These need to be developed alongside the ToC, to demonstrate the links in the chain and include the reasons why the intervention is having a contribution. These need to be developed in lay terms for other stakeholders to understand and interpret.

Our ToC started as simple logic model, that soon developed into two, much more complex and detailed theories of change. One ToC for our intervention and another for our alternative causal factors. Developing a final ToC, was again an iterative process that developed simultaneously with data collection and analysis. It was only at the end of our final stage of data collection and analysis were we able to refine a simplified and clear ToC for stakeholders to be able to read and interpret.

The subjectivity of confidence of contribution

Through the analysis process, it has been challenging to understand the degree to which the HETS role has contributed to the final outcome and to be confident in the robustness of the analysis. Due to this challenge, whilst completing our analysis, we included a three-tier rating (i.e., red, amber, green) to assess two things. Firstly, we assessed the degree to which each of the conditions (outlined in step 6) we were assessing was achieved. Secondly, we assessed the strength of the evidence we had collected to form this judgement, which demonstrates our confidence in our assessment. Whilst we used this three-tier rating to assess each of these, there does not seem to be a widely utilised method to quantify the level of contribution. The HETS role as an intervention is one part of many causal factors that could have contribution to students' success. As outlined by Mayne (2019) results in most ToC are not defined as a specific amount of the result. Therefore, it is difficult to 'prove' that the HETS role was the sole causal factor that contributed to students' outcomes, or therefore to what degree it played a role in relation to the other factors. We know that the HETS role contributes and why students feel that it had an impact, but we are unable to quantify this impact. From a practical perspective, as we cannot quantify a contribution, it may be difficult to justify to external funders and senior management of the college to invest in additional HETS roles.

Nonetheless, from an evaluation perspective, we are able to confirm that the expected result of the intervention occurred. We have been able to understand the activities that the HETS role undertakes from a logical perspective to facilitate impact and why these have an impact. We have been able to determine the other causal factors that may also have contributed to the observed results. Therefore, through this evaluation we do feel as though we have made

valuable steps in understanding ‘what is working’ with our newly implemented intervention. Contribution analysis does allow evaluation teams in colleges to develop conclusions about the contribution that their intervention had made to their students.

It ensures that stakeholders are a valuable part of the testing of the ToC, and thereby offers a well-informed evidence-based evaluation. Through triangulation of data, contribution analysis offers a robust evidence base to understand the contribution that the intervention made, but also offered an understanding, again using evidence, of other causal factors. Given the complex nature of student success in education, this methodology can help to understand where there are interactions between support mechanisms which may either be internal or external to the college where the intervention is based.

Due to the challenges identified above, we feel that it would benefit those using contribution analysis if there were more universal methods to analyse and attribute the level of contribution that an intervention and any identified causal factors have in the observed results.

Conclusion

Contribution analysis does provide a framework and step by step process to follow, and involvement in this pilot project has enabled us to apply this methodology to an educational setting with small cohorts of students in CBHE.

Specifically, this evaluation offers an insight into an intervention that results in a contribution to students' continuations and improved wellbeing in HE. We acknowledge that our HETS role is unique to our college, however, the role that they conduct and the impact that the role can have on students as demonstrated in this project, could therefore be applicable to other similar roles in other colleges. It is hoped that the findings we have indicated the activities the role undertakes that have a contribution to intermediate student outcomes, whilst also understanding the complex interplay of factors that can also contribute.

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Appendix 1: The First Theory of Change for the Project and Supporting Narrative

1 Situation

Context: CCN is a FE College with a School of Higher Education, including approximately 800 HE students. [*NUMBER OF LDD STUDENTS*]
Problems:

- Based on ILR data, there is an attainment gap of 6% between LDD and non-LDD students at CCN (2020-21, OfS Dashboard).
- LDD students are also more likely to withdraw from their programmes of study, compared to their peers (continuation gap for LDD students of 10% (2019/20, OfS APP Dashboard))

Intervention: HE Tutorial Supervisor.

2 Aims

- Instigate a dedicated academic and pastoral support role to focus on providing an additional layer of support for students from underrepresented groups (in this case LDD students)
- Provide these students with a dedicated point of contact for queries and concerns about their studies, experience of college and available support
- Signpost and support students to navigate other support systems within the college (Student Wellbeing, Student Finance)
- To better identify students in need of support, as early as possible into their course, rather than waiting for crisis points
- Improve data capture and monitoring for our APP

Process

7 Inputs

The human, financial and organisational resources required to achieve your desired outcomes?

- HE Tutorial Supervisor (HETS)
- EBS data system to analyse student attendance, success, and demographics
- Students with LDD (mental Health and/or Disabilities)
- Nationally published data for CCN (OfS Dashboard etc.)
- Email, Skype/MS teams, BlackBoard for Announcements, Room booking system to allow for face-to face contact.
- Support Teams within the college (Library Services, Student Finance, Student Services (Wellbeing Team)
- Student academic policies and procedures in place

5 Activities

Outline the interventions you believe (supported by your rationale and assumptions) will bring about your desired change. Activities mobilise your inputs to produce outputs.

- Raise awareness of HETS role amongst students and academic staff (who may need to refer students for support)
- Identification of undisclosed (at the point of entry) support needs through a student survey
- Hold 1:1 tutorials with students with an LDD to identify any support needs / areas for concern
- Support students to apply for academic support (utilising Extenuating circumstances and Special Allowances / Reasonable Adjustment policies)
- Organise Study Skills workshops with Library Team
- Support students to apply for additional financial support through the HE Hardship Fund
- Ensuring updating of student records to reflect emerging picture more accurately (i.e., student who have been identified with an LDD post-entry)
- Identify areas for additional intervention to enable more effective support of students
- Work with support teams and students to ensure the effectiveness of policies.
- Signposting students to additional services e.g., wellbeing

6 Outputs

What are the results/ deliverables of the activity relevant to the achievement of your outcomes?

- Identification of LDD
- Better understanding of support services available to LDD students at CCN
- More students can access support services
- Better understanding of academic policies and procedures and how these can support LDD students
- Policies that are shaped by the experience / input of LDD students.
- Increased confidence in academic skills amongst LDD students (referencing, proofreading, academic writing) for students who attended workshops
- Greater utilisation of hardship funds by LDD students
- More accurate student records

Impact

3 Outcomes

Short and intermediate-term outcomes which must be in place for your interventions to work & for your long-term goals to be achieved.

- Increased sense of support in students.
- Increase in students accessing support services (library, wellbeing, financial etc.)
- Increase in support/interventions available to students.
- Decrease in student concerns being directed towards tutors and support service staff.
- Decrease in student issues escalating, e.g., referencing errors being targeted sooner (start of the year) to avoid impact to grades and student confidence.
- Improved wellbeing, financial situation, academic skills etc. in underrepresented students (because of signposting to support services, and new interventions).
- Better understanding of the student cohort and where there are gaps in support.
- Less financial concerns for students who have accessed the HE Hardship Fund

4 Impacts

What is the long-term goal which relates to the 'problem'? What will result from the removal of the problem?

- Closure of Attainment gaps.
- Fewer dropouts of LDD students (Absolute and relative to peers)
- Uncovering of previously hidden support needs that can be addressed to improve the support offer for CCN HE Student
- Marketing Opportunity to highlight support offer to students.

Rationale and Assumptions

"Disabled students are less likely to continue their degrees, graduate with a good degree, and progress onto a highly skilled job or further study." OFS (2019).

For all English Providers there was a non-continuation gap of 1.2% (2019-20), and a 1% attainment gap (Good Honours, 2020-21). CCN data suggests a wider gap than the sector average

A specific intervention was part of our APP – "Appoint a dedicated tutor *(HETS)* providing academic support, with targeted focus on individuals from underrepresented groups. Although appointments available for all students, risk factors (such as dips in attendance and applications for multiple extensions) will provide a targeted approach." CCN APP 20/21 – 24/25". ONS survey, November 2020 suggested that students are significantly more anxious than the general population of Great Britain. Lower continuation rates (3% gap) between full time undergraduates with a declared mental health condition continuing into their second year of study, compared to those without a declared mental health issue OfS APP dashboard 218/19 (and similar gap repeated ion 2019/20)

Students from underrepresented groups including students with an LDD, require access to further tutorial support and signposting to relevant services. These groups also require monitoring and interventions to ensure the gaps currently present in Success metrics (Continuation and attainment) are closed. Students from underrepresented groups require a single point of contact (on top of their academic tutors) for queries or concerns about their studies, experience of college, and available support to provide direct support and to help them access support form professional services both within and outside of the college.

Background to the HETS role

The HETS role was introduced as a direct action coming from our assessment of performance within our APP 2020/1-2024/5. We have seen two staff members in the role since November 2019, with the current staff member commencing with us in Mid-October 2020. This transition between staff members has also seen the role move from a focus on better understanding our student demographics to more direct work with students.

General Assumptions (the need for the role)

Anecdotal evidence suggested that underrepresented groups of students at CCN were not actively engaging with student support services within the wider college, and this was one explanation for gaps in continuation and attainment rates for specific groups, including students who had a self-declared LDD.

Data on continuation and attainment showed that there were gaps between students with a self-declared LDD and their peers, for continuation rates (measured as the rate at which students from different groups remained in HE for 1 year and 14 days from commencing their programme of study) and attainment rates (measured as the rate of students achieving Good Honours, 1st or 2:1 degree classifications or equivalent) of 10% and 6% respectively.

By providing an extra layer of support, to provide direct support (pastoral and academic) for students and to ensure they were able to access services within and outside the college we would be able to increase continuation and attainment.

Students and staff members have reported positive benefits of the role through college course committees, but we intend to use the small-n project as a mechanism to fully evaluate the impact of the role, and to make amendments to areas of focus considering the information coming through the evaluation.

The roles and responsibilities of the HETS

To raise awareness of HETS role amongst students and academic staff (who may need to refer students for support)

The assumption here, that we will evaluate, is that there has been a previous lack of awareness of the support services available in the college, and that by raising awareness of the HETS role that students (and staff) will have a more immediate point of contact to resolve issues. Research indicates that students experience barriers to accessing support services due to the procedural elements (form completion) involved. Many students are also unaware of the learning support available to them when arriving at university, or what types

of provision would suit them (Jacobs, *et al*., 2020). This implies that having a role such as HETS in which a person can guide and direct students to appropriate services within the college, could aid the barrier to support that students may face.

Identification of undisclosed (at the point of entry) support needs through a student survey

Experience of operating the role has shown that often issues (around mental health and other LDDs) are not necessarily disclosed upon application (i.e., via UCAS) and so we survey 1st year students as early as possible into their programme of study. This is so that we can identify whether they have a LDD that they have not previously disclosed, but also to understand if they have other more general concerns or anxieties around financing their studies; coping with the move to university-level study (particularly as many will be coming back into formal education after a break post-secondary). Students often have to self-identify their SpLD needs to their university to received learning support (Pino and Mortari, 2014), however, will conceal their LDD as a result of feeling as though they may face labelling or stigmatisation (Riddick, 2000). Additionally, research indicates that students may not receive support for a LDD upon entry to university, and for students with dyslexia, they do not receive a diagnosis until post-secondary education (Jacobs, *et al*., 2020). They seek support from their institution generally because they may struggle with the demands of university level study, which then as a result, can lead to a SpLD diagnosis. Our HETS role actively promotes the support we offer to our students, in an attempt to foster an inclusive learning environment in which our students feel comfortable taking the help that is on offer to them. If our HETS can identify students who may be struggling academically at the start of their study, this could positively impact students' success, as they will receive support from the first year of study.

Hold 1:1 tutorials with students with a self-declared LDD to identify any support needs / areas for concern

By providing a personal tutorial service it will help students to raise any concerns they may have that might otherwise remain undisclosed, or only surface at a point of crisis. Students have a go-to person who they know and recognise, who is separate from the academic team and can advocate for them. Research has highlighted the importance of a person-centered approach to SpLD support. Research suggests that for students with SpLD needs, once their learning support provisions were in place there was no further communication from the wellbeing/disability service and students advocated there is a need to increase pro-active outreach (Jacobs, *et al*., 2020). Ultimately, the core sentiment of students' needs is that

having regular support and knowing who to turn to is invaluable. The HETS has looked to ensure that this type of provision is in place for students.

Support students to apply for academic support (utilising Extenuating circumstances and Special Allowances / Reasonable Adjustment policies)

Students need help to both navigate HE policies but also often to complete the necessary paperwork to apply for extensions, or reasonable adjustments. Our HETS role can also discuss DSA with the students, and direct students to the advice team at the college to receive further support with completing necessary documentation required. Disabled Students Allowance is essential for students to apply for should they wish to receive accommodations for study, such as assistive technology. This too could be a barrier to success, if students are not receiving the technology that they need. Many students also receive extra time in their examinations, to aid with processing, or have the provision of using a laptop in an exam to aid with handwriting, as an example. However, accommodations such as these will need to be applied for through the college / university to ensure that it is in place throughout their academic study, for each assignment. Through our HETS role we are actively engaging and supporting our students to complete the necessary paperwork to ensure these accommodations are in place for the students. This could lead to positive outcomes for students in assignments, where a barrier may have otherwise been in place.

Organise Study Skills Workshops with Library Team

The support survey also identifies concerns that students have about their academic skills. The HETS role collates these and arranges for additional support workshops to take place (on topics such as academic writing, referencing, how to proofread your work, access journals and academic sources). 1:1 tutorials may also highlight issues, so students will be referred to the workshops to help in this regard. Elliot and Wilson (2008) suggested that students are surprised by the emphasis placed on self-directed learning, and undergraduate students need additional support to meet the demands of independent study. Students with dyslexia can experience challenges with areas of academic study including writing, notetaking and organising essays (Mortimore and Crozier, 2006). Additionally, many students with dyslexia struggle with spelling. With the right guidance, the challenges that students with SpLDs, such as dyslexia may face, mean that they do not need to limit academic attainment. Therefore, our HETS role can help to direct students to the library support team, if they come to the HETS indicating that they are struggling with HE academic skills.

Support students to apply for additional financial support through the HE Hardship Fund

Personal circumstances are reasons that students often state for leaving study in HE (Russell and Jarvis, 2019). It is understood that a lack of finance is one of a number of barriers that students face on programme (Russell and Jarvis, 2019; Bradley; 2017; Lambert and Dryer, 2018). The cost of studying is an important factor to students. Not only is there the cost of the programme which students feel is a large debt, there are added pressures of juggling work and family commitments too. In addition to these, the costs of having formal assessments and assistive technology are costs that students with disabilities may encounter in addition to the costs that all students face (Lambert and Dryer, 2018). However, it has been suggested that finance is not typically the reason for leaving their studies, but it can "compound a situation of stress and dissatisfaction" (Bradley, 2017, pg. 39). It has been reported that students have taken on additional working responsibilities during their studies to earn money; however, the impact on their overall experience was negative. It has led to reported cases of students finding it more challenging to complete their assignments and, in some cases, has led to withdrawal (Bradley, 2017). One of the reasons this could be is as a result of the increased levels of stress that students have reported because of the financial pressures (Lambert and Dryer, 2018). Finances may be a bigger barrier to students with disabilities than to those without as people with disabilities face barriers in employment and have significantly lower incomes than those without a disability (Lambert and Dryer, 2018). Prior to APPs coming into effect, the College kept a small reserve fund to help students in need. However, through our APP commitments this has become an explicit fund available to students from underrepresented groups. The work of the HETS has seen significant increase in take up of the fund, we believe through raising awareness / signposting but also through direct assistance with applications. At the most recent review, some 30% of all fund claimants had some form of declared LDD, which is disproportionate to the numbers of LDD students we have.

Ensuring updating of student records to reflect emerging picture more accurately (i.e., students who have been identified with a LDD post-entry)

The evaluation of our HETS role will aim to capture a more accurate understanding of the disabled students enrolled with us, so we can ensure that we are providing support to the students. If students are identified as LDD post entry, but are unsure of the support that would help them, because they are new to undergraduate level study, our HETS can utilise

the data to be proactive in offering support i.e. going into student groups or reaching out to student to have been identified to discuss their support options.

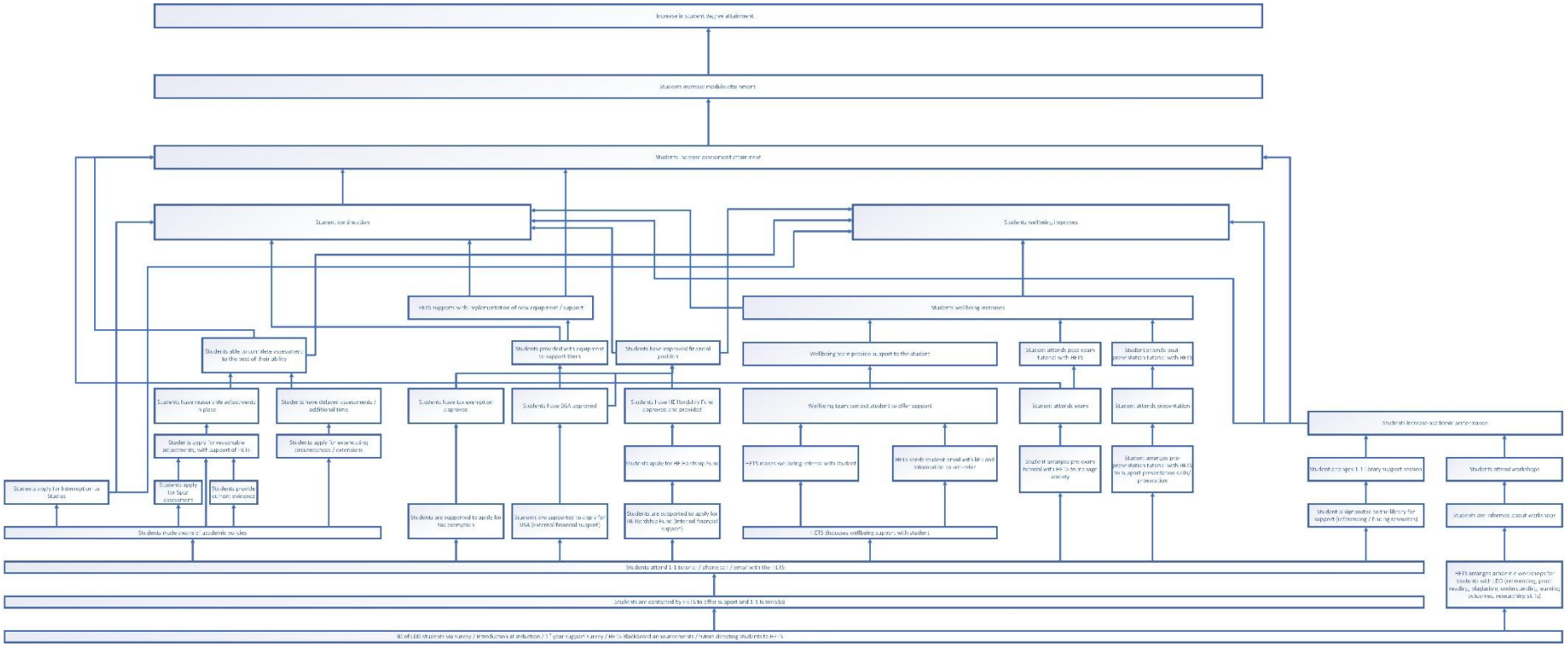
Identify areas for additional intervention to enable more effective support of students

LDD students have lived experience of studying with disabilities or difficulties. To meet the specific needs of these students, HE institutions need to invest time in learning from their lived experience. Working with support teams and students as stakeholders, we can look to ensure the effectiveness of the procedures at the college, and the support provision and interventions in place for students. As part of this evaluation, we will be able to understand what is working well within the HETS role and to understand areas for improvement.

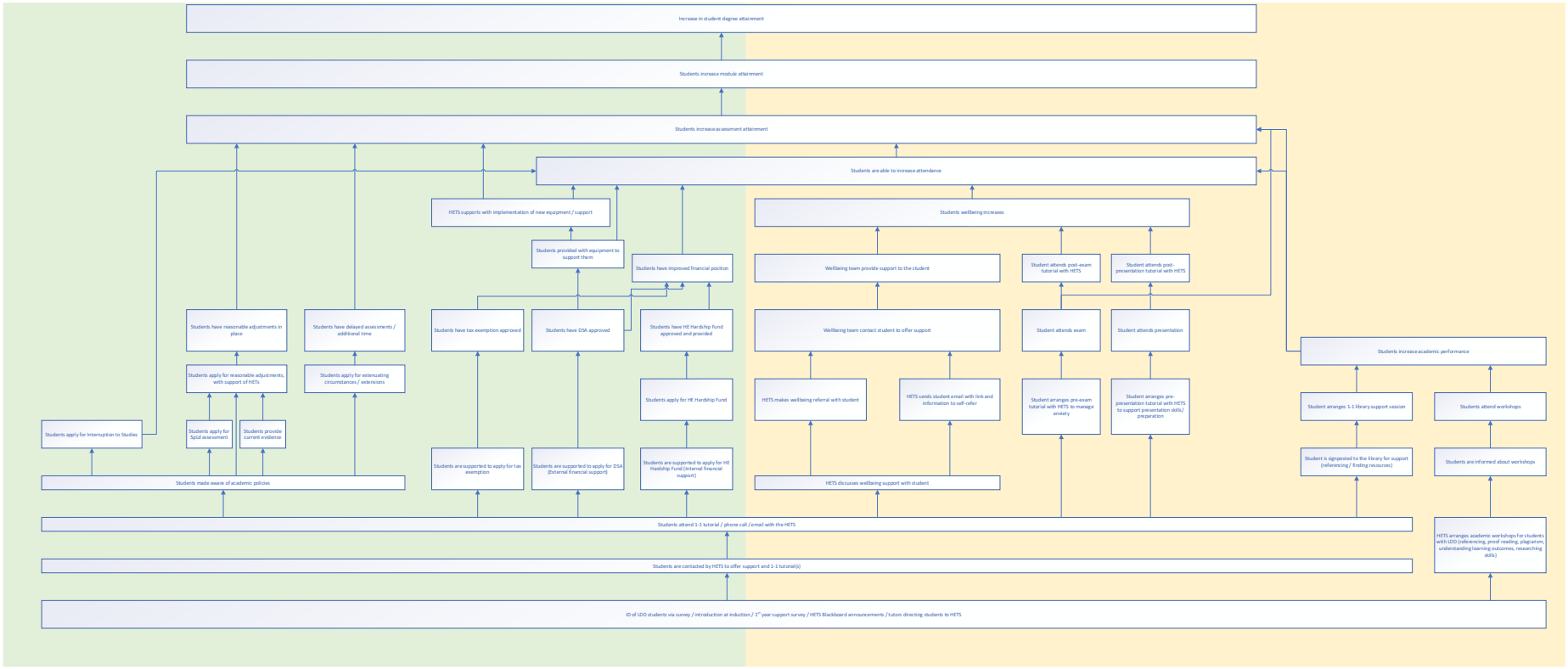
Signposting students to additional services e.g., wellbeing

Here the assumption, from anecdotal evidence, was that students either were unaware of, or unable to access, existing professional support services within the college and/or through external agencies (MIND, etc). The relationship between mental health and SpLD needs is becoming more apparent in the literature. The British Dyslexia Association highlighted that “young people with learning difficulties are more likely to experience feelings of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem" (British Dyslexia Association, 2022). Literature highlights that students with specific learning difficulties experience low self-esteem, and a diminished academic self-concept (Carroll and Iles, 2006; Jacobs *et al*., 2020). The lack of a supportive learning environment, and a lack of outreach from the university wellbeing services can leave students feeling isolated (Jacobs *et al*., 2020). Often the emotional support needs of students with SpLD need are overlooked, in comparison to their academic needs, therefore our HETS role is proactive in signposting students to additional services at the college such as the wellbeing service, so students can receive support for their mental health needs too. It is hoped that the collaborative approach between the HETS and the wellbeing service will ensure that students receive a holistic approach to support, which ultimately could positively impact on students learning experience, achievement and success.

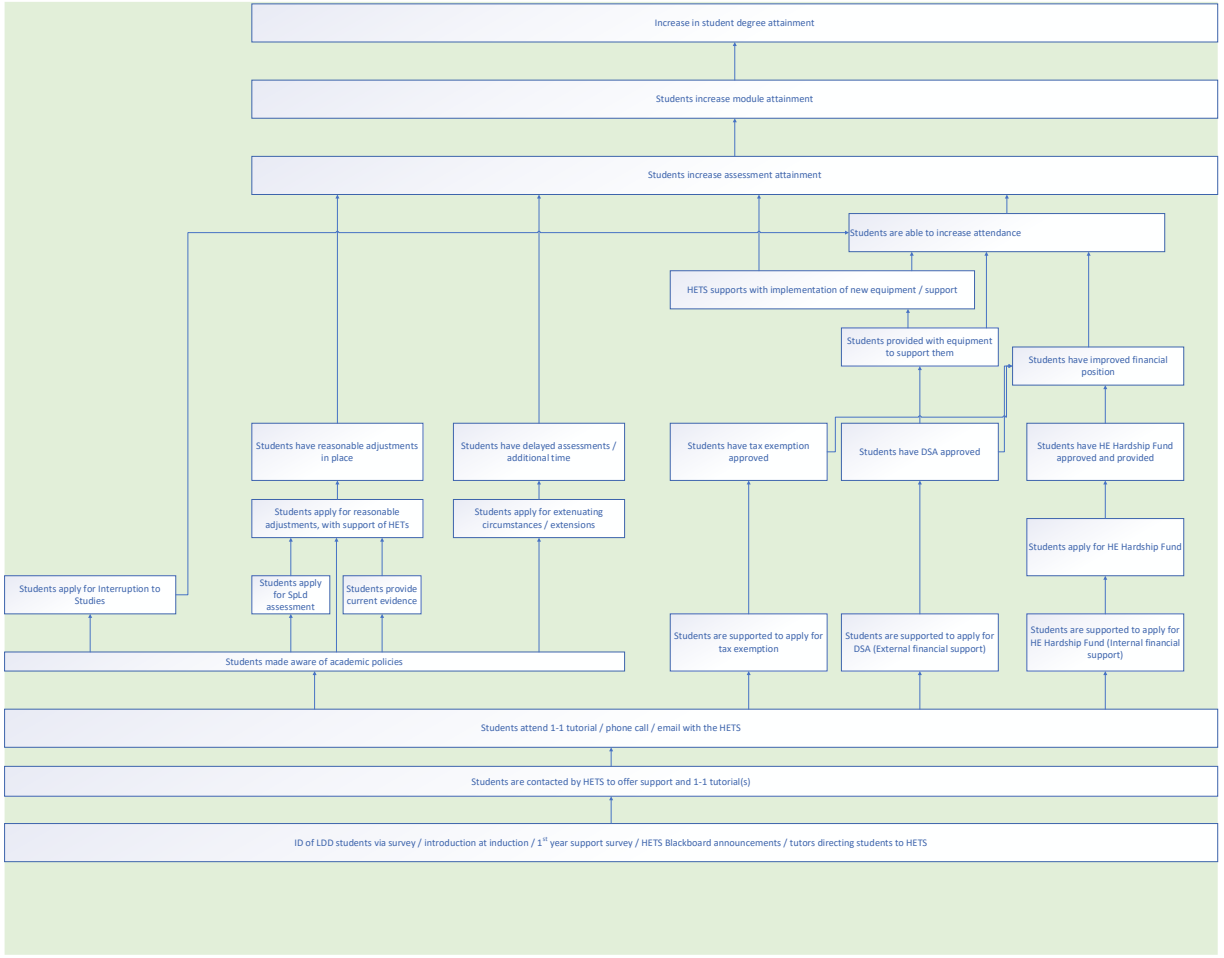
Appendix 2: Theory of Change (Higher Education Tutorial Supervisor)



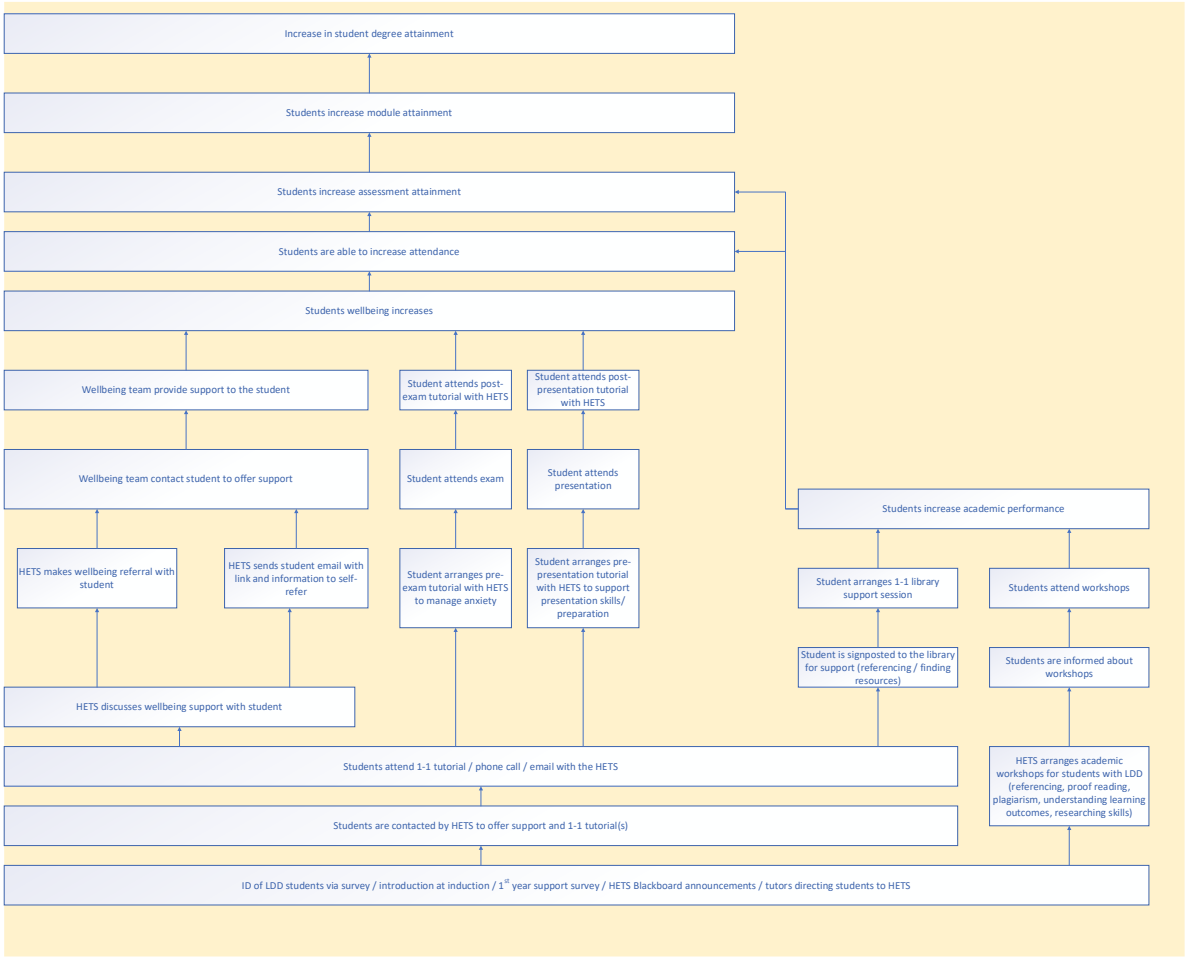
Appendix 2a: Theory of Change (Higher Education Tutorial Supervisor) Colour-coded



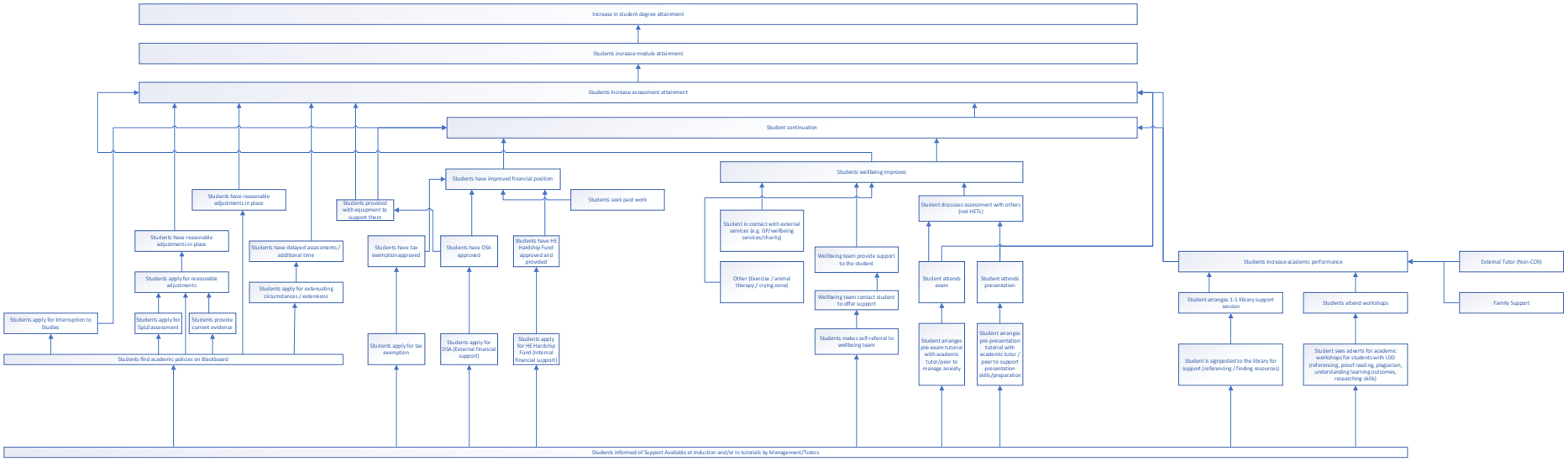
Appendix 2b: Theory of Change (Higher Education Tutorial Supervisor) Colour-coded Part1



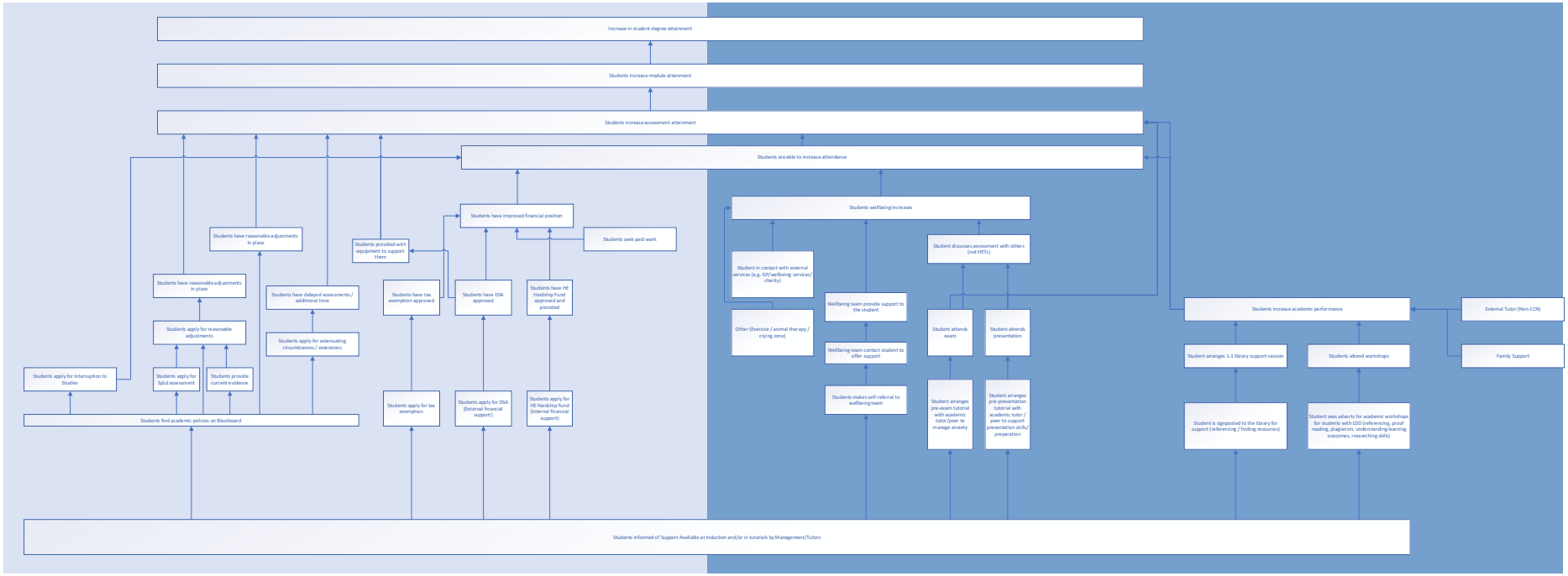
Appendix 2c: Theory of Change (Higher Education Tutorial Supervisor) Colour-coded Part2



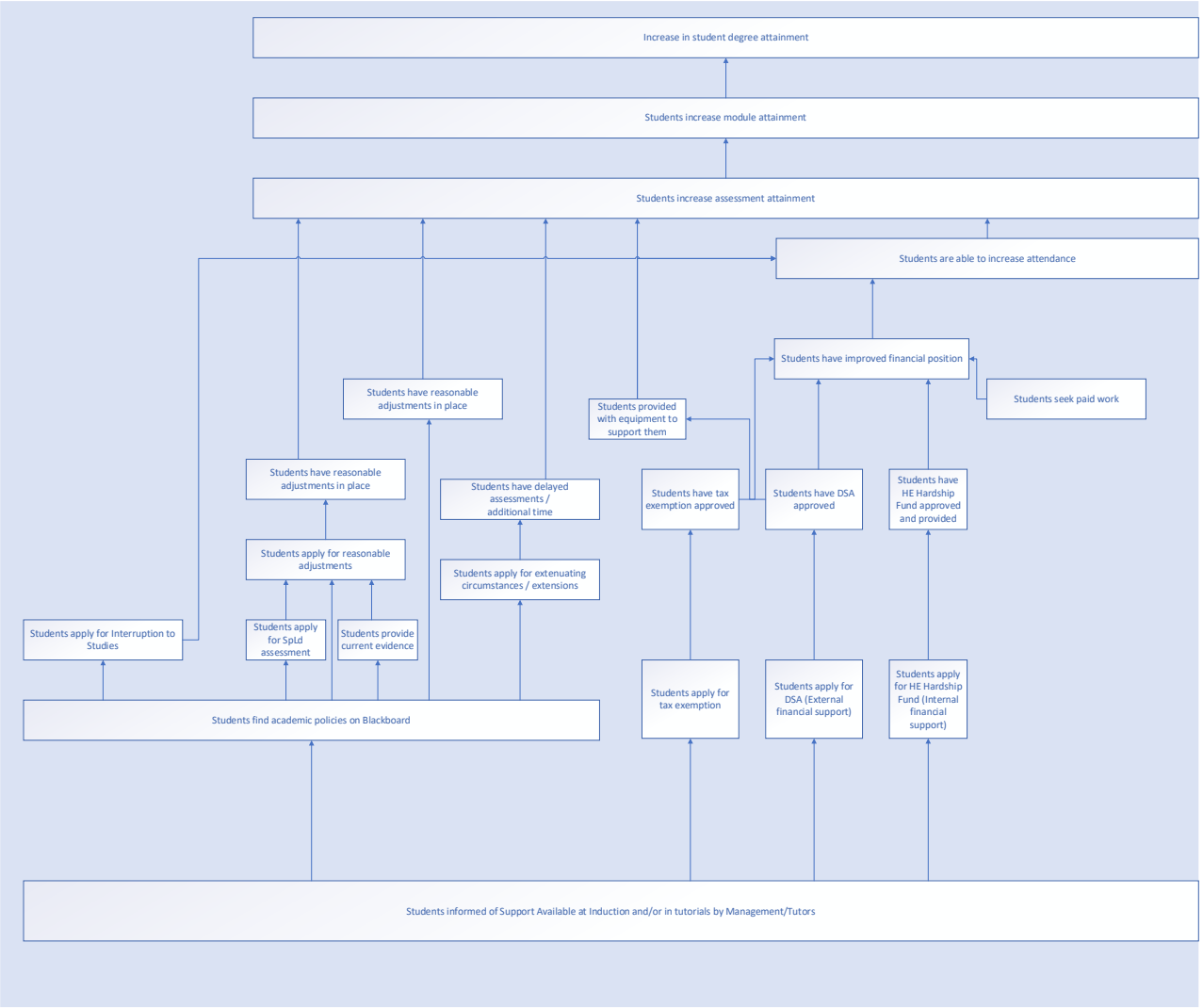
Appendix 3: Theory of Change (Alternative)



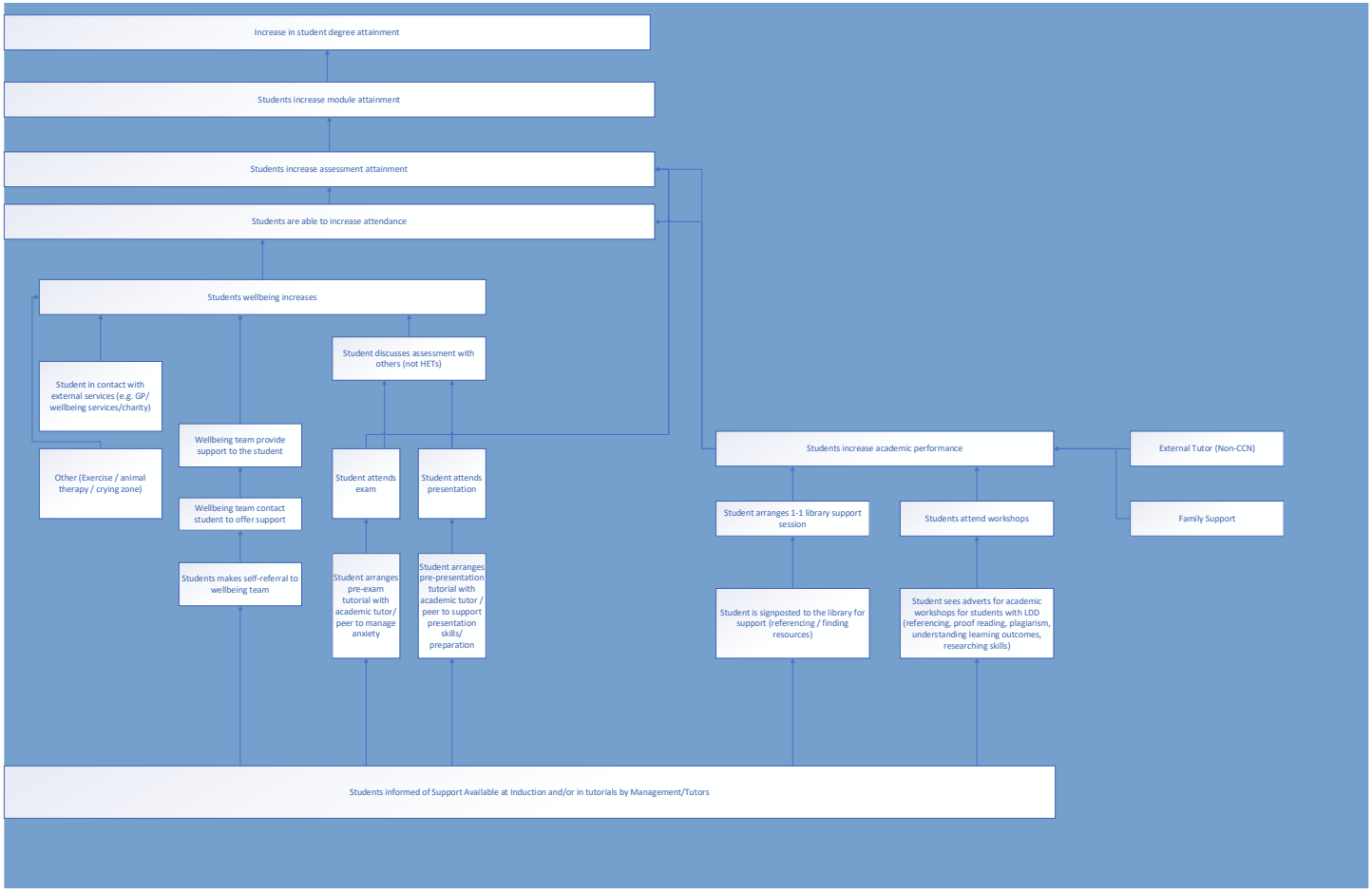
Appendix 3a: Theory of Change (Alternative) Colour-coded



Appendix 3b: Theory of Change (Alternative) Colour-coded Part 1



Appendix 3b: Theory of Change (Alternative) Colour-coded Part 2



Appendix 4: Assessment of Conditions

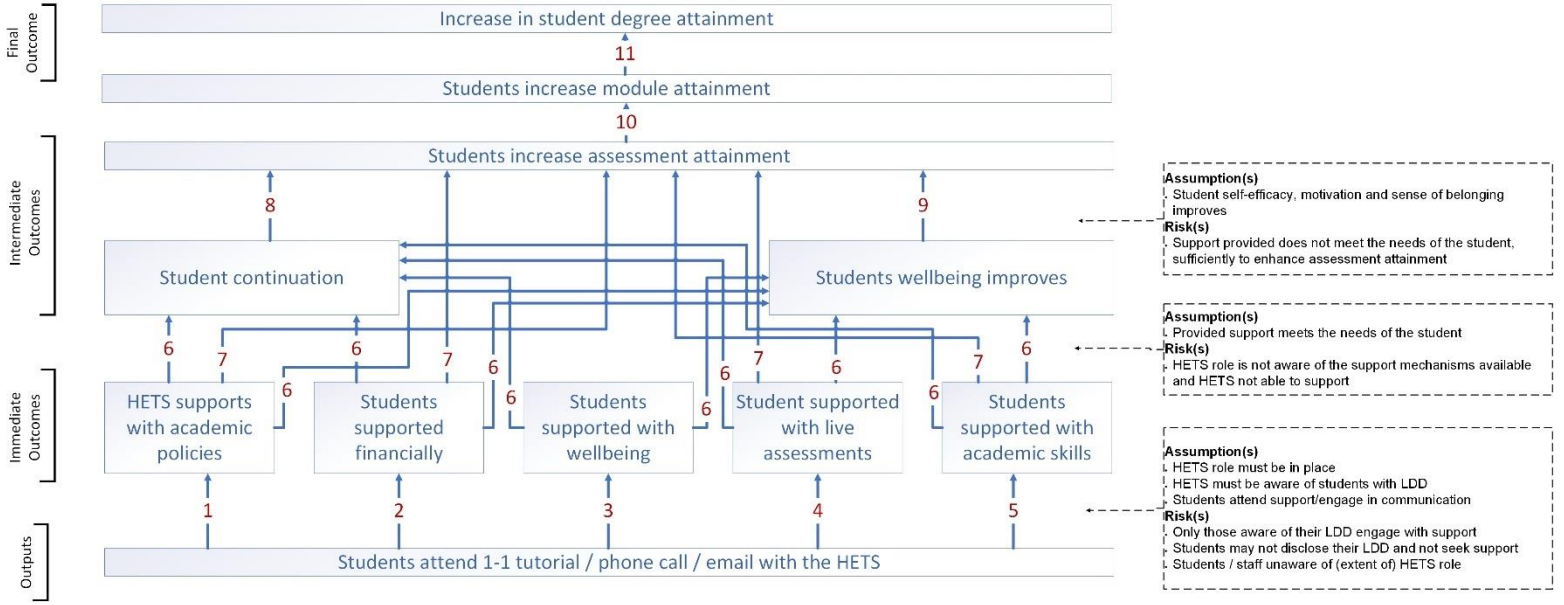
Condition		Description	Condition Confirmed	Confidence in Analysis	Evidence	Explanation
Plausibility	The programme is based on a reasoned theory of change	There is a logic to the results chain				The results chain is logical
		The theory of change is supported by previous research/theory			-Previous research/theory	The theory of change is supported by theory on supporting student achievement and behaviour change
		Risks to assumptions in the results chain are low			-Student interviews -Staff focus group	The evidence suggested that the risks at the immediate and intermediate level outcomes, did not materialise.
Fidelity	The activities of the programme were implemented	The implementation of the programme to date is consistent with the theory of change			-Student interviews -Staff focus group -HETS virtual learning environment (VLE) announcement relating to academic support, academic policies, finance, wellbeing, check-in opportunities -Student ILP entries (including those not interviewed)	The evaluation to date confirms the implementation of the programme to date is consistent with the theory of change
Verified theory of change	The theory of change is verified by evidence such that they	The programme has made a significant contribution to			-Student interviews -Staff focus group -HETS VLE announcement relating to academic support, academic policies,	Students with a self-declared LDD have stated that HETS role has been integral in their success

	evaluator is confident that the chain of expected results occurred	immediate outcome			finance, wellbeing, check-in opportunities -Student ILP entries (including those not interviewed) -Course committees with students	
		The programme has made a significant contribution to intermediate outcome			-Student interviews - Staff focus group - Student ILP entries	Students said that self-efficacy, motivation and sense of wellbeing improved as a result of the intervention
		The programme has made a significant contribution to the final outcome			-Staff focus group -Data on attendance and attainment for students interviewed	We were not able to speak to students that have completed their degree. Data was not available pre- and post-intervention
Accounting for other influencing factors	Other factors influencing the programme were assessed; either they were shown not to have made a significant contribution or, their relative contribution was recognised	Important context been analysed and other causal factors have been discounted or their relative contribution recognised			-Student interviews -Staff focus group -HE Office re: academic support, academic policies, finance, wellbeing -Head of School VLE announcements re: self-certification (some guiding towards HETS) - Student ILP entries (including those not interviewed) - Course committees with students	Evidence has suggested that there are other causal factors which contribute to the observed results. These have been recognised in the final theory of change.

Appendix 5: Final Theory of Change and Supporting Narrative

Other Causal Factors:

. DSA approved prior to enrolling
. External wellbeing support e.g. counsellor
. Students accessing library services directly
. Tutor support (personal / module)



Underlying Mid-level Theory from the Final ToC

The numbering on the final theory of change diagram correspond to the following supporting narrative.

1:

Student assessments can vary to meet the needs of neurodiverse learners, for example, multiple-choice question-based exams or more practical forms of assessment, in comparison to traditional written essays (Shaw and Anderson, 2018).

Whilst the college does aim to offer variety in forms of assessment, written essays and traditional exams do still exist in undergraduate degree courses, therefore it is important to ensure that students with LDD are supported to complete these assessment types. Academic policies such as reasonable adjustments are in place to ensure that students with known diagnosed disadvantages can be assessed fairly, without advantage or disadvantage compared to other students. Students need help to both navigate HE policies but also often to complete the necessary paperwork to apply for extensions, or reasonable adjustments.

Many students also receive extra time in their examinations, to aid with processing, as an example. Literature indicates that taking exams in smaller rooms can help students with having extra time in exams, and extended deadlines are helpful forms of support for neurodiverse students (Anderson, Carter and Stephenson, 2018; Clouder, *et al*., 2020). However, accommodations such as these will need to be applied for through the college / university to ensure that it is in place throughout their academic study, for each assignment.

Students have highlighted that having some ‘single point of contact for advice to help them through this process’ would be welcomed (Johnson *et al*., 2022). Through our HETS role, acting as a point of contact, we are actively engaging and supporting our students to find and complete the necessary paperwork, including providing required evidence, to ensure these accommodations are in place for the students and to access the support needed. This also includes supporting students to obtain a SpLD appointment once the application form has been submitted which grows students' confidence with completing these forms and provides access to reasonable adjustments and extenuating circumstances. As a result of this students have an increased sense of belonging and feel empowered which could lead to positive outcomes for students in assignments, where a barrier may have otherwise been in place.

2:

It is understood that a lack of finance is one of a number of barriers that students face on programme (Russell and Jarvis, 2019; Bradley; 2017; Lambert and Dryer, 2018). The cost of studying is an important factor to students. Not only is there the cost of the programme which students feel is a large debt, there are added pressures of juggling work and family commitments too. In addition to these, the costs of having formal assessments and assistive technology are costs that students with disabilities may encounter in addition to the costs that all students face (Lambert and Dryer, 2018). However, it has been suggested that finance is not typically the reason for leaving their studies, but it can "compound a situation of stress and dissatisfaction" (Bradley, 2017, pg. 39). For example, it has been reported that students have taken on additional working responsibilities during their studies to earn money; however, the impact on their overall experience was negative. It has led to numerous cases of students finding it more challenging to complete their assignments and, in some cases, has led to withdrawal (Bradley, 2017).

Finances may be a bigger barrier to students with disabilities than to those without as people with disabilities face barriers in employment and commonly have significantly lower incomes than those without a disability (Lambert and Dryer, 2018). Prior to the APPs coming into effect, the College kept a small reserve fund to help students in need. However, through our APP commitments this has become an explicit fund available to students from underrepresented groups.

The work of the HETS has seen a significant increase in take up of the fund. HETS support included sharing the required form, support with completing, checking completed forms prior to submission and supporting with submission.

Our HETS role can also discuss DSA with the students, and direct students to the advice team at the college to receive further support with completing necessary documentation required. Disabled Students Allowance is essential for students to apply for should they wish to receive accommodations for study, such as assistive technology. This too could be a barrier to success, if students are not receiving the technology that they need. Literature acknowledges that students applying for DSA experience challenges collating evidence for their application and are unclear about accessing support through DSA.

This support from the HETS provides reassurance to students that needed additional and financial support, as it is often difficult to ask for help. Having a good relationship with the HETS is integral to this support being accessed.

3:

Existing literature, in conjunction with our evidence from this project, indicates that students with LDD need emotional and wellbeing support whilst studying in HE. Students with disabilities can experience feelings of stress, anxiety and feeling overwhelmed when facing challenges in the HE environment (Clouder *et al*., 2020). The relationship between mental health and SpLD needs is becoming more apparent in the literature.

The British Dyslexia Association highlighted that “young people with learning difficulties are more likely to experience feelings of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem" (British Dyslexia Association, 2022) and students with autism spectrum disorder can experience feelings of stress and anxiety when studying the HE environment (Vincent *et al*., 2017). Literature also highlights that students with specific learning difficulties experience low self-esteem, and a diminished academic self-concept (Carroll and Iles, 2006; Jacobs *et al*., 2020). The lack of a supportive learning environment, and a lack of outreach from the university wellbeing services can leave students feeling isolated (Jacobs *et al*., 2020).

Our HETS role has been proactive in signposting students to additional services internally within the college and to external support services. This includes the college's wellbeing and SpLD team for mental health and wellbeing referrals and arranging internal wellbeing support. The HETS also supports students directly by talking to them at times of heightened challenge which helps students feel reassured and supported themselves. Students' wellbeing is also supported indirectly by the HETS being accessible and responsive, which reduces students' anxiety with a range of other challenges and/or queries and leads to students feeling more positive. Students have highlighted that speaking to the HETS has reduced feelings of being overwhelmed with their academic studies as the HETS has put action plans in place with the student to ensure that they can meet their academic deadlines. Furthermore, having a trusted point of contact who understands and listens to students concerns and will take actions to ensure they are accessing emotional and wellbeing support has been acknowledged by students in this pilot as invaluable. The collaborative approach between the HETS and the wellbeing service can ensure that students receive a holistic approach to support.

4:

Formative assessment is a useful support to aid student progression (Yorke, 2001). Providing feedback to a student and offering guidance to further enhance their assessment is key to supporting students (Snowball and Sayigh, 2007). However, due to resourcing challenges in the HE sector, it is not always possible to conduct this to its maximum potential (Sambell and Hubbard, 2004). For students with LDD, assessment related anxiety often

increases when in live assessments which can significantly affect performance (Waters and Torgerson, 2021).

The HETS role supports students with live assessments. This includes observing and providing feedback on presentations prior to a summative assessment. The HETS can also meet students on the day of a live assessment to help with panic and anxiety. This also includes understanding feedback from summative presentations. This, therefore, allows feedback to improve presentation skills and reduces anxiety around live assessments.

5:

For some students, academic skills, for example referencing, are a common challenge (Gravett and Kinchin, 2020). Academic skills are one of the areas of concern that students have highlighted when completing surveys.

The HETS role includes supporting students through arranging for additional support workshops to take place (on topics such as academic writing, referencing, how to proofread your work, access journals and academic sources). 1:1 tutorials may also highlight issues, so students are referred to the workshops to help in this regard. Elliot and Wilson (2008) suggested that students are surprised by the emphasis placed on self-directed learning, and undergraduate students need additional support to meet the demand of independent study.

Students with dyslexia can experience challenges with areas of academic study including writing, notetaking and organising essays (Mortimore and Crozier, 2006). Literature has also acknowledged that tutoring can support students with ADHD with academic skills (DuPaul *et al*., 2017). With the right guidance, the challenges that students with SpLDs, mean that they do not need to limit academic attainment. Therefore, the HETS role can help to direct students to the library support team, if they come to the HETS indicating that they are struggling with HE academic skills.

The role also supports students with skills such as time management and organisation to support assessment work and meeting assessment deadlines. This combined support provides students with increased knowledge, therefore making them feel more confident. It also meant that students were less worried and increased their motivation.

6:

As a result of the immediate outcomes, students' continuation and student wellbeing improved. In order for this to have maximal impact, it is important for there to be a positive relationship between the student and the HETS. It is also important for the HETS to have

strong communication skills and be accessible and responsive. One of the reasons why students access the support available is due to the increasing awareness work that the HETS role conducts. Once students decide to access the support, the HETS role is also able to provide substantial individual support to maximise the opportunities that are available.

In providing support to students in the five areas of our final ToC (i.e., with finance, wellbeing etc.), evidence suggests that this support is a contributing factor to student retention. Literature indicates that underrepresented students in HE are more likely to drop out of HE (Quinn, 2013). Research with students from underrepresented groups have highlighted that significant support from an approachable tutor who provides individuals emotional and practical support to students, including enhanced academic and social integration into the HE environment, can help students to develop the resilience and overcome risk factors that could be stopping them from continuing their studies. The role of a personal tutor has been found to be crucial in helping students to adapt to university life (Cotton *et al*., 2017). Similarly, a lack of financial support, can lead to students considering withdrawing from academic study due to the stress this can bring. Having access to a bursary can relieve financial stress to some extent. Literature has recognised that increased support for students, monitoring attendance and offering support when needed, could lead to an increase in attendance and engagement with learning. Cotton *et al*., (2017, pg.75) acknowledge that the role of a personal tutor could be an 'important mediator when attendance issues arose'. By having a designated HETS role, this helps to identify and reduce risk factors for drop out through early intervention, which is an important factor when aiming to prevent students from departing a programme early (Gray and Perkins, 2018; Foster and Siddle, 2019).

It is understood that students feel that increasing awareness of wellbeing services and improving the availability, range, and quality of wellbeing services are important to enhance student wellbeing (Baik *et al.,* 2019).

Literature highlights that learning support plans and accommodations being put in place can reduce the pressure that students feel. There is often a reluctance to discuss or disclose mental health concerns with HE staff due to fears of judgement, and students are unsure if they are entitled to support (Quinn *et al.,* 2009). However, often in larger university, a one size fits all approach to supporting students with SpLD needs are in place, which do not meet the needs of students, which can be a barrier to participation in learning and feelings of inclusion in an HE learning environment. Students are often reluctant to disclose their disability due to fear of stigmatisation. Kendall (2016, pg.8) suggests that a 'generalised approach is not impacting in a positive way', indicating that an individualised support

approach in which students have the opportunity to discuss their individual learning needs would be welcomed. It has been suggested that individualised support improves students' wellbeing by 'making them feel more integrated within the university community' (Adams, 2021). In relation to this, positively, the HETS role is well advertised at the start of the academic and in open events at the college to give students greater confidence in seeking support in the first instance. The HETS role offers this individualised approach to support, providing a direct path to accessing support that a student needs at the time.

Literature has recognised that a single, clearly defined person as the 'first port of call' to help students identify the best course of support for them, with students stating that having an open and available tutor to offer support was greatly appreciated for mental health and wellbeing support (Quinn *et al.,* 2009). Having a culture in which students can talk openly about their mental health and wellbeing concerns is recognised in the literature as an important cultural shift in HE (Quinn *et al.,* 2009).

As a result of the support that is provided and received, this leads to an increase in students' confidence, self-efficacy, motivation and sense of belonging. This also leads to a decrease in anxiety.

7:

Students with learning difficulties can access reasonable adjustments, such as extra time or use of a laptop in an exam. The use of these accommodations can reduce students' anxiety, and stress in exam conditions to allow them to complete the assessment and demonstrate their skills and can benefit their performance.

Unforeseen events can impact a student's ability to attend an assessment or submit an assessment by the specified deadline (Achinewhu-Nworgu and Nworgu, 2014). Therefore, students may submit extenuating circumstances to request an extension or a deferred attempt. Without extenuating circumstances, students may fail the assessment or not achieve to the best of their ability. However, with approved extenuating circumstances, this ensures that students with LDD are not disadvantaged and provides students with the opportunity to complete this assessment.

Literature has shown that providing individualised support on presentation and audience skills for neurodivergent HE students can support learners (Hand, 2023). Furthermore, Claxton *et al.,* (2018) have reported that neurodivergent learners have shared that social and emotional support in addition to academic support is needed. The HETS role provides social, emotional and academic support to students in preparation for their assessments.

Financial support from the HETS provides reassurance to students that needed additional and financial support, as it is often difficult to ask for help. This contributes to improved wellbeing through reducing stress as a result of financial difficulty and increasing a sense of belonging.

8:

It has been understood that students with better attendance to taught lessons typically have better attainment (Edwards and Clinton, 2019; Moores *et al.,* 2019; Newman-Ford *et al.,* 2008). However, it has been suggested that although there is a strong correlation between these, correlation does not mean causality (Newman-Ford *et al.,* 2008). Newman-Ford *et al.,* (2008) suggested a reason for this is that attending a lesson does not necessarily mean that a student is learning. On the other hand, Edwards and Clinton (2019) suggest one of the reasons for attendance having a positive impact on attainment is that students are more aware of the expectation of the summative assessment. Therefore, the students would be better prepared for the assessment and achieve higher grades. In addition, Moores *et al.,* (2019) suggests that a student's attendance, can be attributed, at least in part, to the motivation of the student with individual circumstances of the individual also a factor.

As a result of the support that the HETS role provides, students have remained on programme that would have otherwise withdrawn. Therefore, by the fact students are retained on programme and complete assessments, this achievement is better than withdrawing from the programme which is likely to be the outcome had it not been for the support from the HETS.

9:

One way that the HETS role supports wellbeing is by increasing students' motivation to study and their sense of belonging. This is important because perceptions of belonging are understood to contribute positively to student engagement and attainment (Mulrooney and Kelly, 2020).

Another way that the HETS supports students is with time management and by staggering their deadlines through ECs. HETS supports with stress and feelings of pressure and being overwhelmed. As the students can focus on their assessments one at a time, the stress is reduced and there is a greater likelihood of the student completing all their assessments and achieving better grades. This is supported by the literature which has found that if students are experiencing challenges which impact their wellbeing, this can have a negative impact on their participation and likelihood of completing academic work (Ashbaugh *et al.,* 2017).

Therefore, supporting students with their wellbeing can contribute and lead to improved assessment attainment.

10:

Due to the way in which module attainment is calculated, an increase in assessment attainment mathematically leads to higher module attainment.

11:

Due to the way in which degree attainment is calculated, an increase in module attainment mathematically leads to higher degree attainment.