

Next Step York Impact Evaluation 2025/2026

ACCESS AND OUTREACH TEAM, SEPTEMBER 2026

PLEASE CITE THIS REPORT AS: Access and Outreach Team (2026), Next Step York Impact Evaluation 2025/2026, University of York

Table of contents

Table of contents	0
Executive summary	1
Programme overview and background	2
Stage One of programme: gain 100 credits	3
Table 1: Next Step York - First year events and activities	4
Stage two of of programme: complete the YorJourney module	6
Table 2: Next Step York programme Programme Second Year Activity Offering	6
Figure 1: Next Step York Theory of Change	7
Participant information	9
Figure 2: Next Step York Year 12 cohort 25-27 pupil demographics	9
Figure 3: Pupils living in an IMD 1 or 2 area. Measure of relative deprivation. IMD 1 and 2 represent the most deprived areas	9
Event attendance	9
Table 3: Attendance at Next Step York events during the 2025/2026 academic year	10

Research consent	10
Research aims	10
Hypotheses	11
Research Question 1	11
Research Question 2	11
Table 4: Theory of Change Alignment	12
Data collection and methods	12
Figure 4: Data collection and reporting timeline for Next Step York cohort 25-27	13
Findings	14
TASO Validated Questions	14
Table 5: Mean and Median scores for TASO validated questions assessing students' academic self-efficacy, cognitive strategies, HE expectations, knowledge of HE and sense of belonging in HE	14
Table 6: Highest scoring statements within each category	14
Table 7: Lowest scoring statement within each category	14
Custom Survey Questions	15
Table 8: Factors affecting students' applications to universities	15
Table 9: Highest scoring statement within each category of application factors	15
Table 10: Lowest scoring statement within each category of application factors	15
Table 11: Factors affecting students' motivations for joining Next Step York	15
Table 12: Highest scoring statements within each category of different elements of the Next Step York programme that students value	16
Table 13: Lowest scoring statements within each category of different elements of the Next Step York programme that students value	16
Discussion	16
Academic Self-efficacy	16
Cognitive Strategies	17
Higher Education Expectations	17
Knowledge of Higher Education	17
Sense of Belonging	18
Free School Meal Demographic Breakdown	18
Conclusions and Recommendations	18
Acknowledgements and Contact Information	19
References	19
Appendix A: Next Step York: Theory of Change	21
Appendix B: Evaluation Framework	22
Appendix C: Data reporting notice	27
Appendix D: Pupil demographics	27
Appendix E: Glossary	28

Executive summary

This report evaluates the impact of the Next Step York programme (during 2025/26) on prospective students from underrepresented backgrounds in higher education (HE). The programme aims to increase prospective student knowledge and understanding of HE and thereby increase their confidence and ability to make informed choices about their options. The long-term aspiration of the programme is to increase the number of successful applications and enrolments - to highly selective institutions, such as the University of York, from students from underrepresented backgrounds.

The report uses survey responses from students before beginning their engagement with Next Step York and highlights themes regarding students' initial perceptions of HE. As the current cohort is midway through the programme at the time of writing and publishing, this analysis will provide narrative and seek to outline emerging themes in student responses. In future reports, this data will be directly compared with survey responses post completion of the programme and will look to analyse statistically significant changes in knowledge, understanding, confidence and attitudes around HE as outlined in the programme Theory of Change.

Programme overview and background

Next Step York, founded in 2012, is a two year widening access programme designed to support Year 12 and Year 13 students from underrepresented backgrounds in HE across England. The programme operates with the following objectives:

- To demystify HE and promote aspirations to progress to university, particularly research-intensive universities such as the University of York.
- To support students from backgrounds that are underrepresented in HE across England to achieve their full academic potential and access university.
- To increase diversity and representation in the University of York's student body, creating a university community that is reflective of wider society, in line with the national gaps in representation in HE and top careers.
- To ensure that participating students' achievements are considered in context and that this is realised in the University of York's admissions outcomes.

To be eligible for the Next Step York programme, students must meet all of the following essential criteria:

- Have the potential to achieve BCC or above at A Level, DMM or above in BTEC Extended Diploma or the equivalent in a Level 3 qualification e.g T Level
- Currently studying at an English state (non-fee paying) school, sixth form or college and in their first year of further education (such as Year 12 or Level 3 Year 1). We consider applications on a case by case basis where an applicant is attending an Independent Special School fully funded by their local authority
- Attended a State (non-fee paying) school from Year 7 to Year 11. Again, we consider applications on a case by case basis where an applicant has attended an Independent Special School fully funded by their local authority

As places on the programme are limited, priority is given to students who meet one or more of the following widening participation criteria.

- Have experience of local authority care
- Are estranged from their family members
- Are seeking asylum in the UK or granted refugee status
- Entitled to, or were in receipt of, free school meals or discretionary payments at school/college
- Have a disability or long term health condition
- From a military or service family
- Parent/carer/guardian(s) didn't go to university or went as a mature student during their secondary education

- Are a young carer. Students who care, unpaid, for a family member or friend with an illness or disability, mental health condition or an addiction. (UCAS & Carers Trust, 2026)¹
- Live in a low participation neighbourhood

In completing the full two year programme, participants can access the following benefits:

- A guaranteed offer or interview to study their chosen course at the University of York (subject to meeting course minimum requirements)
- An alternative offer of up to 3 grades lower than the standard offer for their course as published in the prospectus

The programme is designed in a series of online and on campus events which are sectioned into modules, known as YorModules. These events include; online Zoom events, remote super-curricular learning opportunities, campus visits, and residential events. Participants must gain a minimum of 100 credits during the first year of the programme from participating and engaging with the activities to progress to the second year of the programme. These students will then be eligible for a guaranteed interview or offer (subject to meeting the minimum requirements) upon application to the University of York or Hull York Medical School (HYMS). It is only by completing the YorJourney module at the end of the second year of the programme that students will be eligible for the alternative offer. Full details of both years of the programme can be found below.

Completing the full two year programme requires students to complete two stages:

Stage One of programme: gain 100 credits

The first stage of programme completion is to pass the first year. In the first year, each activity that students can take part in has a number of credits attached and students must gain a minimum of 100 credits to pass. Participating students have the full academic year as well as the beginning of the next to gain their required credits. For example, for the cohort this report starts to analyse, students have taken part in activities throughout the 2025/26 academic year and have a deadline of 5 October 2026 by which to gain the minimum 100 credits. Students are able to choose which activities they take part in in order to gain these credits, therefore, they do not have to engage in every activity offered. This is so that students are able to take part in the programme around existing commitments, giving more students the chance to participate in and successfully complete the programme. This model also recognises that not all students seek the same information, thus enabling them to tailor the programme to suit their interests and gain knowledge in specific areas that they feel is needed. Some events are joint events with other Post-16 programmes at York.

A key feature of Next Step York is assigning students to a 'college group' before the launch event. Working in these smaller teams throughout Year 12, participants are guided by the same two University of York student mentors. Groups establish their own unique identity during the launch event, laying the foundation for a community that lasts across all subsequent activities. Aligned with the University of York's college system, these dedicated groups help students navigate their journey from day one. Participants build a supportive network where they can thrive, fostering a strong sense of belonging both within the programme and the university as a whole.

¹ <https://www.ucas.com/applying/applying-to-university/students-with-individual-needs/students-with-caring-responsibilities>

The first year event offering is outlined below:

Table 1: Next Step York - First year events and activities

Activity Title	Activity Type	Activity Description	Maximum credits earned from taking part in the activity
Launch	Online	Introduces students to the programme as a whole including the student team, the staff team and the activity offering.	15
Introduction to Studying at University	Online	Comparing university-level study to sixth form or college topics on university-style teaching and assessments, and different note-taking methods. Looking in more detail about what it's like to study at the University of York specifically, including information on study spaces on campus, support at York, and balancing studying with your social life.	15
Academic Conference Online	Online Open to Black Access Post-16 Programme students	An online session offering students to take part in subject taster lectures delivered by University of York academics for students not able to attend the in-person conference	15
Academic Conference On Campus	In person	An opportunity to visit the University of York (based on East Campus). Academic sessions, including two subject taster sessions (led by department academics), an academic skills workshop, and Q&As with current students with an optional campus tour	30
Introduction to Budgeting at University	Online	Exploring how student finance works (including information on tuition fee loans, maintenance loans, Disabled Students Allowance, and scholarships/bursaries). Info also shared on LLE. Information about student jobs and different opportunities. Top tips on budgeting	15
Diversity and Inclusion at York	Online	Online session focusing on fostering a strong sense of belonging and celebrating	15

	Joint event with the Black Access Post-16 Programme	students' unique identities, giving them a safe space to get honest answers about student life from diverse peers, current students and university staff.	
Preparing to Apply to Medicine at HYMS	Online Open to Black Access Post-16 Programme students	This session is led by current Medicine students and provides students with an overview of the specific application process for Medicine courses and provides advice and guidance on applications and interviews.	15
Summer Residentials	3 x in-person residentials Joint event with the Black Access Post-16 Programme	Opportunity for students to visit campus and experience life as a University of York student. Students stay on campus for 3 days and 2 nights, engaging in subject taster sessions, an academic group project, sports/society sessions, social activities and a trip to the city centre.	40
Preparing your UCAS Application	Online Joint event with the Black Access Post-16 Programme	Webinar event providing a structured, step-by-step guide to the UCAS application process, and guidance on writing an effective personal statement.	15
Online learning resources	Online	Students are able to engage in University of York MOOCs, and engage with learning resources on the Next Step York Hub. They then need to submit a reflection piece to outline their learnings from the resource in order to gain credits.	20
Feedback surveys	Online	Feedback surveys to gather students' views to help the team improve events year on year. Most surveys offer 5 credits for completion. Occasionally longer surveys offer 10 credits for completion such as after an in-person event.	5-10

Achieving 100 credits by the outlined deadline and therefore passing the first year of the programme makes students eligible to receive the first of the benefits outlined above, a guaranteed interview or offer to study a course at York (subject to meeting course minimum requirements, such as studying particular subjects at A Level or equivalent).

Stage two of of programme: complete the YorJourney module

In year two of the programme, students have the opportunity to attend a range of online events. There are no credits attached to the second year of the programme and none of these activities are mandatory. This is due to the recognition of students' existing time commitments in Year 13; they are also likely to be applying to university and preparing for Post-16 exams. So as not to add an additional workload on to participants at this stage of their HE journey, the majority of activity takes place in year one. Year two events and a monthly newsletter offer touch points to stay connected to the programme and offer transitional information, advice and guidance until the start of the YorJourney module in the summer term. YorJourney is an invite-only module for students who have placed York as their firm or insurance choice. Programme specific year two events offer support for students who may later select other institutions.

In the summer term of the programme, all students who have completed the first year of a University of York Post-16 outreach programme and have selected York as their firm or insurance choice are invited to attend the YorJourney module. Completing this module is mandatory to complete the full two years of Next Step York and become eligible for the alternative offer.

Next Step York second year activity offering is outlined below:

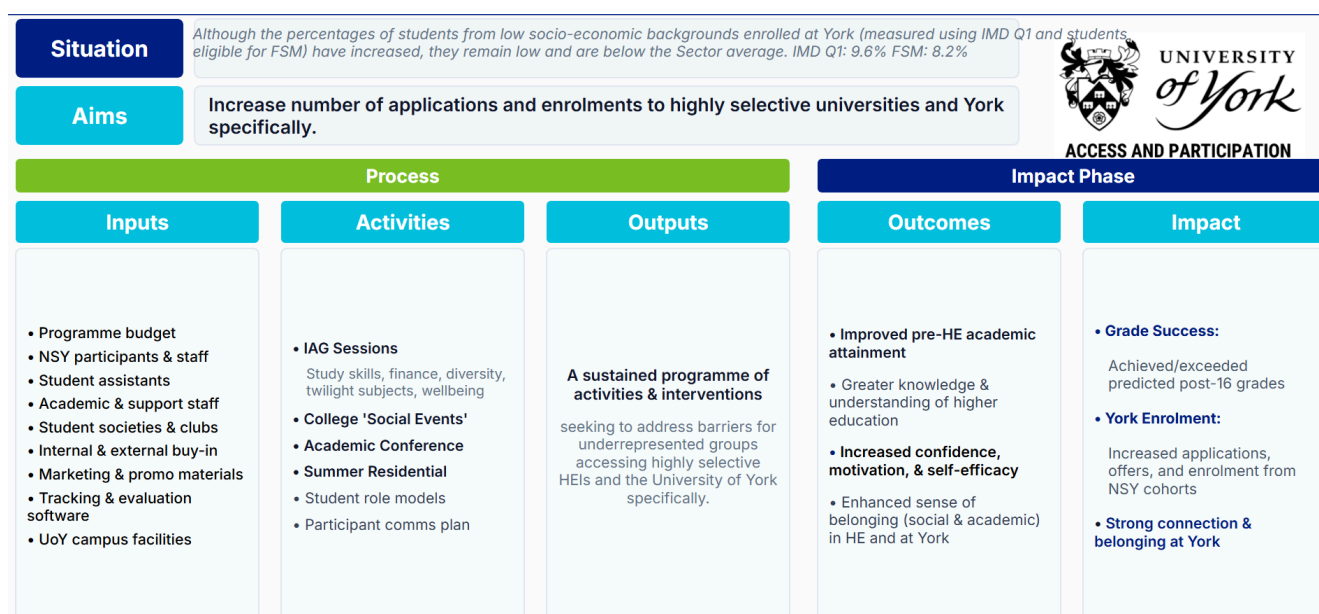
Table 2: Next Step York programme Programme Second Year Activity Offering

Activity Title	Activity Type	Activity Description
Preparing for your University of York Interview	Online	Event to support students to effectively prepare for their university interviews. Includes what to expect, how to discuss strengths and structure a response and Q&A with a HYMS student supporter.
Revision Advice and Guidance	Online	Event to help students develop effective revision and study strategies that enhance exam performance, reduce stress, and promote academic confidence.
Accommodation and College system at York	Online	Event designed to increase knowledge about university accommodation options at York as well as support provided to students as part of the university's college system.
YorJourney Module (Joint with all University of York Post-16 programmes)	Online	Module designed to support students across all post-16 programmes with the transition from school/college to university. Completion of this module is essential for students to unlock their reduced alternative offers.

The cohort of participants that joined the programme in December 2025 are known as The 2025-27 Next Step York cohort. In order to be eligible to receive the alternative offer, students must complete the YorJourney module. Students who successfully complete the Next Step York programme can typically access the alternative offer and additional consideration for two consecutive cycles (applications within two years of successfully completing Next Step York) – which means two years in total. Eligible students should complete YorJourney in the year of application to university.

Whilst the above programme overview outlines operational delivery, evaluating impact requires an explicit causal model. The following Theory of Change maps the intended intervention pathways, drawing directly on theoretical frameworks and rationale detailed in the subsequent literature review.

Figure 1: Next Step York Theory of Change



An accessible version of the Theory of Change can be found in [Appendix A](#)

It is widely acknowledged that young people from socio-economically less advantaged backgrounds frequently encounter systemic barriers that limit their exposure to, and guidance regarding, HE options. This structural lack of information and access can heavily impact their educational choices and long-term career trajectories. The issue is often increased by a lack of immediate academic role models, which leaves students without relatable reference points for university progression. Because attainment and opportunity gaps open early in childhood and compound across the educational lifecycle, higher education institutions (HEIs) have an institutional responsibility to address these inequities with widening access programmes such as Next Step York.

There is evidence that sustained, multi-intervention outreach engagement, rather than one-off visits, is key to enhancing pupils' institutional knowledge and fostering self-efficacy in educational decision-making. Targeted outreach activity, including structured peer mentoring, academic summer schools, and immersive campus visits, serve complementary functions: mentoring and summer schools develop interpersonal competencies and academic confidence, while physical campus visits demystify student life and clarify the tangible value of a degree (Patel and Bowes, 2021). Next Step York embeds these interventions into a sustained Year 12 and Year 13 journey. Through a combination of online and on

campus programme offerings, Next Step York targets skills barriers and knowledge gaps to support participants to make informed decisions about their HE options.

An insight from Menzies (2013) is that the primary barrier for underrepresented pupils is rarely a lack of ambition; rather, less advantaged young people possess high aspirations but lack the operational knowledge to translate those ambitions into achievable outcomes. Without practical scaffolding, high aspirations remain abstract. This concept aligns with Whitty, Hayton, and Tang (2015), who emphasise that "knowing the ropes" (Whitty, Hayton, and Tang, 2015, p.15) of HE requires specific forms of social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Middle-class students inherit institutional knowledge (*navigational capital*, conceptualised by Appadurai, 2004) through educated family members and affluent social networks, whereas first-generation and disadvantaged students often have fewer opportunities to discuss university at home, generating a cultural disconnect (Moogan, 2010). Inoue (1999) highlights this generational influence, noting that parental socio-economic background directly conditions both a pupil's educational horizon and their ultimate occupational ambitions through the social transmission of expectations.

Early and meaningful interactions with university staff, current undergraduate peers, and fellow applicants are essential for helping less advantaged students cultivate a genuine sense of belonging within selective academic communities. Thomas (2012) identifies institutional belonging as a primary determinant of student retention, persistence, and degree outcome. Belonging is built through active, participatory engagement, supportive peer networks, and curriculum content that aligns with students' identity and future goals.

For first-generation students who cannot rely on inherited cultural capital, developing this sense of belonging before university enrolment is crucial (Pedler, Willis, and Nieuwoudt, 2022). When widening access initiatives create safe, inclusive spaces for interaction, participants begin to see HE not as an unfamiliar environment, but as a space where they naturally fit and can thrive.

Further, strengthening students' self-efficacy, defined as an individual's belief in their capability to execute courses of action to achieve specific goals (Bandura, 1997), can dismantle psychological barriers to HE participation. Thorpe, Snell, Hoskins, and Bryant (2007) argue that when university progression is not the norm within a student's local community or school context, students systematically underestimate their own academic abilities relative to their peers. This internalised *false modesty* or reduced self-belief leads pupils to self-select out of competitive pathways, even when their academic potential matches that of their more privileged counterparts.

Similarly, Baker et al. (2014) observed that environmental disadvantages subtly depress educational expectations over time. Widening access programmes like Next Step York serve as a crucial intervention against this trend: by pairing academic skill-building with current student role models and contextual grade offers, such programmes rebuild self-efficacy, sustain high motivation, and bridge the gap between a student's potential and their progression to higher education.

The following sections of this report move from the theoretical frameworks and rationale underpinning the programme to narratively evaluating the starting point of the 2025-27 Next Step York cohort. These sections outline the research design, methodology and initial findings. All pupil numbers in this report are rounded to the nearest 5 to protect pupils' identities (for more information on this please see the Data Reporting Notice in [Appendix C](#)). Pupil information and event attendance data reflect the full cohort, while the analysis of surveys includes only those programme participants who consented to their responses being used for evaluation purposes in accordance with the programme's ethics procedures.

Participant information

In 2025/2026, a total of 470 students enrolled onto the Next Step York programme and remained enrolled at the point of the programme beginning with the Launch event in January 2026. 5 students have since formally withdrawn from the programme. Participant demographics data is displayed below using the total participant figure of 465.

Figure 2: Next Step York Year 12 cohort 25-27 pupil demographics

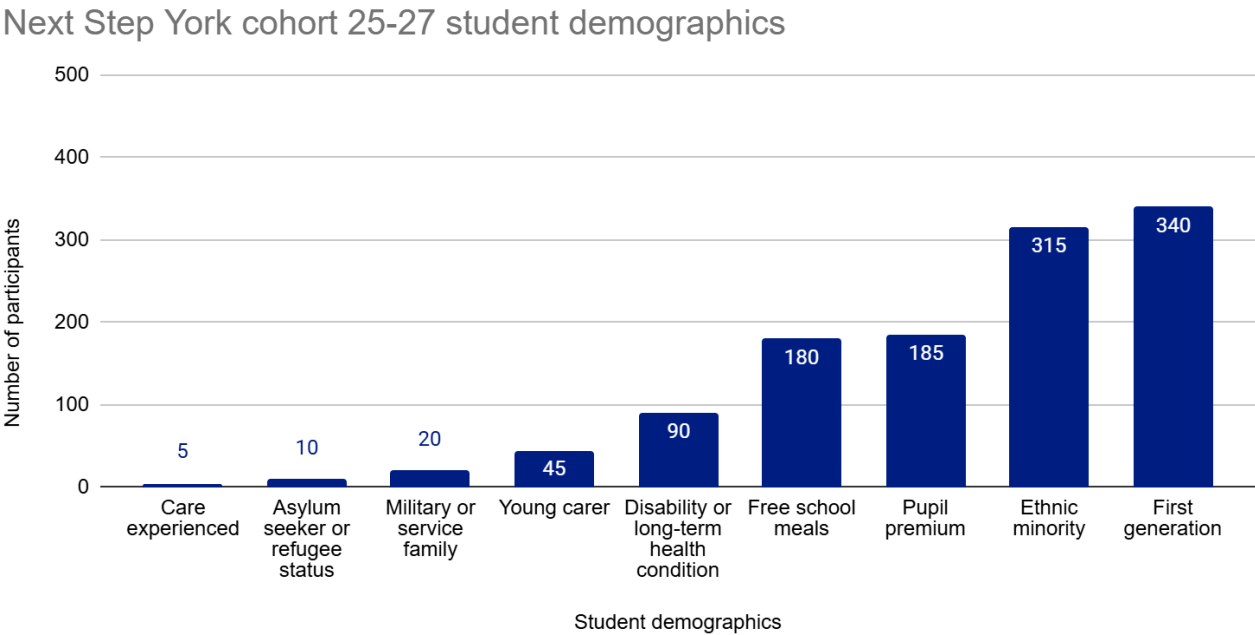


Figure 3: Pupils living in an IMD 1 or 2 area. Measure of relative deprivation. IMD 1 and 2 represent the most deprived areas

IMD Postcode data					
	Quintile 1	Quintile 2	Quintile 3	Quintile 4	Quintile 5
Number of participants	170	150	70	50	25
Percentage of cohort	36%	33%	15%	10%	6%

Event attendance

Table 3 provides an overview of the events and activities that took place during the 2025/2026 academic year, demonstrating the number of participants who engaged, and the corresponding attendance rate for each event.

Table 3: Attendance at Next Step York events during the 2025/2026 academic year

Event/activity	Number engaged	Percentage of cohort
Launch	370	79%
Introduction to Studying at University	245	52%
Academic Conference Online	130	28%
Academic Conference On Campus	145	31%
Introduction to Budgeting at University	115	25%
Diversity and Inclusion at York	105	23%
Preparing to Apply to Medicine at HYMS	30	6%
Summer Residentials	205	44%
<i>Independent learning such as MOOCs or NSY hub resources</i>	110	24%

Research consent

Ethics approval was received from the University of York's Professional Services Research Ethics Committee (ProSREC) in October 2025. All participants and their parent/carer/guardian(s) (PCGs) were required to read an information sheet and complete a consent form before participating. Participants were told that taking part in the research was optional and they had the right to withdraw at any stage of the project. Participants were made aware that taking part in the research would not impact any current or future interactions with the University of York.

Research aims

This evaluation report aims to research the following questions:

- To what extent does Next Step York address barriers present for students from underrepresented backgrounds in HE accessing highly selective HEIs and the University of York specifically?
- What is the impact of Next Step York on participants' engagement in HE, specifically at York?

Hypotheses

Research Question 1

To what extent does participation in the programme address key barriers to HE by improving students' baseline knowledge, self-efficacy, cognitive strategies, sense of belonging, and academic attainment?

- Hypothesis 1.1 (Knowledge of HE):
Participants will report a statistically significant increase in their knowledge base and understanding of HE compared to their pre-programme baselines.
- Hypothesis 1.2 (Self-Efficacy & Strategy):
Participants will report a statistically significant increase in their academic self-efficacy and use of cognitive learning strategies compared to their pre-programme baselines.
- Hypothesis 1.3 (Sense of Belonging):
Participants will report an improved sense of belonging in HE generally, and at the University of York specifically, compared to their pre-programme baselines.
- Hypothesis 1.4 (Academic Attainment):
Participant cohorts will achieve higher average Key Stage 5 academic attainment compared to their school-wide non-participant baselines.

Rationale

Hypotheses 1.1–1.3 directly address the specific barriers experienced by underrepresented students in HE. By testing multiple intermediate outcomes within our Theory of Change, these hypotheses evaluate whether the programme successfully tackles the pre-entry environment it was designed to transform.

Research Question 2

Does participation in the programme translate increased HE readiness into successful progression to the University of York or other highly selective universities?

- Hypothesis 2.1 (York Applications & Progression):
The University of York will see a measurable increase in the rate of applications, offers, and enrolments originating from programme participants.
- Hypothesis 2.2 (Alternative Selective Progression):
Programme participants who do not enrol at York will demonstrate increased enrolment rates at other highly selective HE institutions compared to benchmark averages.

Rationale

Hypotheses 2.1–2.2 represent the long-term impact metrics within our Theory of Change. They test Hypothesis 1.4 (the bridge between internal mindset shifts and external behavior), linking gains in HE knowledge and self-efficacy directly to the practical achievement of securing a place at a high-tariff institution.

Table 4: Theory of Change Alignment

Hypothesis	Level in Theory of Change	Target Barrier Addressed	Primary Outcome Measure
H1.1	Intermediate Outcome	HE Information Void	Baseline vs. Post-programme survey (Knowledge Scale)
H1.2	Intermediate Outcome	Grade & Study Confidence	Baseline vs. Post-programme survey (Self-Efficacy Scale)
H1.3	Intermediate Outcome	Social Integration & Identity	Baseline vs. Post-programme survey (Belonging Scale)
H1.4	Intermediate Outcome	Attainment Gap	KS5 Exam Results vs. School Baseline
H2.1 & H2.2	Long-Term Impact	Progression Barriers	UCAS Application, Offer, and Enrollment Tracking Data

Data collection and methods

To assess the impact of the Next Step York programme, students who had successfully gained a place completed a Welcome Survey before the start of any programme activities. This research uses a repeated-measures design, therefore, the Welcome Survey serves as a baseline measure to understand students' initial perceptions and attitudes around HE and the University of York. Consenting participants will be asked to repeat the survey at both a midpoint and end of programme timeline to measure change and impact. [Figure 4](#) displays the Welcome Survey and Midpoint Survey in relation to the writing of this report. The End of Programme survey will be conducted in December 2026, after which eligible participants are monitored and evaluated by the YorJourney programme team. Responses from all surveys will be analysed in the next reporting cycle.

The Next Step York evaluation framework uses a mixture of TASO Access and Success Questionnaire (ASQ) validated scales as well as custom questions. Of the seven outcomes the ASQ scale measures, this framework uses all four relevant for Access activities and one which can be used for both Access and Success. These are; Academic Self-efficacy, Higher Education Expectations, Knowledge of Higher Education, Sense of Belonging, and Cognitive Strategies. The TASO validated scale weighting has been

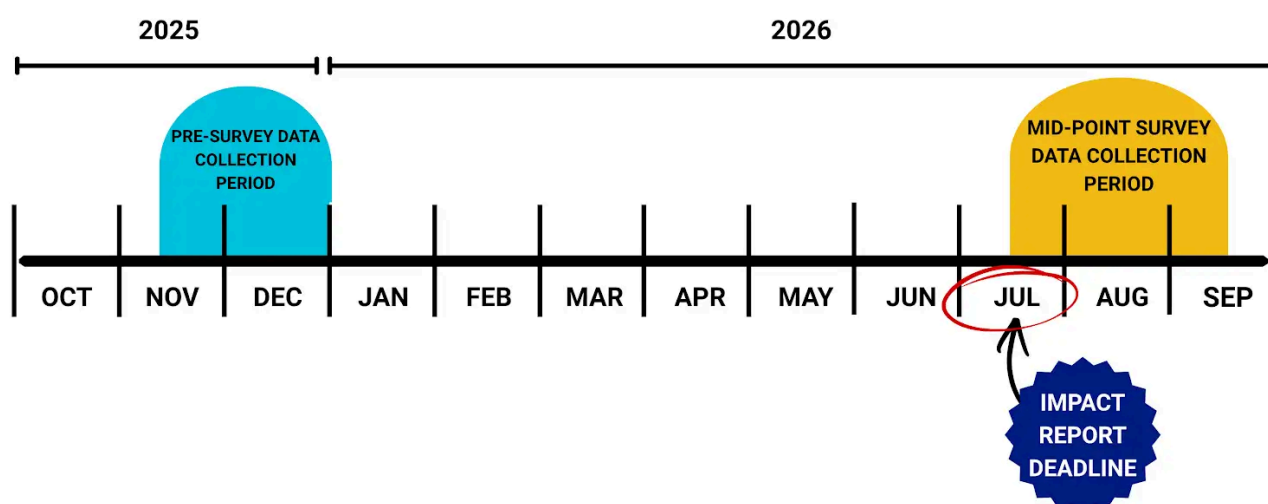
applied for each participants' scores. The custom questions were categorised into custom scales aligning to the Next Step York Theory of Change outcomes. These can be viewed in full in [Appendix B](#).

All Welcome Survey questions, both from the ASQ validated scales and custom, used a 5-point Likert scale for responses, which were converted into numerical values for quantitative analysis for each pupil (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Mean and median scores were then calculated for each ASQ validated scale and custom scale, as well as per question to ascertain the highest and lowest scoring question within each scale. 'Prefer not to say' responses were coded as 0 and excluded from the mean and median calculations, therefore, the reported figures reflect active sentiment only.

Of the 465 students on the programme, 335 gave full consent to use their responses within this research. Following data cleaning, these responses have been initially analysed to identify emerging themes. The Academic Self-efficacy, Knowledge of Higher Education and Sense of Belonging scales contained three questions each, the Higher Education Expectations scale contained one question, and the Cognitive Strategies scale contained four questions. There were 335 full responses and scores for each scale. The custom scales focus predominantly on intentions and motivations behind joining the programme and applying to university. Whilst these provide insightful contextual information, it is the TASO ASQ validated scales which this and following reports will focus on to assess the impact of Next Step York.

It is not yet possible to conduct further comparative analysis or draw conclusions of impact due to the longitudinal nature of the Next Step York programme. Nevertheless, the findings presented in this report offer early insights and themes regarding students' initial perceptions of HE and the University of York. In future reports, this data will be directly compared with survey responses post completion of the programme and will look to analyse statistically significant changes in knowledge, understanding, confidence and attitudes around HE as outlined in the programme Theory of Change.

Figure 4: Data collection and reporting timeline for Next Step York cohort 25-27



Findings

TASO Validated Questions

The following tables present findings with regards to student responses to the TASO validated questions within the pre-programme Welcome Survey. The full set of questions are outlined in [Appendix B](#).

Table 5: Mean and Median scores for TASO validated questions assessing students' academic self-efficacy, cognitive strategies, HE expectations, knowledge of HE and sense of belonging in HE

	Academic Self-efficacy	Cognitive Strategies	HE Expectations	Knowledge of HE	Sense of Belonging
Mean	4.25	4.01	4.67	3.68	4.08
Median	4.3	4	5	3.68	4

This table shows that students had high overall mean and median scores in all areas. Comparatively, students had particularly high scores in their expectations that they would go on to enter HE. The table further demonstrates students' confidence in their academic ability to gain a place at university, fit in and succeed academically at university. However, whilst students demonstrated high confidence in academic ability, this table shows they had comparatively lower confidence in their knowledge of HE, cognitive strategies and sense of belonging at university.

Table 6: Highest scoring statements within each category

Highest scoring statement in the scale			
Academic Self-efficacy	Cognitive Strategies	Knowledge of HE	Sense of Belonging
I have the academic ability to do well at university.	I can tell which information is most important when I study.	I believe that if I apply to university, I will get a place.	I would fit in well academically with others at university.

Table 7: Lowest scoring statement within each category

Lowest scoring statement in the scale			
Academic Self-efficacy	Cognitive Strategies	Knowledge of HE	Sense of Belonging
I am confident that I can get the exam results required to progress to university	I can confidently explain my ideas when talking to others.	I know what studying at university would be like.	I would fit in well socially with others at university.

Custom Survey Questions

The following tables present our findings with regards to student responses to the custom questions within the pre-programme Welcome Survey. The full set of questions are outlined in [Appendix B](#).

Table 8: Factors affecting students' applications to universities

University Application Factors			
	Practical & Financial Constraints	Academic & Reputational Capital	Social Fit & Community
Mean	3.06	3.95	3.68
Median	3.00	4	3.75

Table 9: Highest scoring statement within each category of application factors

Highest Scoring Statement within the scale		
Practical & Financial Constraints	Academic & Reputational Capital	Social Fit & Community
The location of the university	Graduate prospects	Reputation regarding equality / diversity

Table 10: Lowest scoring statement within each category of application factors

Lowest Scoring Statement within the scale		
Practical & Financial Constraints	Academic & Reputational Capital	Social Fit & Community
How close the university is to where I live	Course content	How much people at the university are like me

Table 11: Factors affecting students' motivations for joining Next Step York

	Pre-Entry Support	Social Capital & Belongingness Seeking	Exploratory & Academic Ambition
Mean	4.39	3.66	4.28
Median	4.4	3.75	4.4

Table 12: Highest scoring statements within each category of different elements of the Next Step York programme that students value

Highest Scoring Statement within the scale		
Pre-Entry Support	Social Capital & Belongingness Seeking	Exploratory & Academic Ambition
I would like an alternative offer	I would like to find out more about student life	I would like to try something new

Table 13: Lowest scoring statements within each category of different elements of the Next Step York programme that students value

Lowest Scoring Statement within the scale		
Pre-Entry Support	Social Capital & Belongingness Seeking	Exploratory & Academic Ambition
I would like support with my application	I would like to speak to current students	I would like to know more about careers and what I can do with a university degree

Discussion

It is important to reiterate that due to the timeline of the report, the findings and discussion are based on the Welcome Survey data only.

Academic Self-efficacy

The Welcome Survey responses demonstrate that the cohort has strong academic self-efficacy, which can be defined as an individual's belief in their capability to plan, organise, and execute academic tasks (Bandura, 1997). The high mean (4.25) and median (4.30) scores, suggest that students enter the programme with confidence in their overall ability to succeed in HE.

Highest and lowest scoring statements:

Highest: *"I have the academic ability to do well at university."*

Lowest: *"I am confident that I can get the exam results required to progress to university."*

While students believe in their capability to perform well academically at university, the lowest scoring statement suggests a lower confidence level when it comes to the more immediate requirement of achieving required entry grades. This ambition is echoed in the programme motivation data: within the Pre-Entry Support scale, the highest-rated statement was *"I would like an alternative offer"* (4.39). This may relate to the lower confidence noted in grade attainment under academic self-efficacy; students apply to the programme to ensure that they can access an alternative offer. Next Step York aims to maintain these ambitious expectations while showcasing the distinct academic and lifestyle benefits of studying at York. Next Step York aims to address this gap by providing targeted academic skills

workshops and revision strategies support. As a result, we anticipate a positive trajectory in academic self-efficacy scores in the mid-point and end-point surveys.

Cognitive Strategies

Cognitive strategies refer to the mental techniques and processes students use to facilitate learning, problem-solving, critical thinking, and decision-making (Weinstein & Mayer, 1986). The mean (4.01) and median (4.00) scores represent the second-lowest average across the validated TASO scales, indicating that there may be an increase in scores following engagement in Next Step York events and activities.

Highest and lowest scoring statements:

Highest: *"I can tell which information is most important when I study."*

Lowest: *"I can confidently explain my ideas when talking to others."*

The statements suggest that students feel equipped to use academic information independently, however may have lower confidence in their ability to communicate their ideas verbally. Next Step York will focus on nurturing interactive communication skills through small-group discussions, and collaborative tasks. By offering safe spaces for group work during online and residential events, we hope to build students' confidence in their cognitive strategies and track improvements across future surveys.

Higher Education Expectations

The cohort recorded its highest overall mean (4.67) and median (5.00) scores in the HE Expectations category. This may suggest that the cohort anticipate entering HE. Similarly, baseline intentions to apply specifically to the University of York were high. We note however that students in this sample have self-selected to participate in the Next Step York programme, therefore these results may not necessarily reflect the experiences of all pupils at this stage in their educational journey. We would expect these results to remain consistent or a higher trajectory in future surveys.

Knowledge of Higher Education

Although there were high scores in the HE expectations data, Knowledge of HE showed the lowest mean (3.68) and median (3.68) category scores among the TASO scales, highlighting a focus area of need.

Highest and lowest scoring statements:

Highest: *"I believe that if I apply to university, I will get a place."*

Lowest: *"I know what studying at university would be like."*

Students demonstrated confidence about securing a university place, yet the responses display a gap in knowledge of university life, which could include academic formats, and expectations about student life. Addressing this knowledge gap is an aim of the Next Step York programme. Through structured academic skills sessions, lectures delivered by current academics, and transparent insight into student life from current students, the programme intends to demystify the university experience. We expect knowledge scores to show a marked upward trajectory in post-programme surveys.

Sense of Belonging

The Sense of Belonging category demonstrated medium mean (4.08) and median (4.00) scores, compared to other TASO validated scale scores. The highest scoring statement shows that students believe that they will fit in with others more academically than socially.

Highest and lowest scoring statements:

Highest: *"I would fit in well academically with others at university."*

Lowest: *"I would fit in well socially with others at university."*

This may be consistent with findings surrounding academic self-efficacy and cognitive strategies responses, where participants feel confident in their academic capability however, have a lower confidence surrounding social confidence. Through Next Step York college group activities and the opportunity to engage with current student role models, we hope to see an increase in the mean and median scores for the sense of belonging category.

Free School Meal Demographic Breakdown

The survey data was further analysed by Free School Meal (FSM) eligibility, using data verified by the students' school, however showed that the differences between FSM and non-FSM cohorts were minimal across all measures except for *Knowledge of HE*, where non-FSM students scored very slightly higher on average. Both groups shared the same application factors and confidence patterns: high self-assessed academic ability as well as lower confidence in grade attainment and lower familiarity with university life. These consistent findings suggest that the planned Next Step York interventions including academic skills support, opportunities to connect with others socially in a safe and inclusive environment, and demystifying university life should equally benefit all participants across the programme. While this is encouraging, ongoing monitoring will be important to understand whether Next Step York continues to support all students equally, and whether any differences emerge as students experience further programme activity and interventions.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Methodological limitations should be considered when interpreting these findings. First, as this report reflects baseline data from the Welcome Survey only, it is not yet possible to measure the overall impact or causal effect of Next Step York on participants. Second, the sample consists of self-selected students who actively applied and engaged with the programme, representing a group with inherently high motivation. Consequently, these findings reflect the baseline characteristics of this specific, highly engaged cohort and cannot be generalised to the broader post-16 student population.

These findings provide a baseline for future evaluation surveys and will support the measurement of impact of Next Step York for programme participants. Analysis of the Welcome Survey data highlights strong academic self-efficacy, where students express strong belief in their overall ability to succeed in HE. However despite high HE expectations and confidence in securing a place, Knowledge of HE recorded the lowest overall scores. Students feel confident about getting into university, but lack clarity on what studying and living at university is actually like. Across Cognitive Strategies and Sense of Belonging, there is a consistent pattern where students feel equipped to work independently and fit in academically, but lack confidence in verbal communication and social integration. Differences between FSM eligible and non-FSM students were minimal at baseline across all measures.

Recommendations:

- **Continue to survey cohort at mid-point and programme completion**

Whilst this Welcome Survey data provides an essential benchmark. Continuous measurement will allow the team to track whether knowledge gaps close over time and evaluate the long-term impact of Next Step York as cohorts progress through Year 12 and into HE.

- **Continue planned programme content to address the knowledge gap**

While students display high academic self-efficacy and confidence in securing a place, their knowledge of university life including university level study, finance, accommodation and independent living, recorded the lowest baseline scores. Workshops should explicitly demystify student life at university.

- **Build upon cognitive strategies**

The Welcome Survey data reports participants feeling equipped to work independently, but may lack confidence in verbal communication. The continuity of the two college groups will help create a safe space for students to practice communication and build social networks.

Acknowledgements and Contact Information

Authors and Contributors

Access and Outreach Team, Next Step York Team

Contact details

Next Step York Team: nextstepyork@york.ac.uk

References

Baker, W., Sammons, P., Siraj, I., Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., & Taggart, B. (2014). Educational aims and aspirations of 14–16 year olds: Associations with socio-economic status and prior achievement. *British Educational Research Journal*, 40(3), 525–542. <https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3102>

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W. H. Freeman and Company.

Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood Press.

Inoue, Y. (1999). *The educational and occupational aspirations of young people: The role of family background, ability, and significant others*. University Press of America.

Menzies, L. (2013). Educational aspirations: How English schools can work with parents to keep them on track. Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF).

Moogan, Y. J. (2010). Can leaver pupils be categorized by how they make decisions regarding higher education application? *Higher Education Quarterly*, 64(4), 392–406.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2010.00466.x>

Patel, R., & Bowes, L. (2021). Third-party evaluation of widening participation activities: Evidence review. Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO).

Pedler, M. L., Willis, R., & Nieuwoudt, J. E. (2021). A sense of belonging at university: Student retention, motivation and enjoyment. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46(3), 397–408.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877x.2021.1955844>

Thomas, L. (2012). Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: Final report from the What works? Student retention & success programme. Higher Education Academy (HEA).

Thorpe, A., Snell, M., Hoskins, S., & Bryant, L. (2007). False modesty or genuine lack of confidence? Self-efficacy, aspirational limits, and widening participation. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 9(2), 27–38.

Weinstein, C. and Mayer, R. (1986) The Teaching of Learning Strategies. In: Wittrock, M., Ed., *Handbook of Research on Teaching*, Macmillan, New York, 315-327.

Whitty, G., Hayton, A., & Tang, S. (2015). Who you know, what you know and knowing the ropes: A review of evidence about access to higher education, social mobility and social capital. *London Review of Education*, 13(2), 57–70. <https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE.13.2.08>

Appendix A: Next Step York: Theory of Change

Situation

- Although the percentages of students from low socio-economic backgrounds enrolled at York (measured using IMD Q1 and students
- eligible for FSM) have increased, they remain low and are below the Sector average. IMD Q1: 9.6% FSM: 8.2%

Aim

To increase the number of applications and enrolments to highly selective universities and York specifically.

Target population

Students in Year 12 from underrepresented backgrounds in HE across England.

Inputs

- Financial allocation and programme budget
- Dedicated NSY staff and student participants
- Undergraduate student assistants and ambassadors
- Academic departments and professional support staff
- University student clubs and societies
- Institutional commitment and external stakeholder buy-in
- Strategic marketing and promotional materials
- Specialised tracking and impact evaluation software
- University of York campus facilities

Activities

- IAG Sessions
- Study skills, finance, diversity, twilight subjects, wellbeing
- College events
- Academic Conference
- Summer Residential
- Student role models
- Participant comms plan

Outputs

- A sustained programme of activities & interventions
- seeking to address barriers for underrepresented groups accessing highly selective HEIs and the University of York specifically.

Outcomes

- Improved pre-HE academic attainment
- Greater knowledge & understanding of higher education
- Increased confidence, motivation, & self-efficacy
- Enhanced sense of belonging (social & academic) in HE and at York

Impact

- Grade Success: Achieved/exceeded predicted post-16 grades
- York Enrolment: Increased applications, offers, and enrolment from NSY cohorts
- Strong connection & belonging at York

Barriers

- Not all students will have access to a device where they can access online events, forms, newsletters

Appendix B: Evaluation Framework

TASO Validated Questions						
The following statements relate to how you feel about studying at university from an academic perspective. Please think about each statement and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree.		Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Academic Self Efficacy	I am confident that I can get the exam results required to progress to university	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I have the academic ability to do well at university.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I could manage with the level of study required at university.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The following statements are about how you study. Please think about how you go about learning and studying generally and indicate to what extent you agree or disagree with each statement.		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Cognitive Strategies	I can tell which information is most important when I study.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I can tell how reliable information is when I read something.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I can clearly explain my ideas, even when writing about complicated things.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I can confidently explain my ideas when talking to others.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

TASO Validated Questions						
This question is about whether you're thinking about going to university. There is no right or wrong answer, the important thing is to respond honestly about what you think.		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
HE Intentions	I am thinking about going to university in the future.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The following statements are about what you know and how you feel about going to university. Please think about each statement and indicate to what extent you agree or disagree.		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Knowledge of HE	I know what studying at university would be like.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I know how studying at university is different from studying in school or at college.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I believe that if I apply to university, I will get a place.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The following statements relate to how you might feel about becoming a student at university. Please think about each statement and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree.		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Sense of Belonging	University is for people like me.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I would fit in well academically with others at university.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I would fit in well socially with others at university.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Custom Questions						
These statements relate to how important the following factors are to you when making a decision about which universities to apply to. Please think about each statement and indicate the extent of their importance to you.		Not important at all	Not important	Not sure	Important	Very important
Factors affecting students' decisions about which universities to apply to	Where people I know are applying	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	How close the university is to where I live	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	How much it will cost to live in that location	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	How much people at the university are like me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	The required grades	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	The contextual admissions policies offered i.e. reduced offers or additional considerations	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	The course content	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	University rankings/reputation	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	Graduate prospects	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	Facilities available at the university	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	The location of the university	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	Reputation regarding equality / diversity	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	How much people share a similar background to me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	The financial support offered by the university i.e. non repayable	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Custom Questions						
	scholarships and bursaries					
The following statements relate to the influencers when considering applying to university. Please think about each influencer and their importance related to your decision making about higher education.		Not important at all	Not important	Not sure	Important	Very important
Importance of different influencers in making decisions about higher education	Parent/Carer/Guardian	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	Other family members	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	Friends	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	Teacher	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	Careers advisor	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	Other (box to input custom response)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The following statements relate to reasons that you have applied to the programme. Please think about each statement and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree.		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
Motivations for joining the programme	I would like to learn more about universities like York	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I would like to speak to current students	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I would like to meet new people and join the university community	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I would like to develop my academic skills	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I would like to try something new	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	My friends were applying	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Custom Questions						
	I hope it will help me decide whether to go to university	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I would like support with my application	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I would like to find out more about student life	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I would like to know more about student finance	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I would like to know more about certain subjects	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I would like to know more about careers and what I can do with a university degree	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I thought it would be useful for my personal statement	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I would like an alternative offer	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	Other (box to input custom response)	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
This question is about whether you intend to apply to specific universities. There is no right or wrong answer, the important thing is to respond honestly about what you think.		Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly agree
HE Intentions (not TASO Validated)	I intend to apply to the University of York	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I intend to apply to other Russell Group universities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
	I intend to apply to other top-third ranking universities	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Appendix C: Data reporting notice

Pupil numbers used throughout this document are being reported under HESA rounding guidelines to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of programme participants. As such, all participation figures are rounded to the nearest 5. Any category numbers reported as 0 do represent some programme participants; categories with no pupils are not reported on.

Appendix D: Pupil demographics

Student Group	Definition
Care experienced	Pupils who have care experience ; this refers to anyone who has been, or is currently, in care. This care may have been provided in many different settings, including living with foster carers, living in a residential children's home, being looked after at home under a supervision order, or living with friends or relatives in kinship care
Estranged students	The term 'estranged student' describes someone who has no communication with both of their biological or adoptive parents, and the situation is likely to remain permanent.
Disabled or long-term health condition	Pupils who report a disability, including pupils with long-term health conditions, specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dyspraxia and ADHD, autistic spectrum conditions and mental health conditions
First generation	Pupils who are the first generation in their family to go to university
Free school meals	Pupils entitled to, or in receipt of, free school meals
IMD 1 or 2	Pupils living in an IMD 1 or 2 area. Measure of relative deprivation. IMD 1 and 2 represent the most deprived areas
Military or service family	Pupils of an individual who is currently serving in the Regular or Reserve Armed Forces.
Pupil premium	Pupils entitled to, or in receipt of, discretionary payments at school
Young carer	Pupils with unpaid caring responsibilities for a family member

Appendix E: Glossary

Acronym	Definition
A Level	Advanced Level
ASQ	Access & Success Questionnaire
BTEC	Bachelor of Technology
FSM	Free School Meal
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
HYMS	Hull York Medical School
IAG	Information Advice & Guidance
IMD	Index of Multiple Deprivation
LLE	Lifelong Learning Entitlement
MOOCs	Massive Open Online Courses
NSY	Next Step York
ProSREC	Professional Services Research Ethics Committee
PCG	Parent, Carer, Guardian
Q&A	Questions & Answers
Q1	Quintile 1
T Level	Technical Level
TASO	Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Service