

SUPPORT FOR INDEPENDENT STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF YORK

AN EXPLORATORY CASE STUDY, INCLUDING PRE-ENTRY (ACHIEVE HE - VIP VISITS) AND POST-ENTRY (TARGETED ADVICE AND SUPPORT & PRACTICAL SUPPORT)

ACCESS AND PARTICIPATION MONITORING AND EVALUATION
STUDENT ADVICE & COMMUNITIES, STUDENT LIFE AND WELLBEING
ACCESS & OUTREACH
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Executive Summary

- 'Independent students' is a term used by the University of York to refer to students who have care experience and students who are estranged. The University of York devised a holistic package of support which has been developed to expand across the whole student lifecycle.
- For this exploratory case study of the independent students' holistic package of support, we used a mixed methods approach, using a survey and interviews.
- The survey results were split into questions regarding pre-entry and post-entry support. Results demonstrated both the level of engagement regarding different aspects of support and the impact of that support in general and on specific outcome measures.
- The thematic analysis of the interviews provided a much broader and more in-depth insight into the experiences of independent students with the holistic package of support and the possible impact it might have on them. Awareness of the support for independent students specifically at the University of York, mitigation of financial concerns/awareness, sense of belonging, and establishing peer support and social networks were all themes that were discussed extensively.
- Overall, the findings showed positive impacts of the holistic package of support for independent students at the University of York. Students demonstrated a strong level of awareness of the package and were able to discuss outcomes that the package impacted on. This case study provides a strong foundation point for additional research and evaluations in the future.
- Conclusions specifically about the interventions Achieve HE - VIP Visits, Provision of Targeted Advice and Support, and Practical Support from the University of York's [Access and Participation Plan 2025-26 to 2028-29](#) have all been included.

Introduction

'Independent students' is a term used by the University of York to refer to students who have care experience and students who are estranged. The term was developed as part of a focus group with these students to reflect their self-identification and to foster a sense of belonging.

The group 'independent students' includes students with a wide range of backgrounds.¹ They often share a commonality in experience which distinguishes them from the rest of the general student population. For example, around 19% of students who are estranged also have care experience.²

The University of York has a number of existing commitments to support students with care experience (reflected in our National Network for the Education for Care Leavers ([NNECL Quality Mark Award](#)) and students who are estranged (reflected in our [Stand Alone Pledge](#) and [Stand Alone Legacy Pledge](#)).

York is a signatory of the [Care Leaver Covenant](#) and was one of the first universities to be awarded the [NNECL Quality Mark](#), renewing this accreditation in May 2025 with a rating of "exceptional" in five categories.

Supporting students who are estranged has been a key area of development for York, commencing with the commitment made through signing the [Stand Alone Pledge](#) in 2019 and more recently through signing of the [Stand Alone Legacy Pledge](#) in March 2024. Our efforts were recognised through a [Stand Alone Pledge Award in 2021](#) for overall excellence (nominated by our students) and a [Stand Alone Pledge Award in 2022](#) for innovation and creativity in supporting the emotional wellbeing of students who are estranged.

We devised a holistic package of support which has been developed to expand across the whole student lifecycle.³ This support has been cited as an example of good practice across the Sector.⁴

We recently completed [an independent students' financial support impact evaluation](#) at the University of York. To complement the financial support evaluation, we conducted an exploratory case study of the independent students' holistic package of support available at the University of York⁵. The aim of the case study was to evaluate specific elements of the support available to independent students (namely, VIP visits, which are available pre-entry, and Targeted Advice and Support and Practical Support, which are available post-entry) as well as explore and investigate the students' experiences of the support package as a whole.

The pre-entry support available to independent students at the University of York, offered by the Access & Outreach team, forms part of the 'Access Intervention Strategy in the Access and Participation Plan and is summarised as follows:

- **Dedicated support team:** To provide 1:1 support and advice to prospective students and their supporters via phone, email and video call.
- **Contextual offers:** Care experienced and estranged students are considered for an offer up to two grades below our standard offer.

¹ The University of York also includes those who come to York through the national [Foyer Federation](#) (young people who have experienced homelessness) and students who have been assessed as independent by their funding provider (e.g. Student Finance England) due to both of their 'sponsors' having passed away.

² [Focus on access and retention. Risks for students who are estranged or disowned by their family](#)

³ [Care Experienced students - Support and advice, University of York](#) and [Estranged students - Support and advice, University of York](#)

⁴ [Principles to guide higher education providers on improving care leavers access and participation in HE - GOV.UK](#) and [The independent review of children's social care - Final report - GOV.UK](#)

⁵ Whilst we did not aim to investigate the financial support further and instead aimed to investigate the rest of the holistic package of support available to independent students at the University of York, financial support did come up during the course of the exploration.

- **Additional support during Clearing:** A separate phone number is provided to all care experienced and estranged applicants and their supporters, and is answered by the dedicated pre-entry contact.
- **VIP campus visits:** A fully funded overnight stay to the University campus is provided for prospective students and offer holders, along with a guest of their choice. Visitors meet with a member of the dedicated support team, go on a campus tour with a current independent student and meet with a member of staff in their chosen department.
- **Priority places on outreach programmes:** Independent students receive priority places on all Access & Outreach programmes, which include [Shine](#) at pre-16 and [Next Step York](#) and [Black Access](#) at post-16.
- **Webinars for professionals:** A series of webinars is delivered annually to staff in schools, colleges, Virtual Schools and leaving care teams, equipping them with essential knowledge about higher education.
- **Foster Carer programme:** A free online programme for foster carers, Foster their Future, is delivered annually to foster carers from across the UK. This increases their knowledge and confidence in supporting young people in their care to access higher education.
- **Local authority partner network:** We keep in regular contact with a network of over 70 different local authorities, who receive a quarterly newsletter from us, updating them on our work with independent students.
- **Virtual School Campus Visits:** We host visits to our campus for groups of Year 10-Year 12 students from virtual schools.
- **Open Day sessions:** Talks and drop-ins are delivered on all University Open Days, covering the support available to independent students.
- **On Track Outreach Project:** Run in collaboration with our UniConnect partnership, we offer visits to partner institutions for local young people with care experience.

The post-entry support available to independent students at the University of York as part of the 'Wider Student Experience Intervention Strategy' in the Access and Participation Plan, is delivered by the Student Advice & Communities team and is summarised as follows⁶:

- **Dedicated support team:** Provide 1:1 advocacy, support and advice to students, and make regular contact with important information and news about social events and opportunities.
- **Transition support:** Students are sent a suitcase ahead of starting to help with their packing and receive a bedding and kitchen pack with a welcome letter on arrival. Students are also invited to the [Step Ahead transition programme](#).
- **Housing security:** Uniquely, the University provides 365-day-a-year housing, ensuring no student faces homelessness during term breaks. For private sector accommodation, the University can act as a guarantor.
- **Financial support:** Bursary⁷ and accommodation subsidy (up to £130 per week)⁸ available for students to receive on campus and in private sector accommodation. This includes an additional £1000 at the end of the course to help with the transition out of University. Additional scholarships, such as the York Futures Scholarship, provide financial support towards employment opportunities.
- **Practical support:** Help with transporting and securely storing belongings over the vacation period, between housing tenancies and during year abroad or year in industry. We also aim to

⁶ Independent students are eligible to receive other support from the University of York, often in conjunction with other underrepresented students, such as the Coaching provided by the Progression Intervention Strategy in the University of York's APP. This report is limited to support specific for independent students.

⁷ The [Care Leavers and Estranged Students' Bursary](#) is available to the undergraduate Home students who meet the following eligibility criteria: Under 25 on course commencement, coming to York as a legally defined Care Leaver, through the national Foyer Federation, irreconcilably estranged from parents or both parents have passed away

⁸ The [Care Leavers' Accommodation Subsidy](#) is available to undergraduate Home students who meet the following eligibility criteria: Under 25 on course commencement, coming to York as a legally defined Care Leaver or through the national Foyer Federation (and the students' Local Authority is not providing accommodation)

break barriers to engagement in other activities by providing a freshers pass and access to the College Music Scheme to all independent students.

- **Social events:** To meet with other independent students (including celebrating key milestones such as graduation). We also mark key events throughout the year such as National Care Leavers Month and Estranged Students' Solidarity Week to raise awareness of the experience of independent students.
- **Summer Residential Trip:** Usually a day away somewhere to take part in lots of fun activities. This is a great way for students to meet each other over the long gap between semesters when many students leave campus.
- **Small expressions of care:** Handwritten birthday cards, Christmas cards (signed by the Vice-Chancellor) and Christmas Stockings full of presents funded and created by the University community.
- **Gym memberships:** A partnership with our onsite sports facilities, York Sport, enables local care experienced people to access our gym and swimming pool for free, which supports their health and wellbeing and gives them an opportunity to familiarise themselves with the campus.
- **Internships:** Each academic year, two current independent students are given the opportunity to work in the Access & Outreach team as Student Assistants, supporting the above work.

Evaluation Methodology

For this exploratory case study of the independent students' holistic package of support, we used a mixed methods approach, using a survey and interviews. All participation was voluntary, and we used purposive sampling to engage students from the population of undergraduate independent students currently at the University of York⁹. Survey participants were entered into a £50 voucher prize draw for their participation. At the end of the survey, students were asked to provide an email address if they were interested in being contacted to be interviewed. Students who attended an interview were given a £25 voucher for their time.

Questions for both the survey and the interviews were created by the Student Advice & Communities team and the Access & Outreach team, who deliver the holistic package of support for independent students at the University of York. The survey results informed the interview questions.

There were 45 participants who started the survey (rounded to the nearest 5), of which two thirds responded to half or more of the survey questions. The survey questions were primarily Likert scale questions, asking students to either 'Strongly Agree' to 'Strongly Disagree' or to rate how important something was to them. The remainder of the survey questions were yes/no questions regarding engagement and free text responses. The survey results are reported descriptively only.

15 students who completed the survey indicated that they would be interested in being contacted to be interviewed (rounded to the nearest 5), of which half successfully attended and completed an interview lasting between 30-60 minutes. The interview was semi-structured with questions and topics to be discussed identified beforehand. The interviews were conducted by the Access and Participation Monitoring and Evaluation team, who are impartial from the Student Advice & Communities team and the Access & Outreach team and also unknown to the students in order to provide a safe space for students to discuss their experiences and to maintain their anonymity. The interview transcripts were written, quality checked and analysed by the evaluation team. The team consisted of three White women who didn't deliver any of the holistic package of support. None of the team identify as care-experienced or estranged.

The interview data was thematically analysed, initially using deductive codes taken from the [University of York Access and Participant Plan 2025-26 to 2028-29](#). This initial deductive coding frame used the

⁹ Only students with a Home status are eligible to be classified as an independent student and only students with a Home, undergraduate and independent student status are eligible to receive the holistic package of support.

outcome measures listed for the relevant intervention strategies within the Access and Participation Plan (namely, Intervention Strategy 1 - Achieve HE, page 11, and Intervention Strategy 2 - Provision of Targeted Advice and Support and Practical Support, page 14). After the initial coding stage, where two evaluators reviewed each transcript, the deductive coding frame was refined and developed. Of specific note, the sense of belonging theme was expanded to include subthemes from the literature in order to distinguish the differences in how students discussed the theme (Allen et al., 2024; Strayhorn, 2018; Gilani et al., 2016). See Table 1 for the deductive codes used for the thematic analysis of the interview transcripts and how these were refined after the initial coding stage.

Table 1: Deductive Themes used in the Thematic Analysis Coding of the Interview Transcripts with Independent Students at the University of York

<u>Initial Deductive Themes</u>	<u>Refined Deductive Themes</u> <i>(Changes in italics)</i>	<u>Additional Subthemes</u>
Knowledge and understanding of Higher Education	Knowledge and understanding of Higher Education	
Confidence, motivation to learn, self-efficacy ¹⁰ and greater metacognitive ¹¹ approach to learning	<i>Academic</i> confidence, motivation to learn, self-efficacy and greater metacognitive approach to learning	
Sense of belonging	Sense of belonging	● Perceived social support on campus - feeling safe, at home and part of the community ● Feeling of connectedness to peers, staff and the institution/learning environment ● Experiences of feeling important to/mattering to the university ● Emphasising diversity and inclusion
Confidence	Confidence <i>(generally)</i>	
Awareness of activities, facilities, opportunities and support available	Awareness of activities, facilities, opportunities and support available - <i>Available for Independent Students specifically</i>	Reference to the dedicated team
	Awareness of activities, facilities, opportunities and support available - <i>Available generally at the University of York</i>	
Establish peer support and social networks	Establish peer support and social networks	
Opportunity for students to participate in university activities	Opportunity for students to participate in university activities	

¹⁰ "A person's belief that they can be successful when carrying out a particular task" - [SELF-EFFICACY | English meaning - Cambridge Dictionary](#)

¹¹ "Of or related to metacognition - knowledge and understanding of your own thinking" - [METACOGNITIVE | English meaning - Cambridge Dictionary](#)

Financial concerns	Financial concerns / <i>awareness</i>	
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After the initial coding stage, two additional inductive codes were added based on patterns the evaluators observed in the data which did not fit into the initial deductive codes:

- Other factors/issues identified
 - Physical or practical
 - Wellbeing, emotional or mental
- Knowledge and awareness of external support to the University of York or Higher Education in general

In addition, the evaluators noted an overall impression from the data which was not initially relevant to the coding frame, but provides context to the results and how the methodology (particularly the questions asked) might need to be changed in the future. The evaluators observed that students did not seem aware of, or were unclear about, the difference between the pre-entry team (Access & Outreach) and the post-entry team (Student Advice & Communities) and which team provided which aspects of the holistic package of support. Additionally, there was some confusion around which support was provided for independent students specifically or for the student population generally and whether this support was provided by the University of York or YorkSU. Instead, the students seemed to perceive all support to be provided by the 'University of York' as a whole. As the focus of this evaluation is to explore independent students' experiences of the holistic package of support, during thematic analysis we attempted to distinguish what was support specific to independent students and what was available for the student population generally at the University of York, as these were talked about interchangeably. Additionally, we were able to distinguish what support was provided by the pre-entry team and by the post-entry team. Beyond these distinctions, students discussed everything else interchangeably, and we have done the same within this report.

Survey - Results and Analysis

The survey questions discussed below provide the most useful information for analysis and consideration. Additional questions were asked but have been excluded from reporting in order to focus on the most demonstrative results.

In addition, there are limitations to what results we can discuss due to low numbers of respondents for some questions and/or responses. We have provided descriptive commentary where we are not able to report on numbers directly.¹²

Pre-Entry Questions

Over half of all survey respondents (56.7%) said that they looked into the support for care experienced and estranged students before choosing the university they applied to. Of those who looked into the support before choosing:

- 88.2% said it was either 'Very Important' or 'Important' when making decisions about where to apply.
- 76.5% said they were aware of the range of support available specifically at the University of York.

A third of all survey respondents stated that they had been on a VIP visit with the University of York. When asked about the impact of the VIP visit, the majority indicated they 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' to statements related to the outcome measures. The outcome measure statements are listed below in order of the most agreeing with to the least agreed with; for all the statements over half of participants responded 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree':

¹² See our [Notices](#) section to understand the rounding and suppression rules we implement as part of reporting.

(Note, statements reported with the same number had the same number of participants positively respond to the statement - e.g. the same number of students agreed/strongly agreed with each of the the first three statements)

1. Increased my knowledge and understanding of higher education
1. Increased my confidence in general
1. Increased my confidence to travel or move to a new place
2. Increased my knowledge of the support available to care-experienced and estranged students at the University of York
2. Made me feel welcome and included at the University of York
2. Influenced my decision to choose the University of York as my firm/insurance choice
3. Increased my motivation to learn
3. Included my decision to apply to the University of York

In addition to the VIP visit, the survey respondents were also asked whether they received support from the Access & Outreach team via email, phone, zoom or in person - of which over half (53.3%) stated they had.

42.9% of respondents stated that the support they received pre-entry influenced their decision to come to the University of York. The other response options for this question were 'No' or 'Unsure'. It is unclear whether respondents selected 'No' or 'Unsure' because they did not receive pre-entry support or because it did not influence their decision. This would need to be a change to the survey design in future evaluations.

Post-Entry Questions

The majority of survey respondents received a welcome letter (email) from the Independent Student Support Team to introduce themselves and support their transition to the University of York (84.6%). Those who did not receive this may have done so for a number of reasons, including coming through clearing, not being known to the Independent Student Support Team ahead of their attendance at the University of York, or them becoming estranged after they started their studies.

When asked about the impact of the following welcome transition support in helping their transition to University, 84% of survey respondents indicated the below statements were 'Very Important' or 'Important':

- Being introduced to the Independent Student Support Team
- Practical support such as receiving a suitcase, kitchen pack and bedding pack
- Learning about social events and the chance to meet with other independent students
- Other offers such as the free gym membership, college music scheme or parking permits

In addition, 92% of survey respondents responded that they 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' with the following statements:

- Receiving a welcome letter from the Independent Student Support Team helped to increase my sense of belonging
- Learning about social events and the chance to meet with other students increased my opportunities to participate in university activities
- Receiving practical support such as a suitcase, bedding pack and kitchen pack reduced my financial concerns

When survey respondents were asked how important it was for them to have a dedicated point of contact for Independent Students, 81.5% said it was 'Extremely Important' or 'Important'. Interestingly, that percentage increased to 93.3% when only looking at those who had met with the Independent Student Support Team.

Interviews - Results and Analysis

A table containing the number of times a theme or subtheme was discussed within the interviews can be found in [Appendix A](#). These numbers in isolation cannot display the breadth or depth of the discussion of each theme, but can be a helpful framework when approaching understanding the analysis.

It is also worth noting that the results of the thematic analysis presented here aimed to discuss examples and topics that the majority of the interviewees discussed. There were many times when one or two interviewees discussed an example or topic that was specific to them but not spoken about by the majority of interviewees. Whilst these contribute to the overall count of the thematic analysis, we have tried to present a more holistic presentation of the results for the majority of independent students at the University of York.

Awareness of activities, facilities, opportunities and support available

The theme that was most commonly discussed was *'awareness of activities, facilities, opportunities and support available'*. This is unsurprising as the interview questions asked directly about this.

We made the decision to split this theme further in order to clarify what was *'support available for independent students specifically'* (and thus the primary investigation of this report) and what was *'support available generally at the University of York'* (i.e. available to the student population generally). This split allows for insights into what independent students engage with the most, whether this is the support provided for and targeted at them specifically or not, and to understand the impact of the holistic package of support for independent students at the University of York.

Support Available for Independent Students Specifically

The theme *'awareness of activities, facilities, opportunities and support available for independent students specifically'* shall be referred to as *'awareness of support available for independent students'* for the remainder of this report.

The theme *'awareness of support available for independent students'* was by far the most commonly discussed theme in the interviews. As stated previously, this is unsurprising as participants were asked directly about the holistic package of support they received as independent students from the University of York. An observation made regarding this theme was that there was a difference between awareness of the support and using or engaging with the support. As the outcome measure listed in the APP is regarding awareness, we have not necessarily distinguished between awareness versus utilisation unless a student specifically referenced a difference. Additionally, another observation made was that interviewees' *'awareness of support available for independent students'* was very comprehensive; consistently, participants demonstrated high levels of awareness of the support available to them, whether they had personally engaged with it or not.

A number of interviewees spoke about how they did their own research which developed their *'awareness of support available for independent students'* at the University of York (either during their decision making/application process to university or once they became classified as an independent student during their time at the University); *"I actually ChatGPT'ed what the team is called, like the independent students' team. And then I just went to the website, I scrolled, found the e-mail address"*. Several participants stated that they were contacted by the University as well, though it is unclear whether this was by the Access & Outreach team as part of the pre-entry support or the initial welcome email from the Student Advice & Communities team once a student accepted their place at the University. This is further supported by the theme *'knowledge and understanding of Higher Education'* where the primary observation made was that students were aware that support would or should be available to them, even if they were unsure of the specifics. This suggests that the interviewees *'knowledge and understanding of Higher Education'* then fed into them doing their own research to have *'awareness of support available for independent students'*.

The times when students did not talk about having to do the research themselves pre-entry to have *'awareness of support available for independent students'* was primarily when they had engaged with VIP visit days (and the support subsequently available to them). There were a few interviewees who had awareness of the VIP visit days but chose not to engage with them for differing reasons. This was either stated as they did not feel the need to engage or they were having feelings of overwhelm and stress regarding A levels (falling within the ['other factors/issues identified - wellbeing, emotional or mental'](#) theme); *"I remember seeing the e-mail for this and I was very overwhelmed at the time with A-levels. I just kept forgetting to come back to it"*. In each case, whether students chose to participate in the VIP days or not, students consistently demonstrated an *'awareness'* of both the VIP visit days and subsequently the *'support available for independent students'*.

Other examples of interviewees demonstrating *'awareness of support for independent students'* are as follows (from most to least discussed)¹³:

- provision of suitcases, kitchen packs and bedding packs;
- storage and transportation of belongings;
- summer accommodation;
- Christmas stockings;
- gym membership;
- accommodation in general;
- and the socials put on by the independent students' dedicated team.

Even though the interview questions were set up specifically to ask about the *'awareness of support available for independent students'*, with many questions naming the support identified in the list above specifically, interviewees often spoke about these elements before the specific questions were asked, demonstrating their extensive awareness. One interviewee stated *"...it's kind of crazy how much they offer"*.

As interviewees' *'awareness of support for independent students'* was so extensive, the evaluation team created a subtheme to capture the discussion about the ['dedicated team'](#) for independent students at the University of York. Details of this subtheme are expanded on below.

Often, interviewees *'awareness of support available for independent students'* then fed into the other themes, of particular note ['financial concerns/awareness'](#), ['sense of belonging'](#) and ['establishing peer support and social networks'](#), suggesting a positive impact of the holistic package of support. In addition, the evaluators found that interviewees' *'awareness of support for independent students'* often mitigated their concerns seen in the ['other factors/issues identified'](#) theme, again suggesting a positive impact.

Overall, interviewees' *'awareness of support available for independent students'* was extensive and well demonstrated. This suggests the provision of support available to independent students at the University of York is being well communicated and reaching the intended audience, with students either being aware of or making extensive use of the support available for independent students specifically. Furthermore, almost all of the discussion of this theme was positive, providing strong evidence that the holistic package of support is having a positive impact on independent students. Where the participants shared a couple of [recommendations](#), these were to enhance the offer of support which they perceived to be beneficial.

Dedicated Team

In terms of the theme *'awareness of support available for independent students'*, the support discussed the most was the *'dedicated team'* for independent students. Approximately a third of the time that an interviewee was talking about *'awareness of support available for independent students'* they were

¹³ Only support discussed by more than half of the interviewees has been included.

specifically talking about the *'dedicated team'*. This suggests that this is the most important or impactful provision of support for independent students at the University of York. In fact, some interviewees identified it specifically as a deciding factor when applying for the University of York; "...because they reached out so quickly, I was like, 'Okay, like there's like support there'".

In the previous section we noted that participants discussed their *'awareness of support for independent students'* often when prompted by interview questions. Contrastingly, the interviewees often discussed the *'dedicated team'* spontaneously while describing their experiences of support. There was a specific question asked regarding the *'dedicated team'*, but the discussion surrounding this support was much wider.

Multiple students shared that having a specific *'dedicated team'*, often naming the member of staff they interacted with, was important for them in terms of having a relationship with that person, of having someone who had an understanding of their circumstances and not having to repeat themselves to numerous people. This commentary was often followed by discussion of the theme *'sense of belonging'*. This suggests the importance of the *'dedicated team'* at the University of York and the positive impact it is having for independent students. The minority of interviewees who had not engaged with the *'dedicated team'* themselves still had an *'awareness'* of this support and they still discussed the positive impact it had on their *'sense of belonging'*.

Students spoke practically about the support the *'dedicated team'* provides. The dedicated email address, zoom and telephone appointments, and in-person appointments were all discussed and the range of communication seemed to be appreciated, with some students discussing how they felt more heard or understood when talking to a person and others appreciating the fact that they could communicate entirely through written communication if they wanted to. The speed of responses was also noted numerous times by interviewees; "When I would email them to ask questions, they'll get back to me quickly".

Interviewees also talked about how the *'dedicated team'* were able to advise about or communicate with other aspects of the University of York (for example, the accommodation team). Participants described this as valuable in helping them reach their desired outcomes with other services, with one student stating it "legitimised my request".

The importance of the *'dedicated team'* to independent students at the University of York was clear and unanimous; both because students named it as the most important element of the support they received and because of the number of interviewees who discussed this support throughout their interviews. One student commented, "I don't know what I would have done without a lot of the support that I've received from the university" when discussing the *'dedicated team'*.

Support Available Generally at the University of York

The theme *'awareness of activities, facilities, opportunities and support available generally at the University of York'* shall be referred to as *'awareness of support available generally'* for the remainder of this report.

In terms of the theme *'awareness of support available generally'*, interviewees discussed a range of provisions and areas they had engaged with across the institution. While students discussed various support they've received from the University generally, a much smaller proportion of the transcripts were coded to this theme than the theme *'awareness of support for independent students'*. Again, this is to be expected as the interview questions focused on support available to independent students specifically. However, this shows that whilst independent students might be offered support specifically for them, they still interact with the University and the university system as a whole. Examples of *'awareness of support available generally'* mentioned included (but were not limited to) accommodation, colleges, Open Door, Careers and Placements, open days and gym facilities. Therefore, the University needs to

ensure that all aspects of the university system are as inclusive as possible, regardless of which students they are aimed at supporting. This will ensure that the specific support for independent students and general support for all students effectively meets the needs of all.

One of the most common examples of the theme *'awareness of support available generally'* was discussion of academic supervisors. A number of interviewees stated that once their supervisor became aware of their status as an independent student they made an effort to have *'awareness of support available for independent students'* and support their student accordingly; *"So my supervisor I think had done [their] own research and had pretty good knowledge about what was available to me"*. This is positive evidence of how the support available generally at the University of York has been used to support independent students specifically.

Knowledge and Understanding of Higher Education

This theme was mentioned in the *'awareness of support available for independent students'* section. Interviewees demonstrated a *'knowledge and understanding of Higher Education'* by doing their own research into the support available for independent students and knowing that there was probably or should be support available for them within Higher Education institutions.

Knowledge and Awareness of External Support to University of York or HE in general

The researchers developed a new inductive theme called *'knowledge and awareness of external support to the University of York or Higher Education in general'* to account for gaps in the coding framework. Discussions about schools or colleges, and local authorities (discussed using different names and terms) were coded using this new theme. The discussion of these two examples was quite different.

Schools and colleges were discussed as generally available support rather than support specifically relevant to participants' experiences as an independent student. Schools and colleges' support was discussed either neutrally or positively and often in association with their decisions about, and application to, Higher Education; *"My school gave me quite a lot of support and they would do different sessions and they would do one-to-one individual support and stuff like that"*. On the other hand, local authorities were discussed as support specifically for independent students. Sometimes it was discussed neutrally, but often it was discussed negatively, with interviewees discussing frustrations regarding the lack of support, both practical (such as transportation of belongings or setup for university, e.g. kitchen equipment - *"even my PA at the time was like, 'Have you got friends that can help you move?'"*) and educational (such as belief in their ability to attend university or support in application - *"[My PA] was like 'Yeah, I know that's your main plan, but what's your other plan'. And I was like, 'I'm not thinking of anything else. That's my only option.'"*).

Financial Concerns/Awareness

The theme *'financial concerns/awareness'* is an interesting theme for this exploratory case study. As an APP outcome measure, it was included as a deductive theme. However, the interviewers asked no questions regarding financial support specifically because *an independent students' financial support impact evaluation* had already been completed during the same academic year. Despite this, *'financial concerns/awareness'* was the second most discussed theme after *'awareness of support available for independent students'*. This suggests that this is still a very important topic for independent students, even when financial support specifically is not being asked about, which is demonstrated further when considering what students discussed.

Every interviewee discussed financial wellbeing or stress; the majority of interviewees discussed this extensively. Students' awareness of, and concerns about, finances were common. Quite often, the conversation about financial wellbeing/stress was in conjunction with how *'awareness of support available for independent students'* mitigated their concerns. For example, the provision of suitcases,

kitchen packs and bedding packs meant that students did not have to buy these themselves and which in turn mitigated *'financial concerns/awareness'*. One student commented that *"I probably would have had to sleep on the bed [without bedding] until I got my SFE [Student Finance England] or something"*. Similarly, the gym memberships and transportation and storage of belongings were also discussed in a similar manner; students explained that if these weren't supplied, then there would have been a financial burden.

A number of interviewees discussed *'financial concerns/awareness'* regarding the summer when they do not receive a Student Finance payment. They made note of how they saved during the year in order to be able to *"afford summer"*. Similarly, they noted how the *'awareness of support available for independent students'* meant they then had more financial means to save for summer or, in the case of summer accommodation, not have to worry about saving as much.

Another common example of support alleviating *'financial concerns/awareness'* was that as part of the VIP visit (pre-entry) their transport and accommodation were paid for. This was often discussed in terms of *'sense of belonging'* and interviewees spoke about how having this support meant they *'experienced feelings of importance to/mattering to the university'* and if this had not been provided they might not have had the opportunity to visit the institution before applying; *"I think if I didn't go on that overnight thing...it improved my thoughts a lot"*.

Students did make reference to the independent students' financial support package provided by the University of York: the [Care Leavers and Estranged Students' Bursary](#) and the [Care Leavers' Accommodation Subsidy](#). In the majority of cases, it was noted how helpful and appreciated this support was. In some cases, there were notes regarding improvements, though these were often noted in acknowledgement of probable budget limitations. Much of the commentary was in line with what was found in the [independent students' financial support impact evaluation](#). As the financial support specifically was not the primary objective of this evaluation, we would recommend these findings are considered alongside the full report which provides additional context and information.

Opportunities for students to participate in university activities

Whilst the theme *'opportunities for students to participate in university activities'* was not a commonly discussed theme, it is pertinent to the evaluation due to how it was discussed in relation to the themes *'awareness of support available for independent students'* and *'financial concerns/awareness'*. This theme was discussed almost exclusively in relation to how the independent student specific support either directly or indirectly mitigated students' financial concerns and enabled students to have the *'opportunities to participate in university activities'*. Examples of this include:

- the University provides kitchen packs and bedding packs which meant students did not have to buy these and could instead actively engage with the process of starting university and making friends
- the University provides independent students with fresher/welcome week tickets that an interviewee might not have been able to afford otherwise
- the University provides accommodation over summer which meant students did not have to think about saving as much and could engage with other opportunities.

As stated, this was not a heavily discussed theme, but the impact is clearly shown in the few examples collected and demonstrates how the University of York's holistic package of support for independent students meant students can subsequently interact with the University and have a positive impact on their time studying at York; *"They did pay for freshers tickets, which did help me make friends and be able to participate in all the events"*. If additional research were conducted, future evaluators might want to investigate this theme further.

Other Factors/Issues Identified

Another interesting theme from this research is the inductive theme '*other factors/issues identified*'. This was not one of the original deductive themes used in this thematic analysis and was added after an initial rounding of coding due to the prevalence of the discussion around it. It was the joint third most discussed theme. While the majority of the themes directly relate to an APP outcome, this theme provided crucial context to the lived experiences of independent students at the University of York and has been included to ensure this is captured in this case study. Some of the factors/issues discussed may be common across the whole student population (such as nervousness about making friends at university), but many appear to be specific to independent students.

Both subthemes were discussed equally, though there were differences. The '*physical or practical*' subtheme had a few very well discussed examples, whilst the '*wellbeing, emotional or mental*' subtheme had a wider range of examples but one overarching message.

Physical or Practical

Almost all interviewees spoke extensively about the '*physical or practical*' barrier they faced regarding the transportation and storage of their belongings (both pre-entry and post-entry); "...*bear in mind, I'm carrying with me my whole life*". This was often identified as a barrier that was then overcome by the '*awareness of support available to independent students*'. This demonstrates an experience unique to independent students; the '*physical or practical*' issue of transportation and storage of their belongings which they need to overcome just to attend university.

Summer accommodation was also noted as a '*physical or practical*' barrier that interviewees faced. It is interesting that interviewees who discussed this did not always overcome this by the '*awareness of support available to independent students*', with some opting to spend the summer with friends or partners instead. Whether students utilised the summer accommodation or not, the participants were all aware of, and discussed, the summer accommodation offer. One student commented "*I don't know what I [would] do without it. So profound impact*".

Both examples were also discussed with regard to not having familial support. Interviewees spoke about not having people available to help with unpacking belongings when they first moved into university or not having a predetermined place to stay over summer, as examples. This has been included in both the '*physical or practical*' subtheme of '*other factors/issues identified*' and the '*wellbeing, emotional or mental*' subtheme because of the context in which it was discussed.

It is also worth noting that the '*physical or practical*' factors or issues discussed were quite often also discussed in conjunction with the '*financial concerns/awareness*' theme. This is another example of how the experiences of being an independent student (namely, the '*physical or practical*' factors or issues) negatively impacts on students' financial concerns. Positively, we have found that these concerns and issues have been mitigated by the support available for independent students at the University of York.

Wellbeing, Emotional or Mental

There were many examples of '*wellbeing, emotional or mental*' factors or issues that independent students face, including (but not limited to): being away from 'home' for the first time¹⁴, feeling anxious, feelings of overwhelm, loneliness, '*financial concerns/awareness*'. Not having familial support was discussed a lot - for example, feeling anxious but not having family to call for support. Quite often, the '*physical or practical*' factor or issue a student faced as a result of not having familial support led to related '*wellbeing, emotional or mental*' factors or issues.

¹⁴ Interviewees' did not necessarily refer to 'home' in the way that a non-independent student might. 'Home' was discussed with regard to home city or closeness to other family members or friends, suggesting familiarity and social support were the defining features of 'home'. 'Home' was not necessarily a house where their family lived.

The key finding for the *'wellbeing, emotional or mental'* subtheme was how the unique experience of being an independent student can impact students' experiences and negatively affect their wellbeing at university. One student comments "...we could have shared experiences and sort of validate each other's feelings and sort of feel less alone in the world and less like this is an experience that nobody else goes through". This was discussed in association with many of the other themes and it did not appear to have an immediate way to address it as we have been able to demonstrate with other examples. For example, *'practical or physical'* factors or issues, whilst experienced, could be addressed with the provision of support for independent students specifically. Meanwhile, the unique experience of being an independent student, whilst considered in the holistic package of support, did not often have a direct way of addressing it. Students discussed the *'dedicated team'* and the community of independent students at the University of York (discussed in the *'establishing peer support and social networks'* theme) as helpful support that provided them with an alternative in some cases. Students reported that these elements of support meant that they felt understood in their unique situations and a *'sense of belonging'*.

Sense of Belonging

The other joint third most discussed theme was *'sense of belonging'*. This was discussed so extensively that subthemes were introduced after the initial round of coding in order to distinguish the differences in how students discussed the theme.

Interviewees discussed this theme extensively, often when discussing their *'awareness of support for independent students'*, especially the *'dedicated team'*, or in relation to another theme that was influenced by the independent students' support. For example, engaging with the social activities put on by the independent students' team led to *'establishing peer support and social networks'* which led to an increased *'sense of belonging'*, or having their freshers/welcome week ticket paid for meant they had the *'opportunities to participate in other university activities'* which led to an increased *'sense of belonging'*. These are just a couple of examples of the *'sense of belonging'* discussion.

The most discussed subtheme of *'sense of belonging'* was *'experiences of feeling important to/mattering to the university'*, with *'perceived social support (feeling safe, at home and part of a community)'* and *'feeling connected to peers, staff and/or their institution'* being joint second most discussed. Whilst the subtheme *'emphasising diversity and inclusion'* was only explicitly mentioned once by one interviewee, it could be argued that the holistic package of support for independent students at the University of York is *'emphasising diversity and inclusion'* by existing.

As *'sense of belonging'* was often discussed at the same time as support; this suggests that the holistic package of support directly impacts students' *'sense of belonging'* (specifically increasing it). Alternatively, the holistic package of support may influence other intermediate themes identified (such as *'confidence'* or *'establishing peer support and social networks'*), which subsequently impact *'sense of belonging'*.

Experiences of feeling important to/mattering to the university

Interviewees' comments were coded as *'experiences of feeling important to/mattering to the university'* most often when they discussed the support provided for independent students specifically; "I do think I had a lot of support, whether they were aware of it or not, how much it meant". Specific examples of this support included (but were not limited to):

- The dedicated team
 - The initial email they received when starting university
 - The speed of their responses
- The practical support provided (for examples, transportation and storage of belongings or suitcases, kitchen packs and bedding packs)
- Christmas stockings; "Because normally, I don't get any Christmas gifts, so - I'd say my first Christmas gift was from the uni."

It was noted by a number of interviewees that the support provided and their subsequent '*experiences of feeling important to/mattering to the university*' were why they decided to attend the University of York.

Perceived social support - feeling safe, at home and part of the community

The range of examples discussed for the '*perceived social support (feeling safe, at home or part of the community)*' subtheme were extensive and wide ranging, with many examples being discussed but often only by one or two students at a time. Primarily, students discussed the '*dedicated team*' for independent students, and a number of students stated how even if they didn't engage with the '*dedicated team*' or the support for independent students specifically, their awareness of it and the fact that it was an option still positively impacted on this '*sense of belonging*' subtheme; "...how there's like a dedicated support team for all these people at uni that have the same shared experience as me, I think has impacted my belonging quite a bit".

Feeling of connectedness to peers, staff and the institution

Again the examples discussed for the '*feeling of connectedness to peers, staff and institution*' were extensive and wide ranging, with many examples being discussed but often only by one or two students at a time, and again the '*dedicated team*' was the primary one discussed. Interviewees discussed feeling supported and feeling less alone due to their understanding of the unique experience of being an independent student; "...you have the most non-biased, non-judgmental person that has contacts across the uni. Like it's the most important thing without a doubt".

Establishing peer support and social networks

'*Establishing peer support and social networks*' is the last of the most commonly discussed themes. The researchers noted students discussed both potential and established peer support and social networks. Interviewees spoke about the social events put on by the '*dedicated team*' for independent students specifically and how this created a community to engage with others with similar experiences; "It was really, really helpful to be around so many other people. I underestimated how much it would help me.". However, whether interviewees attended those events or not (and subsequently '*established peer support and social networks*' or not) was quite varied, despite the fact that most discussed it.

It was also interesting to see how the discussion surrounding the timings of these events varied between interviewees. Some discussed the provision of these events during holiday periods, the Christmas dinner arranged by the '*dedicated team*' was discussed by multiple participants, while others discussed the importance of having events not just during holiday periods, with them noting that they were not able to attend due to being away from the University. One interviewee stated "You could be alone mid-Jan, like mid-February and you're not feeling great and you haven't got support back home and then your next event's not until Easter." Therefore, while the holistic package of support offers opportunities to begin '*establishing peer support and social networks*', the timing of these events might be a limiting factor in the realisation of this.

The interviewees who did attend the social events discussed how this impacted on their '*wellbeing*' and '*sense of belonging*'.

Confidence Generally

The theme of '*confidence (generally)*' was included as an initial theme but was not a commonly discussed topic. The few times it was discussed were with regard to pre-entry support and decisions. Interviewees discussed being away from home for the first time and having confidence as a prospective student and starting university. This appeared to be in relation to the support they received pre-entry and the knowledge that the '*dedicated team*' was available at the University of York.

Academic Confidence, Motivation to Learn, Self-Efficacy and Greater Metacognitive Approach to Learning

Again the theme '*academic confidence, motivation to learn, self-efficacy and greater metacognitive approach to learning*' was included as an initial theme but was not a commonly discussed topic and was primarily talked about pre-entry. A number of interviewees discussed their decision making and academic ambitions in relation to their course and university choices when applying to Higher Education, with some mentioning looking at modules specifically that were offered.

Discussion and Conclusions

The most commonly discussed themes within the interviews were as follows (from most to least discussed):

- [Awareness of support for independent students](#) (including the [dedicated team](#))
- [Financial concerns/awareness](#)
- [Other factors/issues identified](#)
- [Sense of belonging](#)
- [Establishing peer support and social networks](#)

It is unsurprising that the theme '*awareness of support for independent students*' was the most commonly discussed theme as this was a key focus of the investigation. We wanted to understand and investigate the impact of the holistic package of support for independent students at the University of York. We found that participants had engaged with multiple elements of the support and were overwhelmingly positive about the support they engaged with. Importantly, we found that students also reported positive impacts on other outcomes such as '*sense of belonging*' after engaging with the support.

Also not unsurprising, but certainly noteworthy, is the amount of discussion regarding the '*dedicated team*' for independent students at the University of York. This specific element of support was discussed so much that an additional subtheme was created to account for it, demonstrating its importance. Furthermore, the researchers found that students continued to discuss the dedicated team's support throughout the interview, and not only when prompted; further demonstrating the importance and positive impact this support has for independent students. In addition, the survey results further support this conclusion, with 81.5% stating that having a dedicated point of contact for independent students was either 'Extremely Important' or 'Important'.

The other most commonly discussed themes are interesting and can be split into two categories based on the interview data: providing context for the experiences of independent students which are mitigated (mostly) by the holistic package of support ('*financial concerns/awareness*' and '*other factors/issues identified*') and the positive impacts of the support for independent students at the University of York ('*sense of belonging*' and '*establishing peer support and social networks*').

Two particularly key topics came out during the interviews that fall within these themes that we would like to highlight and discuss:

- Financial stress or wellbeing was discussed by every interviewee, with the majority discussing it extensively. This is clearly a topic that is present in the minds of independent students. We cannot say based on this exploratory case study if this is more or less present in the mind than the general student population, but the narrative within how financial stress or wellbeing was discussed suggests that it is a particular focus for independent students (e.g. discussions regarding lack of parental financial support). Students discussed the positive impact of existing financial support, such as bursaries, and did not propose changes to financial support specifically when asked what else the University could do, despite their financial concerns. Participants' financial concerns related more to feeling in control of their finances (for example, receiving budgeting support) and having other pieces of support that impact them financially (for example, gym membership or suitcases, kitchen packs and bedding packs).

- The discussion surrounding ['experiencing feelings of importance to/mattering to the university'](#) was extensive and appeared to be one of the largest impacts of the holistic package of support for independent students at the University of York. Interviewees spoke about how the specific support impacted this subtheme of '*sense of belonging*' but also spoke about it more generally as an overarching topic of their experience as an independent student at the University of York. It also appeared to be an important decision-making aspect when deciding to attend the University of York.

Further to discussion regarding decisions about attending the University of York, the survey results support the interview findings regarding the importance of the holistic package of support:

- 88.2% said the holistic package of support was either 'Very Important' or 'Important' when making decisions about where to apply.
- 76.5% said they were aware of the range of support available specifically at the University of York.

The least commonly discussed themes from the interviews were as follows (from least to most discussed):

- [Knowledge and understanding of Higher Education](#)
- [Opportunities for students to participate in university activities](#)
- [Confidence \(generally\)](#)
- [Academic confidence, motivation to learn, self-efficacy and greater metacognitive approach to learning](#)

We believe that these themes (particularly the latter three) were not discussed as much due to the nature of the interview questions. The interview questions asked specific questions to explore the different aspects of the holistic package of support for independent students at the University of York (such as "Can you tell us about your experience of starting with the University and the support you received from the Independent Students' Team during this transition?") and left it open for interviewees to discuss the support they received and the impact it had on them. Interviewers could prompt about the impact of the support on intermediate outcome measures, such as confidence, but the interview questions were not aimed at asking about these directly.

On the other hand, survey questions more directly asked about intermediate outcome measures and the impact of the holistic package of support on them. The majority of survey respondents responded 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' when asked about how different aspects of the pre-entry and post-entry support impacted on their confidence (generally), knowledge and understanding of higher education, knowledge of support available to care-experienced and estranged students at the University of York, motivation to learn, sense of belonging, opportunities to participate in university activities and financial concerns. Therefore, whilst we cannot draw many conclusions from the interviews regarding some specific outcome measures, the survey results do provide evidence suggesting their positive impact.

The only theme not discussed thus far from the interviews in this report is the ['awareness of support available generally'](#). This theme is beyond the scope of this report as it was not the intended aim of this evaluation report and is not an outcome measure listed in the Access and Participation Plan. However, the researchers would like to note that all participants discussed an ['awareness of support available generally'](#) which demonstrates that the experiences of independent students at the University of York are not limited to the support provided specifically for them and that they still exist within the university systems as a whole. The examples discussed by interviewees were varied and far reaching across the institution and examples ranged from positive to negative. What this demonstrates is that the holistic package of support goes a long way to support independent students specifically, but that the institution as a whole needs to ensure that all its systems and practices are as inclusive as possible to ensure all students, including independent students, are supported as best as possible.

Overall, this exploratory case study found positive impacts of the holistic package of support for independent students at the University of York. Students demonstrated a strong level of awareness of the package and were able to discuss outcomes that the package impacted on. There was room for improvement in the evaluation methodology, particularly surrounding the specificity of the interview questions being asked. This provides a strong foundation for additional research and evaluations in the future.

Achieve HE - VIP Visits

The VIP visits for independent students fall within the intervention Achieve HE from the University of York's [Access and Participation Plan 2025-26 to 2028-29](#) (page 11). Not all survey respondents and interviewees had attended a VIP visit so the discussion regarding this intervention were more limited. Even so, the evidence suggests the VIP visits positively impacted those who attended. The majority of survey respondents who had been on a VIP visit 'Strongly Agreed' or 'Agreed' with a range of outcome measure statements presented to them (see [pre-entry questions](#)). In addition, interviewees often positively discussed the impact of the support surrounding the VIP visits (payment for their transport and accommodation) and the impact this had on other themes, specifically *'financial concerns/awareness'* and *'experienced feelings of importance to/mattering to the university'*. Interviewees who had an awareness of the VIP visit days but chose not to engage with them either stated they did not feel the need to engage or they were having feelings of overwhelm and stress regarding A levels.

The findings show evidence of the positive impact of the VIP visits as part of the Achieve HE intervention on some of outcome measures stated in the APP. The VIP visits are only a part of the Achieve HE intervention so do not necessarily cover all outcome measures stated in the APP. The themes *'knowledge and understanding of Higher Education'*, *'academic confidence, motivation to learn, self-efficacy and greater metacognitive approach to learning'*, and *'sense of belonging'* were all identified as part of the thematic analysis. And survey results also indicated a majority positive impact of VIP visits on knowledge and understanding of higher education, confidence in general, feeling welcome and included at the University, and motivation to learn.

Provision of Targeted Advice and Support

The dedicated team for independent students at the University of York falls within the intervention Provision of Targeted Advice and Support from the University of York's [Access and Participation Plan 2025-26 to 2028-29](#) (page 14). This support was discussed so much by interviewees that an additional subtheme was added to the coding frame. The range of examples of the dedicated team's support discussed by interviewees was huge; from interviewees having no contact with the team but an awareness that they existed to it being almost solely what some interviewees discussed. The discussion was overwhelmingly positive and the impact that the dedicated team have on independent students at the University of York cannot be overstated. Interviewees often went on to discuss other themes as a result of the dedicated team, particularly *'sense of belonging'*. The survey results also further support this with the majority of respondents stating that the provision of targeted advice and support for independent students was 'Extremely Important' or 'Important' (81.5%).

The findings show evidence of the positive impact of the Provision of Targeted Advice and Support on some of the outcome measures stated in the APP. The themes *'awareness of support for independent students specifically'*, *'sense of belonging'*, and *'establishing peer support and social networks'* were all discussed as part of the thematic analysis. The only outcome measure for the Provision of Targeted Advice and Support that was not particularly highlighted as an impact of the holistic package of support for independent students at the University of York was *'confidence (generally)'*. As discussed in the [Discussion and Conclusions](#) section, we believe this is a result of how the questions in the survey and interview were asked rather than a lack of impact. Future evaluation reports should aim to understand and demonstrate the impact of the confidence outcome measure more.

Practical Support

The transportation and storage of belongings and the provision of suitcases, kitchen packs and bedding packs all fall within the intervention Practical Support from the University of York's [Access and Participation Plan 2025-26 to 2028-29](#) (page 14). The positive impact of this support was demonstrated by both the survey respondents and the interviewees. 84% of survey respondents indicated that practical support was 'Very Important' or 'Important'. Meanwhile, 92% 'Strongly Agreed' or 'Agreed' that receiving practical support reduced their financial concerns. These survey findings are supported further in the interviews; when interviewees discussed the practical support they received, they often then went on to discuss how this positively impacted their '*financial concerns/awareness*'. All discussions regarding practical support for independent students at the University of York were positive and students often expressed the importance of it. Additionally in some cases, this then further impacted on other outcome measures such as their '*opportunities to participate in university activities*'.

The evaluation found evidence of the positive impact of the Practical Support intervention on the outcome measures stated in the APP. The themes '*sense of belonging*', '*financial concerns/awareness*', and the subsequent mitigation of these, and '*opportunities for students to participate in university activities*' were all discussed alongside students of their awareness and use of practical support for independent students at the University of York.

Recommendations

Whilst the overall positive impact of the holistic package of support was discussed extensively, participants also shared a couple of recommendations for improvement¹⁵:

- The gym membership that is currently available to independent students is the off-peak membership. Interviewees discussed how this was limiting due to timetabling and personal circumstances or preferences. They recognised the budget constraints of why they may not be able to be provided with the flexible membership, but discussed the option of extending this support to include a discount on the flexible membership, reducing this cost by the price of the off-peak membership.
- Interviewees discussed the potential of having more socials not just during the holiday periods (such as Christmas). There appeared to be a keen interest in attending social events put on by the dedicated team but limitations placed on attendance due to not being in residence at the University at the time.
- Numerous examples were discussed regarding additional support for financial wellbeing or stress. These included things such as budgeting resources, access to bus passes, loyalty schemes for eateries on campus, food vouchers, etc.
- Students identified the positives in providing more options for the summer accommodation. Interviewees mentioned that the accommodation options available during the summer period were more limited and might not be the type of accommodation they felt comfortable in. Whilst they were appreciative of the summer accommodation support, some suggested that the lack of options was a limiting factor in them accessing the support.

Notices

Ethics approval was received from the University of York's Professional Services Research Ethics Committee (ProSREC) in December 2025. All participants of the survey and interviews 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 their receipt of support from the University of York.

¹⁵ Only suggestions made by two or more students were included in this report

Under points 12 and 13 of 'How do we use your data?' in the Privacy Notice for University of York Students, the Access and Participation Monitoring and Evaluation Team is eligible to use student data to conduct evaluations that support learning, teaching, assessment and the broader student experience. Where we report on student data we adhere to HESA rounding and suppression to ensure confidentiality.

Survey results which are relevant to the discussion in this report have been included at the relevant points. The results of the survey have been suppressed (*) where the number of respondents was fewer than 10. True 0s (where 0 participants responded) have been reported where present. Data has not been suppressed using HESA rounding and suppression because it does not contain personal or identifiable information.

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Appendix A - Thematic Analysis Count

These counts represent the number of times a theme or subtheme were discussed rather than how many interviewees discussed the topic. Therefore, no suppression has been applied to these numbers as it is not possible to identify individuals.

<u>Themes</u>	<u>Subthemes</u>	<u>Count</u>
Knowledge and understanding of HE		7
Academic confidence, motivation to learn, self-efficacy and greater metacognitive approach to learning		12
Sense of belonging		53
	Perceived social support on campus - feeling safe, at home and part of the community	→ 15

	Feeling of connectedness to peers, staff and the institution/learning environment	→ 14
	Experiences of feeling important to/mattering to the university	→ 23
	Emphasising diversity and inclusion	→ 1
Confidence (generally)		10
Awareness of activities, facilities, opportunities and support available - Available for Independent Students specifically		155
	Reference to the dedicated team	→ 43
Awareness of activities, facilities, opportunities and support available - Available generally at the University of York		24
Establish peer support and social networks		37
Opportunity for students to participate in university activities		8
Financial concerns / awareness		65
Other factors/issues identified		57
	→ Physical or practical	→ 29
	→ Wellbeing, emotional or mental	→ 28
Knowledge and awareness of external support to the University of York or Higher Education in general		23