

STUDENT BUDDY SCHEME IMPACT EVALUATION 2025

STUDENT ADVICE AND COMMUNITIES TEAM, DECEMBER 2025

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Data reporting Notice

Student numbers used throughout this document are being reported under [HESA rounding](#) guidelines to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants. Any category numbers reported as 0 do represent some participants, categories with no students are not reported on.

Executive Summary

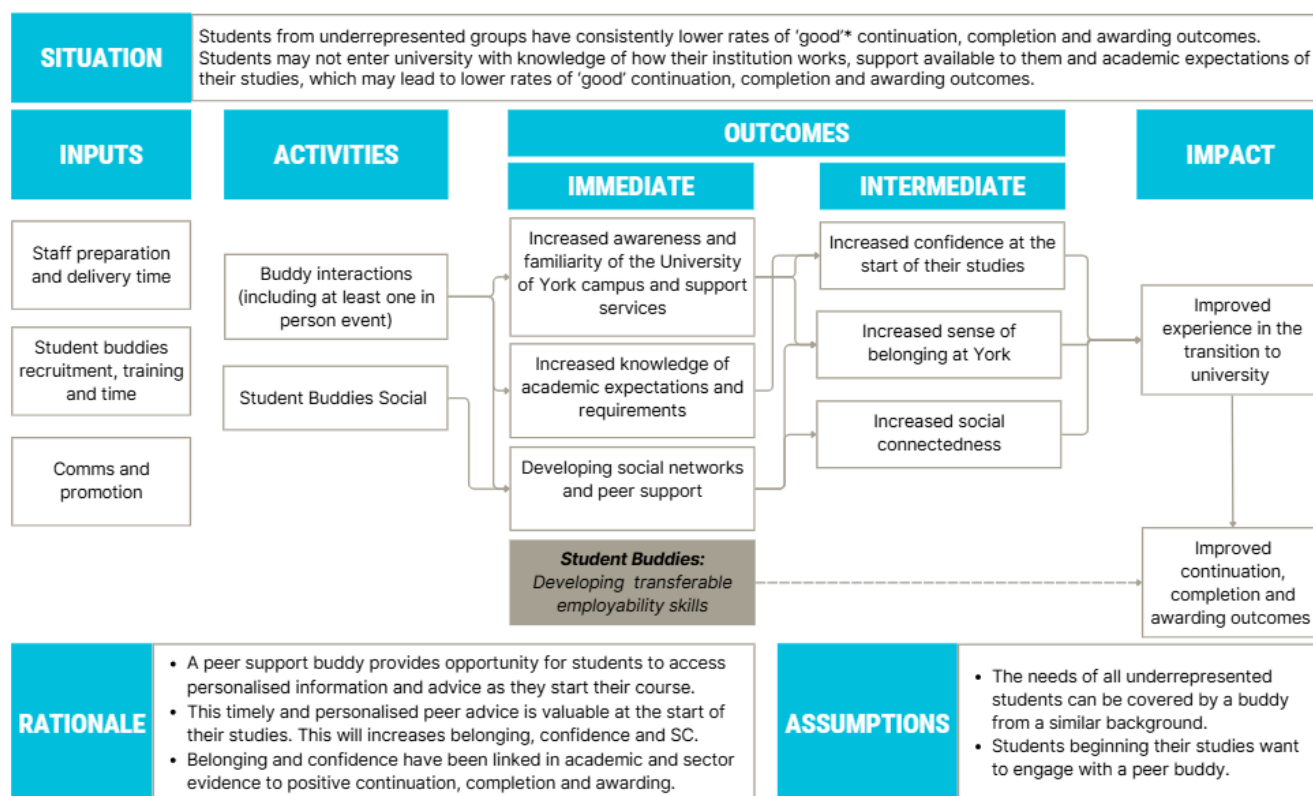
This report evaluates the impact of the 2025 Student Buddy Scheme which is a peer-support transition programme for students from underrepresented backgrounds. This programme plays a key role in achieving the University's Student Success targets, outlined in the [University's Access and Participation Plan 2025 - 2029](#), of improved student continuation and completion for students in underrepresented groups.

Background

The [Student Buddying Scheme](#) (SBS) offers transition support to new undergraduates from our underrepresented [Student Communities](#) by matching these students with continuing undergraduates who have been trained to offer friendly advice, share their experiences and signpost students to other support available. Our Student Buddies are also part of at least one underrepresented Student Community. The scheme has been running successfully since 2016.

Designed to build confidence, foster a sense of belonging and to help students establish a peer support and social network, the Student Buddy Scheme provides support to students at higher risk of non-continuation from peers who were only a year or so ago in their position, helping them transition smoothly into university life. Underpinning the programme and evaluation design is the Student Buddy Scheme Theory of Change ([Figure 1](#)), an accessible version is available in [Appendix A](#).

Figure 1: Student Buddy Scheme Theory of Change



*Good continuation, completion and awarding as defined by a positive outcome in the Office for students Access and Participation data set.

The Theory of Change demonstrates that through the Student Buddy Scheme students:

- Gain a deeper awareness of university support and opportunities from peers who have recently been through the same transition
- Build social connections before the academic year begins

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- Develop a better understanding of academic expectations at university level

These opportunities, in turn, positively influence students' confidence, sense of belonging and social connectedness. These intermediate outcomes that are all interlinked and are essential to the long-term outcomes of improving student success outcomes, including continuation and completion.

Confidence refers to a student's self assurance in their abilities to succeed at university and includes both academic confidence e.g feeling capable of completing coursework and social confidence e.g. feeling comfortable interacting with peers. Often the term self-efficacy is used in a similar sense to confidence (Thomson et al., 2022). Crucially, self-efficacy is strongly correlated with positive attainment outcomes (Schneider & Preckel, 2017). Specifically in terms of the Student Buddy Scheme, we are working with the rationale that confidence can be boosted by feeling prepared for university life through peer guidance and support, and that improving confidence has been linked as an effective way to reduce student outcome gaps (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015).

A sense of belonging is about how connected and included a student feels with the university community (Ahn & Davis, 2020). A supportive social circle at the start of university helps students foster a sense of belonging and identity. The Student Buddy Scheme immediately provides social support and connection, and in particular a peer with a similar background and recent experience of the same transition to university. By definition, the Buddy Scheme aims to provide students with social support and a sense of belonging from the start. Increased sense of belonging improves success outcomes and increases the likelihood students will continue and complete their studies and be awarded a good degree (Allen et al., 2024) and decreases the likelihood of negative outcomes (Menkor et al., 2021).

Programme Overview

In 2025, the Buddying Scheme ran from early September, two weeks before the start of the academic year, until the end of consolidation week on 31st October. This is different from previous years where the Buddying Scheme ran to the Christmas break. This reduced timeline was introduced due to feedback and engagement levels in previous years.

From the beginning of August, [eligible](#) prospective underrepresented students with a confirmed offer to study at York can apply to have a Buddy to support their transition to York. Applicants are matched with Buddies based on their campus (e.g. whether the new student lives on East campus or West Campus), department, background and interests. Buddies then reach out to the new students before they arrive and support them before, during and for a few weeks after their arrival.

The Student Buddies were required to complete an online training module on the VLE in March/April. Applicants needed to successfully complete a short online test at the end of the training in order to pass the training and act as a Buddy. The training included expectations of buddies; resources including the Codes of Conduct for Buddies and Students; important safeguarding and confidentiality information and tips on wellbeing, study skills and signposting. Student Buddies support their students throughout the Buddy Scheme and are required to meet their students in person in Welcome Week or Week 1.

Participant Overview

In 2025, 45 Student Buddies were recruited and trained, 10 of which were returning Buddies. 120 new undergraduates, who all belonged to at least one Student Community, requested a Student Buddy. [Table 1](#) shows the background of the students who requested a Student Buddy (please note, all student

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numbers in this report are rounded to the nearest 5 using [HESA guidelines](#))¹. Students were often part of more than one of our Student Communities so there is a high level of intersectionality; for example all students who received a contextual offer belonged to at least one other Student Community.

Table 1 - Student Buddy Scheme Participants by Student Community Groups (rounded)

Student Community	No. of Students
Disabled /Long term health condition/Neurodivergent	65
Students who received a Contextual offer	50
First Generation	40
LGBTQ+	40
Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic background	30
21 or over when started course	20
Commuting to University	15
Part of York Outreach programme	5
Care Experienced	5
Estranged from family	5
Caring Responsibilities	5
Student with Children	5
Asylum Seeker/Refugee	5
From a low-income household	5

Data Collection and Methods

To assess the effectiveness of the Student Buddy Scheme, students were given the option to participate in a Student Buddy Scheme Impact Evaluation. This research, approved by the University of York's Professional Services Ethics Committee, used a repeated-measures design, administering the survey to participants before and after the Buddy Scheme.

The impact evaluation aims to understand the Student Buddy Scheme's influence on student confidence, social connectedness and sense of belonging, key factors known to contribute to student continuation and completion and key outcomes in the Student Buddy Scheme Theory of Change.

The Student Buddy Scheme team used existing validated scales for both confidence and sense of belonging (see [Appendix B](#)). These scales were created and tested to ensure they effectively measure student confidence and sense of belonging, and have been selected for this impact evaluation to increase the reliability and validity of our investigation and to strengthen the claims that could be made from the results. The validated scales included four questions per outcome. The belonging scale is validated so that each question is weighted, and as such the belonging score at each stage is calculated using this weighting (more information about the belonging scale can be found on the [TASO ASQ webpage](#)). For the confidence scale, the questions are not weighted and therefore responses to the four confidence statements were averaged to give a score at each stage.

¹ Student numbers used throughout this document are being reported under [HESA rounding](#) guidelines to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of participants. Any category numbers reported as 0 do represent some participants, categories with no students are not reported on.

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Additionally, a two-point non-validated scale was used to capture 'social connectedness' for the first time this year. The average of these two questions was used as the social connectedness score. This was identified as a key outcome and change mechanism for longer-term outcomes of the programme.

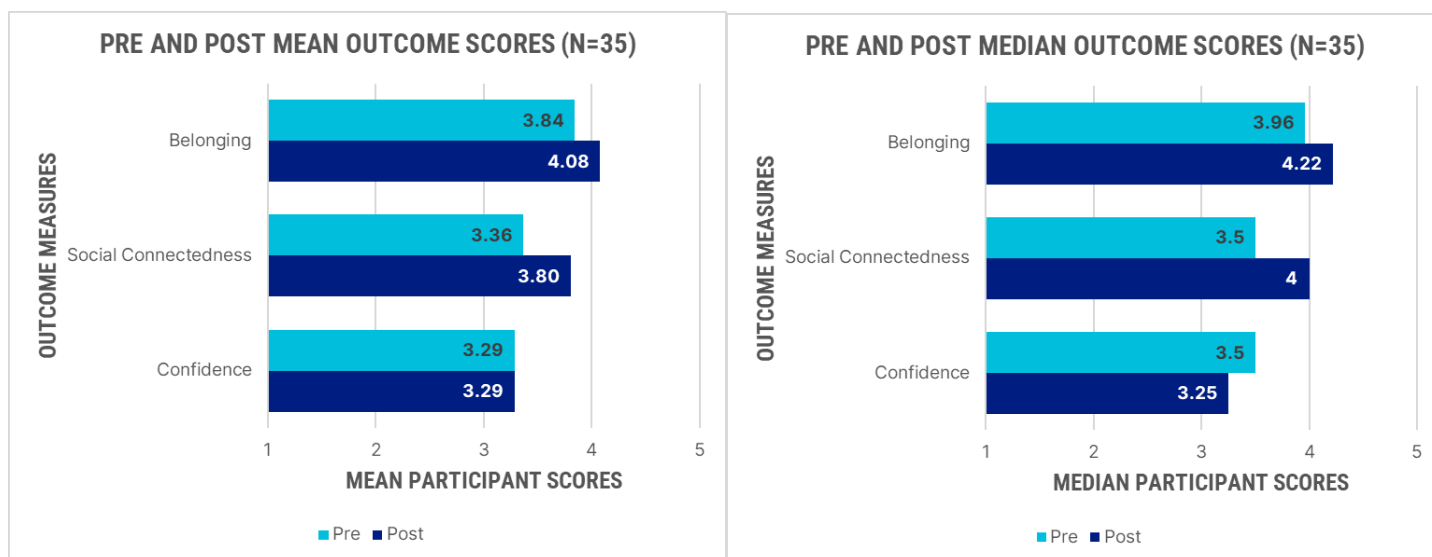
Students were asked to provide their username so that responses could be matched over time, allowing for a more detailed analysis of demographic trends and individual progress. 35 students completed both the pre and post questionnaires.

Findings and Analysis

For each outcome measure we will compare the scores before and after the buddy scheme to see if there are any significant changes. The scores for belonging and social connectedness were not normally distributed and therefore a Wilcoxon signed-rank test is used, the confidence scores were normally distributed and therefore a t-test is used. In both cases, we use a significance level of 95%.

35 students completed both the pre and post survey (the response rate for the pre survey was much higher, at around 90 students). The mean and median scores before and after the Buddy Scheme can be seen in [Figures 2A and 2B](#).

Figures 2A and 2B: Pre and Post Mean and Median Belonging, Social Connectedness and Confidence Scores (n=35)



i) The Impact of the Student Buddy Scheme on Students' Sense of Belonging

The impact evaluation found that sense of belonging rates generally increased at each data collection point, these changes were tested for statistical significance. The Wilcoxon signed-rank test did not find a significant difference in belonging scores before and after the Buddy Scheme as the p -value just exceeded the 95% threshold, ($Z=-1.955$, $p = 0.051$).

ii) The Impact of the Student Buddy Scheme on Students' Social Connectedness

Similarly, the social connectedness scores increased at each data collection point. We are pleased to report a statistically significant increase in social connectedness. A Wilcoxon signed-rank test found a **statistically significant increase in the social connectedness scores after the Student Buddy Scheme**, ($Z=-2.306$, $p = 0.021$).

iii) The Impact of the Student Buddy Scheme on Students' Confidence

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The impact evaluation found that confidence rates were very similar at each data collection point, and when the median is considered rather than the mean, the scores actually decrease. We tested these results to see if the changes were statistically significant. A two-sided paired samples t-test found that the differences in students' confidence scores at the pre ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.971$) and post ($M = 3.29$, $SD = 0.975$) surveys were not statistically significant, $t(32) = 0.00$, $p = 1$.

To supplement the validated questions, we collected more general feedback from students where we found that 82% of respondents told us that having a Student Buddy had made them feel more confident about starting university.

iv) Student Buddy Scheme Feedback

When asked to reflect on their experiences on the Student Buddy Scheme:

- 74% of all students told us their Student Buddy had been a good match for them.
- 74% of students told us their university experience to date had been more positive than it would have been if they hadn't had a Student Buddy.
- 56% of students told us they had settled into university more quickly as a result of having a Student Buddy.

Additionally, there was some very positive qualitative comments from students about their experiences:

"I really enjoyed having a buddy - they were able to answer all my questions about moving to Uni, and when I arrived. Meeting with my buddy was really fun! We got along really well and they had loads of great advice. I would definitely recommend the Student Buddy scheme to anyone!"

History Student

"My student buddy has been brilliant. Super supportive and is generally a wonderful human being. I am so glad that I signed up to the scheme and would highly recommend it to other students."

Biology Student

"My buddy struck a good balance in checking with me more frequently at the start of the scheme and slowly allowing me to experience university more independently as we communicated and I learned. They were very helpful with listening to the detailed questions and experiences I had and gave their own helpful advice, alongside signposting to useful resources such as online guides from the university"

Archaeology Student

"My student buddy was really lovely, we messaged quite a bit in the week before and after arriving at uni. She really made me feel welcome and settled, answered my questions and recommended societies and events to me."

English Language & Linguistics Student

Discussion and Recommendations

The Student Buddy Scheme Theory of Change identified a sense of belonging, social connectedness and confidence as key outcomes necessary for achieving the long-term goal of improved transition to study at York. The impact evaluation conducted this year aimed to understand what impact the Student Buddy Scheme had on students' experiences of settling into university and how the format change affected the experience.

Shortening the scheme to finish at the end of October seems to have worked well, with fewer Buddies reporting that their students are not responding to them than in previous years. The new follow on

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scheme, Community Connect, allowed students who were still struggling to settle in and make friends at the end of the Buddy Scheme some further support to make connections with other students.

It is encouraging to find that there has been a statistically significant increase in the social connectedness scores before and after the programme, as well as seeing non-significant but noticeable increases in sense of belonging. Especially as the statistical test for belonging was so close to the threshold, it would be interesting to compare this result to future larger cohorts or perhaps aggregating multiple cohorts in the future for a larger sample.

Unfortunately we did not see an increase in mean confidence scores, and in fact saw a drop in median confidence scores. From this data alone, it is not possible to say why we might see this trend from this data alone, but the drop could be explained by a number of confounding factors outside the scope of this impact evaluation. Firstly, this may be a larger trend in the student population that we are seeing in the Student Buddy cohort; perhaps after their first few weeks at university students become more aware of university life and how much there is to know and learn that an increase in awareness may negatively affect their confidence. This could be an area for further exploration in future impact evaluations. Importantly this was not a significant result, and therefore from these results we also cannot say that the Student Buddy Scheme negatively impacted confidence. Following these results, we will review the Theory of Change and whether confidence is the most appropriate intermediate measure.

Limitations and future evaluation plans

While significant increases in social connectedness were found, there are limits to this impact evaluation. Firstly, only the students participating in the Student Buddy Scheme were surveyed, so we cannot say that Buddy Scheme is the cause of this increase, but we have shown there is a correlation between participating in the scheme and increases in social connectedness.

Importantly, the small number of matched responses limits what we can say about the results and the tests we can conduct. A higher sample size would make our statistical tests more reliable. Furthermore, due to the small number of students who responded to both surveys, it was not possible to break down the differences between demographic groups. In the future we would hope to increase the number of responses to the post survey in particular. In 2026 we intend to incentivise students to complete both surveys by advertising a prize draw for two £100 vouchers upon completion of both surveys at the point the students request a buddy, which we hope will increase the number of matched responses available for evaluation.

Our primary focus has been on the positive impact of the Student Buddy Scheme on the participants, we also wish to acknowledge the positive impact that Buddy Scheme has on the Buddies. All of our Buddies are part of at least one underrepresented student group. While currently, Student Buddies' feedback is included in the operational review of Step Ahead, there is an opportunity to include student helpers experiences in future impact evaluations.

Acknowledgements and Contact Information

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Appendix A: Student Buddy Scheme Narrative Theory of Change

Situation:

Students from underrepresented groups have consistently lower rates of 'good'* continuation, completion and awarding outcomes. Students may not enter university with knowledge of how their institution works, support available to them and academic expectations of their studies, which may lead to lower rates of 'good' continuation, completion and awarding outcomes.

Inputs:

- Staff preparation and delivery time
- Student buddies recruitment, training and time
- Comms and promotion

Activities

- Buddy interactions, including at least one in person event (leads to Immediate Outcomes 1, 2 and 3)
- Student Buddies Social (leads to Immediate Outcome 2)

Outcomes (Immediate)

1. Increased awareness and familiarity of the University of York campus and support services (Leads to Immediate Outcome 2)
2. Increased knowledge of academic expectations and requirements (Leads to Immediate Outcome 1)
3. Developing social networks and peer support (Leads to Immediate Outcome 2 and 3)
4. *Student Buddy outcome:* Developing transferable employability skills (Leads to Impact 2)

Outcomes (Intermediate)

1. Increased confidence at the start of their studies (Leads to Impact 1)
2. Increased sense of belonging at York (Leads to Impact 1)
3. Increased social connectedness (Leads to Impact 1)

Impact

1. Improved experience in the transition to university (Leads to Impact 2)
2. Improved continuation, completion and awarding outcomes.

Rationale

- A peer support buddy provides opportunity for students to access personalised information and advice as they start their course.
- This timely and personalised peer advice is valuable at the start of their studies. This will increase belonging, confidence and SC.
- Belonging and confidence have been linked in academic and sector evidence to positive continuation, completion and awarding.

Assumptions

- The needs of all underrepresented students can be covered by a buddy from a similar background.
- Students beginning their studies want to engage with a peer buddy.

Appendix B: Impact Evaluation Questions**Student Buddy Scheme Impact Evaluation 2025 - Evaluation Questions**

These questions ask you to think about your university experience and expectations².					
Throughout your course, how confident are you that you will be able to:	Not at all confident	Only slightly confident	Fairly Confident	Predominantly confident	Very confident
Study effectively on your own in independent/ private study	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Manage your workload to meet coursework deadlines	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Plan appropriate revision schedules	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Remain adequately motivated throughout	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
The following statements relate to how you feel about being a higher-education student³.					
Please think about each statement and indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree:	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither agree/disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel I belong in higher education	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I made the right decision in choosing to study at this higher education institution	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I feel supported by this higher education institution	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I see myself as part of the community at this higher education institution	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Social Connectedness statements					
I feel confident about meeting people and making new friends	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
I am confident other students would support me to succeed at university	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

² [Academic Behavioural Confidence Scale \(Sander & Sanders, 2009\)](#), ABC Studying Factor, p.27

³ [Access and Success Questionnaire \(ASQ\), TASO](#), Scale 7a