

Type 3 evaluation case study: University of Leeds



Evaluation at the University of Leeds

At the University of Leeds, we have a dedicated Evaluation Team with a remit to direct and support our evaluation work across the University’s full portfolio of access and student success activity. We are committed to strengthening our staff’s evaluation skills and experience while also contributing to multi-partner, robust evaluations that can help to inform policy and practice across the sector. This was a pivotal factor in our decision to respond to a call from TASO to investigate the impact of summer schools on entry to higher education (HE) using a randomised controlled trial (RCT). We were one of nine higher education providers (HEPs) to collaborate on the research over the two-phase project.

Evaluation of the summer school

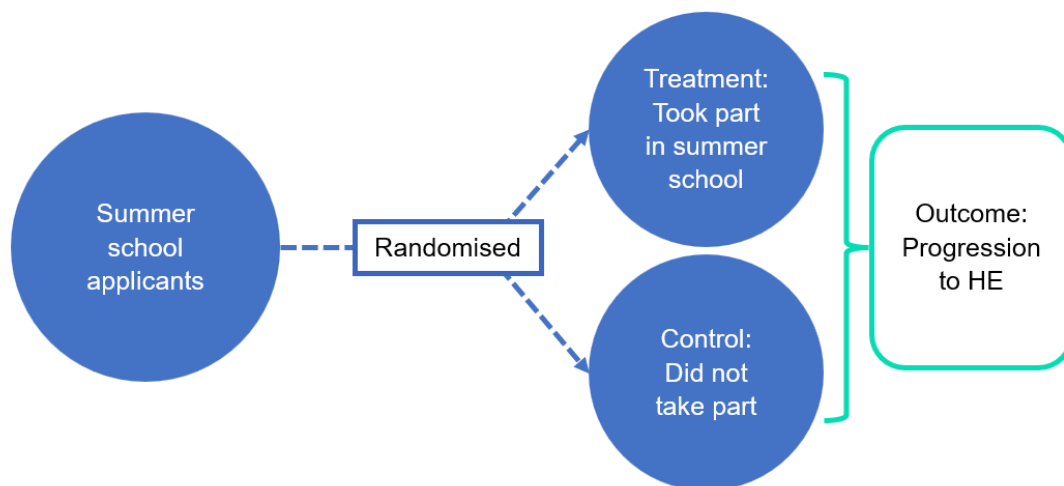


The summer schools were aimed at year 12 students and comprised a variety of elements, including ice breakers, subject-specific information, careers and employability sessions, practical lab sessions, information on engaging with clubs and societies, support with applications to HE, including how to access financial support and how to develop a successful personal statement, amongst others. The table below shows the subject areas and modes of delivery of the summer schools.

Subject area	Mode of delivery
Social Sciences	Two days on campus
Faculty of Biological Sciences	Two days online, one day on campus
Psychology	Two days online, one day on campus
Medicine	Two days on campus
Dentistry	Two days on campus

Evaluation design

The overall research design was developed by TASO, addressing the research question “Do summer school interventions have an impact on access to HE?”. The summer schools were evaluated using an RCT design, with applicants randomly assigned to a treatment group (those who participated in the summer school) and a control group (those who did not participate in the summer school). An implementation and process evaluation was also carried out. Data was collected across participating HEPs and analysed and published by TASO.



Outcome measures

The primary outcome of the RCT is entry to HE in 2022-23, data on which is not yet available. In the meantime, all participants completed a pre and post-test survey on the likelihood of progressing to HE, self-efficacy relating to HE, sense of belonging at HE, and perceptions of barriers to HE.

Timing & staff

The research was originally planned to take place during the 2020 summer school period but was subsequently postponed to 2021 when the summer schools were carried out online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2022, only summer schools with an in-person, on-campus experience were included in the RCT.

With the support of TASO and an independent evaluator, the summer school delivery staff at Leeds were critical in the implementation of the research, building relationships and getting buy-in from summer school participants, gathering student data, and incorporating time in the summer schedules to ensure that focus groups could be delivered. Similarly, the summer school participants (both control and treatment groups) and student ambassadors were crucial in contributing to interviews, focus groups, and surveys, to give us the rich qualitative data required for the research.

Evaluation results

Interim results of the RCT show a small positive impact on perception of future sense of belonging at university. More details on the results can be found on TASO's website: [Online summer schools](#) and [in-person summer schools](#).

At Leeds, we made use of the implementation and process evaluation findings within our institution as we would for any process evaluation. We are currently reviewing our portfolio of access and outreach activity at the University and summer schools remain as core provisions. We will continue to evaluate the longitudinal impact of summer schools on entry to HE alongside the RCT findings. However, more research is required to inform decision-making, particularly in the context of the global pandemic.

Challenges

1. Finding a balance between the effective implementation of the RCT and the successful delivery of the activities was challenging at times. The advertisement and administration

process for summer schools at Leeds begins in January before delivery of the events, and the timelines for the RCT were not always aligned with the practical administration, in some cases delaying opening applications to the summer schools for up to three months. We had to ultimately prioritise the delivery of summer schools and in phase two, one summer school had to withdraw from the RCT due to a delay with ethical approval.

2. We would have liked to create a waiting list for control group students so they could take up unused places when treatment group students were unable to accept their summer school place.
3. The global pandemic caused huge logistical barriers to moving the project forward and will undoubtedly also have affected the overall findings, given the upheaval and disruption young people faced up to and during the research period.

Learnings

1. Early and continued collaboration and communications across all partners are key to the successful delivery of this kind of research. Where multiple partners are involved, there may be different institutional approaches to ethics or varying requirements for sign-off at a senior leadership level for example, and early discussions and agreements will help ensure the smooth delivery of the research.
2. The interim findings mainly showed a null result. The implementation and process evaluation is incredibly important to capture data in the context of each partner institution and we would advocate for the continued use of a mixed methods approach to the evaluation of initiatives such as summer schools.
3. We would recommend using this method of research for new and emerging interventions where little evidence exists, and in collaboration with other providers to generate evidence to be shared with the sector.

Liz Hurley, Monitoring & Evaluation Manager at the University of Leeds, provides final reflections on the RCT:



“This was an incredibly insightful experience with lots of lessons learned all round. We would likely primarily use RCTs on new initiatives and we are investigating the use of quasi-experimental research designs across other initiatives in the near future. To be effective, this kind of evaluation needs a truly collaborative approach with researchers, evaluators, project managers, practitioners and delivery staff working together from the outset and throughout.”

Contact

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