# Theory of Change for City College Norwich student support intervention: Higher Education Tutorial Supervisor role

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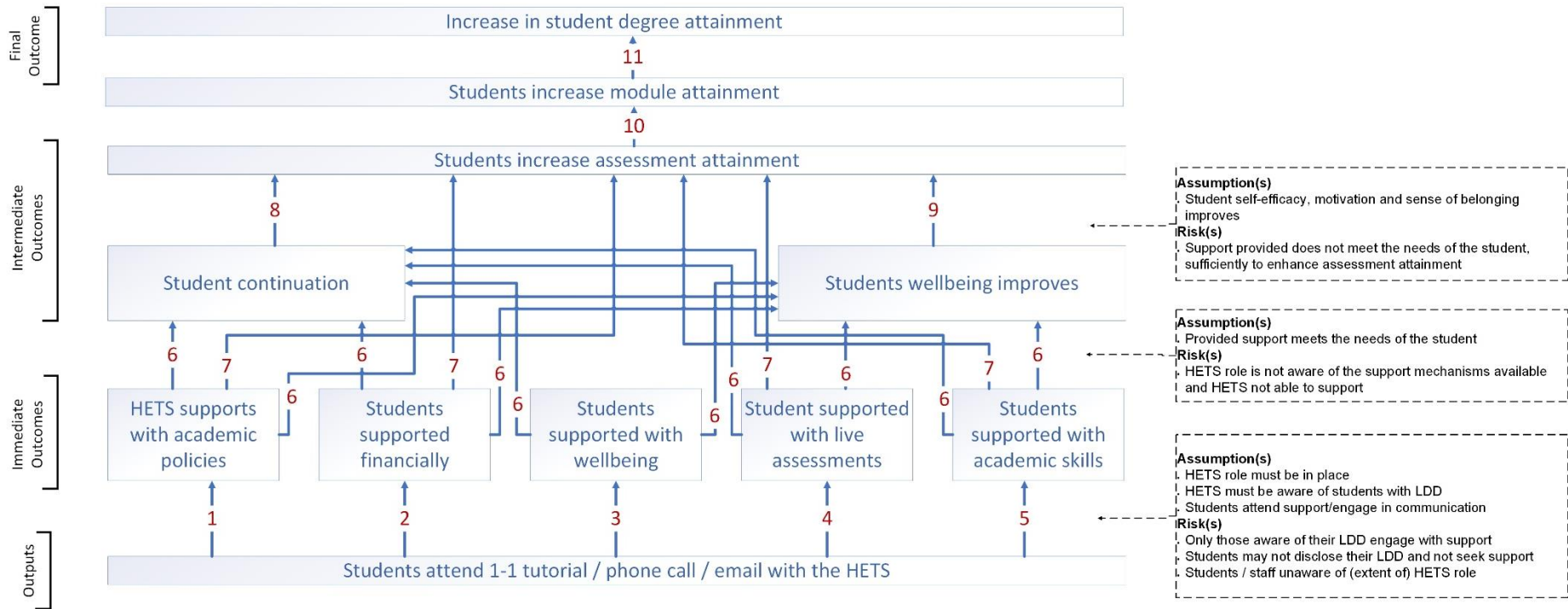Alex Guy
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**Theory of Change Diagram**

**Final Outcome**

Increase in student degree attainment

11

Students increase module attainment

10

**Intermediate Outcomes**

Students increase assessment attainment

8

9

Student continuation

Students wellbeing improves

**Assumption(s)**
- Student self-efficacy, motivation and sense of belonging improves

**Risk(s)**
- Support provided does not meet the needs of the student, sufficiently to enhance assessment attainment

**Immediate Outcomes**

6  7  6  7  6  6  7  6  7  6

HETS supports with academic policies

Students supported financially

Students supported with wellbeing

Student supported with live assessments

Students supported with academic skills

6  6  6  6

**Assumption(s)**
- Provided support meets the needs of the student

**Risk(s)**
- HETS role is not aware of the support mechanisms available and HETS not able to support

**Assumption(s)**
- HETS role must be in place
- HETS must be aware of students with LDD
- Students attend support/engage in communication

**Risk(s)**
- Only those aware of their LDD engage with support
- Students may not disclose their LDD and not seek support
- Students / staff unaware of (extent of) HETS role

**Outputs**

1  2  3  4  5

Students attend 1-1 tutorial / phone call / email with the HETS

**Other Causal Factors:**

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

1

**Why is the Intervention Being Run?**

The Higher Education Tutorial Supervisor (HETS) role is one of the interventions in response to our analysis of performance, as part of the Access and Participation Plan (APP) process.

**Who is the Intervention For?**

The aim of the HETS as the intervention is to support students from underrepresented groups, where our data shows gaps in equality of opportunity in relation to their success* within HE:

- students from areas of low higher education participation, low household income or low socioeconomic status
- some black, Asian and minority ethnic students
- mature students
- disabled students (students with Learning Difficulties or Disabilities (LDD))
- care leavers

(* Success in OfS (Office for Students) terms being measured through their continuation and attainment.)

For the pilot evaluation, we have focused specifically on LDD students. However, it is reasonable to assume that other groups, and intersections between groups, will see similar benefits.

**What is the Intervention?**

The intervention is the introduction of a dedicated role to support higher education students, in a variety of ways, to help stay on programme and achieve their desired outcome.

Specifically, 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.

**Who is Delivering the Intervention?**

The School of Higher Education at City College Norwich recruited specifically to this role, with the member of staff having previously worked with young people in an alternative setting. In terms of training much has been in-house on-the-job training, although we have started a process of more formal mental health awareness training as this is increasingly becoming an issue facing our students.

**How is the Intervention Delivered?**

The intervention is delivered in a variety of ways, through face-to-face tutorials, online support, as well as through broader announcements via our virtual learning environment. The support is also highlighted to students during their induction, where they also complete a Student Support Survey, which helps us to identify early any concerns that they may have (be that academic, financial etc) so that we can target our support as early into their time in HE.

**Where is the Intervention Delivered?**

The intervention is delivered at City College Norwich across four sites.

**How many Times will the Intervention be Delivered? Over How Long?**

The staff member is available to students immediately prior to, and for the duration of their time studying with us. Students may access the support on an occasional basis, perhaps to manage their way through a particular period of stress, or in some cases through more regular, timetabled support.

**Will the Intervention be Tailored?**

The nature of the support is that it is varied, with students accessing specific elements dependent on their needs. It is therefore possible that some LDD students will require a broad range of support, whereas for others the support is either not required at all or is for a specific aspect of the range of support on offer.

**How will Implementation be Optimised?**

Regular communication between the HETS, student body, teachers, management and college support services is important. This helps to identify the support students require so that a tailed approach to providing support can be coordinated.

Many students are also unaware of the learning support available to them when arriving at university, or what types of provision would suit them. Therefore, ensuring that students are aware of the support available is important. This is achieved via face-to-face introduction sessions from the HETS, Blackboard announcements and leaflets.

**Theory of Change Supporting Narrative**

The numbering on the final theory of change (ToC) 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 Specific Learning Difference (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.

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 LDD 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 this 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.

## What is the Evaluation and Evaluation Questions?

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?

## What Methodology are you Using?

Contribution analysis was used to evaluate the impact of a HETS role on supporting students with self-declared LDD.

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.

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. 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 steps help guide the process, but these steps are not prescriptive, meaning that you can return to a previous step when required.

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