Evaluation of the OfS Addressing Barriers to Student Success Programme

Summative Evaluation
FINAL REPORT

Report to the Office for Students
by Warwick Economics & Development Ltd.

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Contents

WECD
Warwick Economics & Development
Two Snow Hill
Birmingham
E4B4 6GA
T: 0121 2313425
www.w-ecd.com

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Abbreviations

ABSS	Addressing Barriers to Student Success programme
ACL	Active Collaborative Learning
AHECS	Association of Higher Education Careers Services
AoC	Association of Colleges
ARC Network	Aimhigher Research & Consultancy Network
ARU	Anglia Ruskin University
BAME	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
BTAG	Beating the Attainment Gap
BTEC	Business and Technology Education Council
CPD	Continued professional development
CU	Coventry University
DISA	Disparities in Student Attainment project
DSSLG	Disabled Students' Sector Leadership Group
EAT	Evans Assessment Tool framework
ECU	Equality Challenge Unit
EEF	Education Endowment Foundation
EURASHE	European Association of Institutions in Higher Education
FACE	Forum for Accessing and Continuing Education
FE	Further Education
FIS	Financial Information Systems
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
GTA	Graduate Teaching Assistant
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEAST	Higher Education Academic Support Tutor project
HEFCE	Higher Education Funding Council for England
HERAG	Higher Education Race Action Group
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
I4S	Intervention for Success project
IAG	Information, advice and guidance
IATED	International Academy of Technology, Education and Development
ICF	Inclusive Curriculum Framework
ILP	Independent Learning Profile
JISC	Joint Information Systems Committee
MIS	Management Information Systems
MMU	Manchester Metropolitan University
MWBHE	Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education

NEON	National Education Opportunities Network
NSS	National Student Survey
NTU	Nottingham Trent University
NUS	National Union of Students
OFFA	Office for Fair Access
OfS	Office for Students
OU	Open University
PGT	Post-graduate taught
POLAR	Participation of Local Areas in Higher Education classification measure
PSA	Personal Skills Award
PT	Personal Tutor
PVC	Pro Vice-Chancellor
RCT	Randomised Control Trial
SAP 2	Student Attainment Project 2
SCALE-UP	Student Centred Active Learning Environment with Upside-down Pedagogies
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics disciplines
SU	Staffordshire University
TASO	Centre for Transforming Access and Students Outcomes in Higher Education
TBL	Team-Based Learning
UoW	University of Wolverhampton
UUK	Universities UK
UWE	University of the West of England, Bristol
UWL	University of West London
VA	Value added
VC	Vice-Chancellor

Executive summary

This report presents the final evaluation of the Office for Students (OfS) Addressing Barriers to Student Success (ABSS) programme, a £7.5 million programme that ran between March 2017 and October 2019. The programme aimed to scale up pedagogical and student support approaches that had proven successful in addressing differential educational and employment outcomes, especially for underrepresented groups of students.

Student participation, experience and outcomes are at the heart of the OfS work. The ABSS programme forms part of a wider policy agenda, which aims to support a more systematic and strategic response to combating the key barriers faced by underrepresented groups of students in achieving successful higher education (HE) outcomes, including employability outcomes.

The programme was delivered through 17 collaborative projects, each involving a minimum of three HE providers (hereafter referred to as providers) working together to better understand the issues that underpin differential student outcomes. The focus of most projects was on addressing gaps in educational and employment outcomes of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students, and students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Most of the 17 projects aimed to address these issues by increasing students' levels of satisfaction, belonging and engagement with HE, and consequently participation, retention and attainment. The 17 projects also aimed to increase providers' understanding of the issues underpinning differential student outcomes, and their awareness of effective solutions.

The context

The ABSS programme was born out of research commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), and undertaken by King's College London, ARC Network and the University of Manchester to explore the causes behind why students from some groups tend to do less well and report lower levels of satisfaction than other groups.[1] The research focused on the disparities between white and BAME students, and between students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Drawing on the findings of the 2012 Disparities in Student Attainment (DISA)[2] project, the resulting report highlighted four key causes of differences in student outcomes:

- Curricula and learning – different student groups indicate varying degrees of satisfaction with HE curricula and the representativeness of learning, teaching and assessment.
- Relationships between staff and students and among students – a 'sense of belonging' and academic role models are perceived as key in supporting attainment and progression.
- Social, cultural and economic capital – recurring differences were noted in how students experience HE, how they network, and how they draw on external support.
- Psychosocial and identity factors – whether students feel supported and encouraged in their daily interactions was important in facilitating or limiting students' learning and attainment.

The researchers concluded that differential outcomes for different student groups are underpinned by influences at three levels:

[1] Causes of Differences in Student Outcomes (2015): https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/23653/1/HEFCE2015_diffout.pdf.
[2] Cousin and Cuerton, Disparities in Student Attainment (October 2012): https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/disparities-student-attainment

- The macro level: This is the wider context of learning, including both the structure of the HE system and socio-historical and cultural structures (such as those of race, ethnicity, culture, gender and social background) that are embedded in the general environment in which universities, employers and students operate.
- The meso level: This covers the individual providers and related structures that form the social contexts within which student outcomes arise.
- The micro level: This is the level of communication between individual students and staff in the HE environment, including the micro-interactions that take place on a day-to-day basis.

While reasons for differential outcomes are complex, these research findings indicated that structural factors and the HE environment are the causes of differential performance and outcomes for underrepresented students, thus challenging deficit theories, that tend to focus on the 'inadequacies' of the students for tackling inequality in education outcomes in HE.[3]

Building on these research findings and recommendations, funding was provided through the ABSS programme to projects that sought to tackle the causes of differences in student outcomes through innovative approaches.

The evaluation

The key aim of the evaluation has been to explore and ultimately assess 'what works, why, in what context, and to what effect?' when introducing new practices to address barriers to success for students from groups underrepresented in HE. The evaluation has also assessed the impact of interventions in terms of benefits and outcomes that can be attributed to the programme, and to explore the value of changes achieved and difference made as a result of the interventions at individual provider, project and national levels. The evaluation approach combined quantitative and qualitative elements, and included the following approaches: desk-based reviews of various documents and materials produced by the projects; consultations with project teams, academics, students, and senior management participating in the ABSS projects; consultations with various sector stakeholders; review and analysis of national data; and various capacity-building activities (e.g. webinars and workshops).

Overall, 205 people were consulted over the course of the evaluation, including: 63 members of academic staff, 84 members of professional services staff, 34 students, and 24 members of senior mangement. In addition, 16 consultations were held with stakeholders from the wider HE sector – for example, Universities UK (UUK), the Higher Education Race Action Group (HERAG), and AdvanceHE.[4]

Delivery of the ABSS programme

The 17 ABSS projects consisted of 57 individual providers, and 25 other organisations, including charities and businesses. The work of the 17 projects covered a broad range of areas across the student lifecycle, i.e. inclusive and active teaching and learning practices; support for student wellbeing;

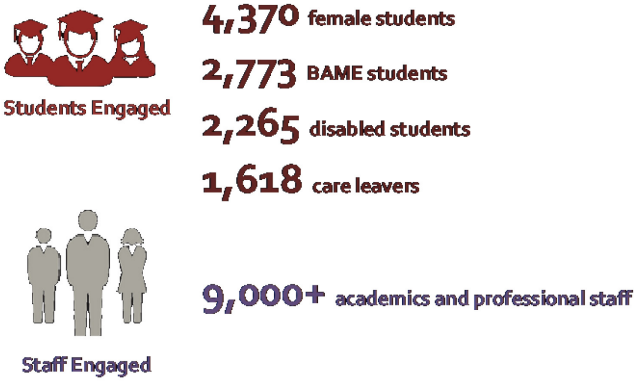
[3] The idea that those who do not succeed in HE fail because of some internal shortcoming (e.g. cognitive or motivational), or some external weakness linked to the student (e.g. cultural or familial background) (Barnett, 2007), from a presentation by Dr Mary Andall-Stanberry, Canterbury Christ Church University, Challenging Deficit Theories/Models of Black Students in HE – an Auto/ Biographical Narrative Research Study.

[4] Lists of those organisations consulted during the different stages of the evaluation are provided in Appendices C and D.

progression to postgraduate study; and graduate employability. The projects involved a wide range of activities, including:

- Online modules, resources and toolkits for students to aid transition to university and further study, support academic skill development, and enhance employability.
- Bespoke events for specific student groups, including tailored transition events for disabled students, and information sessions on postgraduate study for BAME students.
- Student ambassador programmes, and peer mentoring and peer support networks.
- Changes to modules and course content to embed inclusive assessment practices, resilience techniques, and accredited employability elements.
- Staff training and continued professional development (CPD), for example, online resources to develop and enhance their role as Personal Tutors.
- Dedicated support for academic staff in applying inclusive learning and teaching practices, for instance, adapting modules to include elements of team-based learning (TBL).
- Dedicated staff support for student well-being, academic skills and employability.
- Events targeted at staff to raise awareness of and discuss differential outcomes.
- Organising dissemination events, and creating guidance documents, toolkits, and case studies to inform the wider HE sector.

The numbers of students, academics and professional staff engaged in projects' activities are restricted to those providers who collected this information. For example, the ABSS project activities engaged 9,250 academics and professional staff at 47 project partners (out of 57) that provided this information. Figures provided by 37 project partners indicated that ABSS project activities reached and supported a range of students underrepresented in HE e.g. 4,370 female students, 2,773 BAME students, 2,265 disabled students and 1,618 care leavers.[5]



Overall, it is likely that the true numbers of students and academics engaged in the projects' activities are higher, given that some project partners did not collect this information.

Delivery of the ABSS programme was distinguished by two significant processes: collaboration between providers, and student engagement in the design and delivery of interventions. These processes have contributed to producing a range of step changes and structural reforms within partner institutions. For example, the partnership-based delivery model of the ABSS programme has been instrumental in accelerating knowledge exchange of what works between providers, and has led to adoption of a range of innovative practices by a diverse group of providers in a relatively short period of time. This wider adoption of successful practices has created the appropriate social and education context that could benefit underrepresented students (and potentially all students) in a shorter period of time than would have been the case without the ABSS support.

[5] It is worth noting that students' characteristics and identities intersect, and one student could be part of more than one target group.

Student engagement included students being consulted in the early stages of the ABSS projects in order to inform the basis of projects, through interviews, focus groups and surveys. It also involved incorporating student perspectives into project governance structures e.g. project management groups and steering groups. Students were also engaged in the production of project outputs such as reports, dissemination events, and relevant toolkits and guidance. Based on the feedback provided by the projects, student engagement generated a variety of benefits.

Student engagement benefits

- Designing interventions that are the most appropriate for the student groups being targeted, including useful and accessible teaching and learning material.
- Development of stronger relationships between academic staff and students, enabling the student voice to be heard, and the environment within which academics and management operate to be better understood by students.
- Co-production of project materials, giving students a strong sense of belonging.
- Increased confidence levels experienced by students leading interventions.
- Students developing career skills, such as presentation, communication and time management.

At the same time, the feedback provided by all the projects engaging students, indicates that student-engagement models require resources, and could be management-intensive for academics or administrative staff involved. Furthermore, there is limited evidence to suggest that students are systematically engaged and empowered to assume more leadership in institutional policy changes.

Benefits and lessons learned from the ABSS programme activities

A range of benefits emerged from the ABSS project activities. Whilst the 17 ABSS projects were funded under the same theme of addressing barriers to student success, each partnership explored different ways of tackling these barriers. Therefore, there is not necessarily a programme-level insight on what works, but a range of valuable lesssons learned and best practice arising from individual projects.

The majority of ABSS projects focused on inclusive (including active) teaching and learning practices that benefit all students, but particularly those from underrepresented student groups. Main benefits are summarised below:

ABSS project benefits from inclusive teaching and learning practices

- Higher student attendance, higher standards of work, and higher grades achieved.
- Increased students' confidence in their ability to progress.
- Engagement that has strengthened students' ability to debate and challenge.
- Raised awareness among academic staff of gaps in attainment.
- Evidence-based decision-making at institutional level – making maximum use of learner data and data analysis.
- Changes and influence of institutional strategies and policies – participating in an ABSS project has enabled project teams to influence senior management.

Feedback provided during this evaluation indicates that:

- Technology can play an instrumental role in providing an inclusive environment while meeting the needs of underrepresented groups of students. For example, tools like virtual mapping, remote cameras, tablets, and portable microscopes allow everyone to enhance their learning experience,

but they can be particularly beneficial for students with mobility, mental health, learning or sensory needs.

- Academic staff engagement and buy-in is crucial at the local level, i.e. where interventions are being implemented. Several providers found this to be lacking, with intervention activities suffering as a result. Part of this was due to academic staff discomfort and lack of knowledge around attainment gaps and talking about topics such as race.
- Use of data analytics plays a significant role in raising awareness of issues surrounding underrepresentation of specific groups of students in HE.
- Targeted interventions require thorough preparation and planning, as they could reinforce a deficit model. Furthermore, institutions may have to check and address staff awareness and understanding of issues surrounding underrepresentation of specific groups of students in their classrooms, prior to introducing specific schemes.

In general, the feedback received from the ABSS projects highlights that the potential of unintended consequences arising from inclusive (including active learning) approaches will need to be considered in designing and delivering these schemes, particularly in the early stages of implementation, to avoid exacerbation of the very issues that the interventions are meant to address.

The ABSS projects also developed and provided academic and professional services support for students to improve their wellbeing and ultimately improve retention and success. For example, a number of projects focused on enhancing personal tutoring systems to enable them to better support all students. Key benefits that emerged from these activities included:

ABSS project benefits from enhancing student support

- Improvements in the students' learning experience that boosted their engagement, and raised confidence and resilience.
- Better working relationship between HE and further education (FE) providers.
- Enhanced staff understanding of transition issues for BTEC students, and confidence in supporting BAME students and students from other underrepresented groups.
- Institutional changes with the introduction of new action plans on participation, diversity and equality, incorporating elements of project interventions.

Feedback from projects focusing on students' wellbeing indicated that one-to-one support has been particularly popular with students from lower participation areas (POLAR3 Quintiles 1 and 2[6]), disabled students, and those with a disclosed mental health condition. Dedicated academic support has also boosted confidence levels, retention and success among: a) mature students who have been out of education for a number of years; and b) students who have other responsibilities and need additional support to manage their personal and academic time.

Academic staff engagement and buy-in was crucial for the success of the projects. Senior staff engagement and buy-in has also been important to the success of the ABSS projects. Where senior managers were championing projects and interventions, there was a greater chance of sustainability and impact on future students, but also organisational performance indicators.

[6] The reference to POLAR3 in this report is consistent with the measure used by the ABSS projects in their original funding cases and throughout their project lifespan. POLAR4 came into use in Autumn 2017 once the ABSS projects were set up and running and is not routinely referred to by projects.

The added value of the ABSS programme

As a result of the support offered by the ABSS programme:

- New interventions were tested and implemented across the HE sector;
- Valuable organisational outcomes and impacts emerged, and more are expected in the future; and
- Effective practice was shared among providers in the programme and the wider HE sector.

The ABSS programme enabled the adoption of effective practice at a larger scale, to address structural factors and improve aspects of the HE environment that cause differential performance and outcomes for underrepresented students. The evaluation findings indicate that support from the ABSS programme made possible the scaling up of good practice across a range of providers. Scaling up may have gone ahead without the ABSS, but at a smaller scale and within longer timeframes. Relatively small projects have often triggered and enabled significant changes within an institution. These organisational changes may be incremental but they have been instrumental in delivering step changes in the HE environment.

Feedback from the ABSS projects indicates that organisational performance indicators, as well as educational outcomes, have experienced positive change where new approaches initiated by the ABSS projects have been introduced. Examples of improved performance indicators include a reduction in student appeals, improved grades, improved attendance and improved attainment. Furthermore, the value for money derived from ABSS activities was perceived to be relatively high by providers participating in the programme.

Use of data (and various data analytics methods) to inform management policies or improve teaching and learning methods in the classroom also became more widespread as a result of the ABSS. Understanding the benefits of using data also reached more academic and professional staff. ABSS also enabled in some cases buying in additional resources relating to data analytics (e.g. staff or staff time) and use of analytics is now embedded into several departments' practices, enabling the tracking of attainment targets and issues at a local level.

The collaborative nature of the ABSS projects enabled interventions to have a greater impact than could be achieved by an individual institution itself (smaller ones, in particular), and supported the adoption of effective practice. The evaluation findings provide ample evidence of the benefits of participating in collaborative projects in achieving this aim: more providers have adopted and adapted innovative interventions, while participating projects helped promote conversations around attainment and inclusion at a national level. Institutions that were not directly involved in the programme have engaged with providers involved in ABSS projects to learn and find out more about what works, and how.

Wider scaling up of changes will require more time and resources. Some providers in the HE sector have already built momentum to achieve this; others may need additional stimulus. Furthermore, for all change programmes in HE, building evaluation into the projects and programme early is critical to understanding what works in what context leading to continuous improvement in practice and student outcomes.

1. Introduction

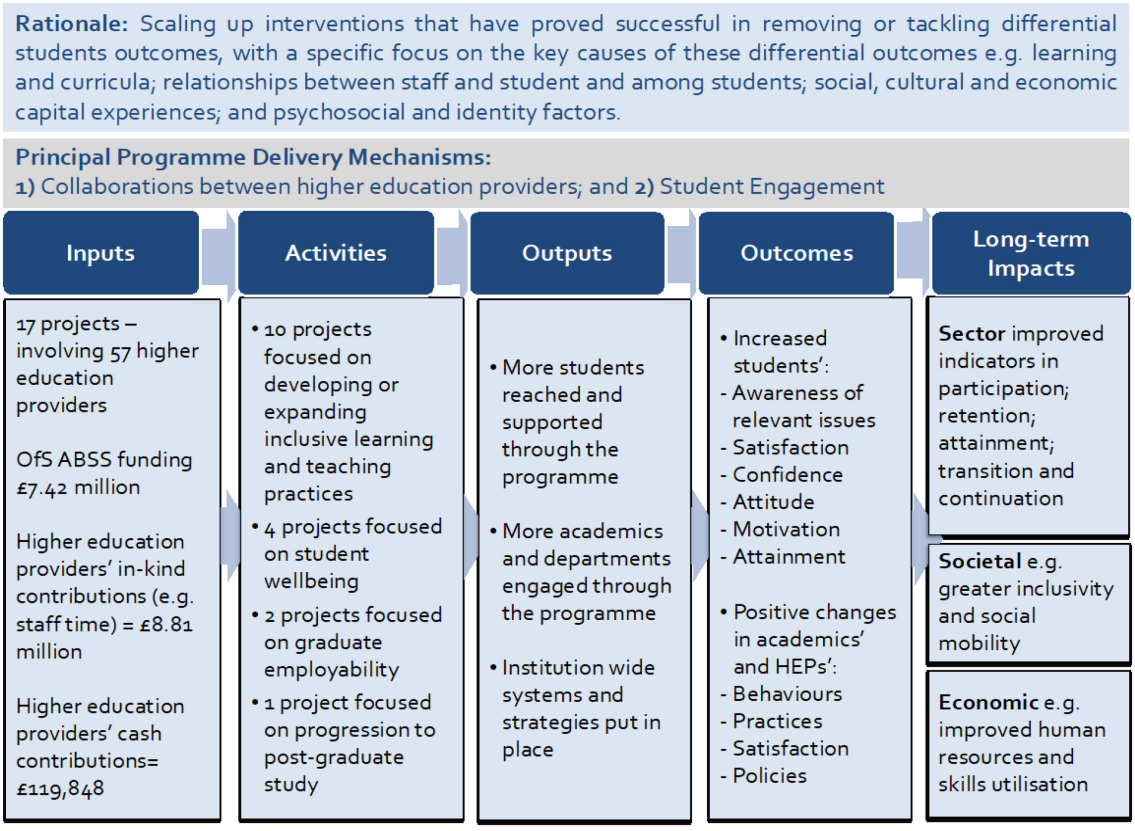
1.1. The aim of the ABSS programme, a £7.5 million OfS programme that ran from March 2017 to October 2019, was to scale up innovative approaches that had been proven successful in addressing differential educational and employment outcomes, especially for underrepresented groups of students.

1.2. The evaluation of the programme commenced in April 2017. A formative evaluation report of the programme was published in October 2018.[7] This is the programme's final summative evaluation report.

Overview of the ABSS programme

1.3. The aim of the ABSS programme was to tackle the barriers faced by underrepresented students in achieving successful educational and employment outcomes. As illustrated by the programme's logic chain in Figure 1.1, addressing these issues means that significant societal and economic impacts will be delivered in the future. For example, in the short-term, the programme could improve participation, attainment and continuation rates for the targeted groups of students, thus closing the gaps in outcomes between different student groups across the sector. In turn, this success will lead to societal and economic impacts in the longer-term, including greater social mobility and improved skills utilisation in the labour market.

Figure 1.1: Logic chain of the ABSS programme



[7] See: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/formative-evaluation-of-the-ofs-addressing-barriers-to-student-success-programme/

Context for the programme

1.4. Two reports from HEFCE, 'Higher education and beyond' (2013)[8] and 'Differences in degree outcomes' (2014/2015),[9] both highlighted statistically significant differences in study outcomes and student experiences for different groups of students in HE. These significant differences related to academic attainment, employment and further study outcomes for BAME students, students from the least represented areas (as measured by POLAR[10]) and disabled students when other student background characteristics were accounted for, including prior HE attainment, age and subject of study. The National Student Survey (NSS) also captured variance in students' experiences.[11]

1.5. To respond to these findings, HEFCE commissioned King's College London, ARC Network and the University of Manchester to undertake research to explore the causes of differential outcomes and experiences among groups of students. The research explored why students from some groups tended to do less well than other groups; it particularly focused on the disparities between white students and students from ethnic minority groups as well as differences between students from different socio-economic backgrounds. The research also explored the reasons white students tended to report the highest levels of student satisfaction compared with their peers from ethnic minority backgrounds. Drawing on the findings of the Disparities in Student Attainment (DISA)[12] project, the resulting report highlighted four key causes of differences in student outcomes:

1. Curricula and learning: Different student groups indicate varying degrees of satisfaction with HE curricula and the representativeness of learning, teaching and assessment practices.

2. Relationships between staff and students and among students: A sense of 'belonging' and the presence of academic role models are perceived as key in supporting attainment and progression as well as positive peer-to-peer relationships and networks.

3. Social, cultural and economic capital: Recurring differences were noted in how students experience HE, how they network and how they draw on external support.

4. Psychosocial and identity factors: The extent to which students feel supported and encouraged in their daily interactions was a key variable to facilitate or limit students' learning and attainment.

[8] Higher education and beyond, Outcomes from full-time first degree study, HEFCE (July 2013/15), https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180405120050/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2013/201315/
[9] HEFCE (2014) Differences in degree outcomes: Key findings: http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180405115303/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2014/201403/
[10] POLAR (**P**articipation **O**f **L**ocal **A**reas) measures entry to higher education by age 19 in small geographical areas across the UK. It sorts each area into one of five groups – or quintiles – based on the proportion of young people in the area who enter HE by the age of 19. Quintile 1 areas have the lowest rate of participation. Quintile 5 areas have the highest rate of participation.
[11] http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180405125317/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/nss/results/
[12] Cousin and Cuerton, Disparities in Student Attainment (October 2012): https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/disparities-student-attainment

1.6. The researchers concluded that differential outcomes for different student groups are underpinned by influences at three levels:

- The macro level: This is the wider context of learning, including both the structure of the HE system and socio-historical and cultural structures such as those of race, ethnicity, culture, gender and social background that are embedded in the general environment in which universities, employers and students operate.

- The meso level: This covers the individual HE providers and related structures that form the social contexts within which student outcomes arise.

- The micro level: This is the level of communication between individual students and staff in the HE environment, including the micro-interactions that take place on a day-to-day basis.

1.7. While reasons for differential performance are complex, these research findings indicated that structural factors and the HE environment are the causes of differential performance and outcomes for underrepresented students, thus challenging deficit theories that tend to focus on the 'inadequacies' of the students for tackling inequality in education outcomes in HE.[13]

1.8. Building on these research findings and recommendations, funding support was provided under the ABSS programme to projects that sought to deal with the causes of differences in student outcomes through innovative approaches. The call for expressions of interest to HE providers (hereafter referred to as providers) specified that proposals should be collaborative projects involving a minimum of three providers. Successful applicants were invited to a development workshop in November 2016 with their collaborators, where outline proposals were developed with facilitation from HEFCE and other agencies. Following this workshop, applicants were invited to submit a full bid for between £250,000 and £500,000 over two years, from which bids the final project list was selected. The selection process concluded in January 2017, with 17 successful projects recommended for funding under the programme. All projects were informed of the outcome, and an official HEFCE announcement was made in March 2017.

1.9. Successful projects focused on supporting student groups most affected by differential outcomes such as:

- BAME students;

- Disabled students;

- Students from areas of low HE participation, low household income and/or low socioeconomic status; and

- Mature students.

1.10. The ABSS programme was originally scheduled to run from March 2017 to March 2019. The programme was extended to October 2019 to enable the funded projects to continue their

[13] Those who do not succeed in HE fail because of some internal shortcoming (e.g. cognitive or motivational), or some external weakness linked to the student (e.g. cultural or familial background) (Barnett, 2007) from a presentation by Dr Mary Andall-Stanberry, Canterbury Christ Church University, Challenging Deficit Theories/Models of Black Students in HE – an Auto/ Biographical Narrative Research Study.

activities over the 2018/19 academic year, to complete their work and collect data needed to measure the difference made by their activities, and to disseminate their findings.

Scope of the evaluation

1.11. In April 2017, WECD was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the programme to assess how successfully the ABSS programme had:

a. Supported collaborations that developed systematic and strategic approaches to address differential student outcomes; and

b. Identified how good practice and interventions delivered by the funded projects could be validated, replicated, transmitted, and embedded across a diverse range of providers (including identification of the required conditions to facilitate this).

1.12. The specific objectives of the programme's evaluation are summarised as follows:

- To discuss progress and the causal effects of different types of interventions (what works, why and in what circumstances);
- To provide an overall assessment of the difference made to the student, society and economy through outcomes that can be attributed to this funding (i.e. impact assessment), where possible within the time of this evaluation;
- To identify the extent to which funding was spent according to plan (accountability for public funds);
- To demonstrate the value of changes achieved and difference made as a result of this funding (and interventions) at individual, provider, project and national level at the end of the evaluation;
- To highlight areas for future research to enable detailed exploration of the causal effects of the interventions by the funded projects, in recognition of the relatively short timeline of the evaluation, and the time it takes for impacts to materialise; and
- To make recommendations to inform OfS advice to Government on future student success policies.

1.13. The commission also included project-level evaluation capacity building. This involved support for the funded projects in developing and implementing high quality evaluation plans and robust approaches for evaluating project activities and interventions to address differential outcomes and impacts.

Policy context

1.14. To tackle underrepresentation in HE the OfS has set out ambitions and long-term targets towards reducing gaps in access, success and participation. As stated by the OfS's Chief Executive, '*We want to see bold, transformational change in the access, success and progression of*

students from underrepresented groups, and we will hold ourselves and every provider of higher education to account in pursuit of this aim.' [14]

1.15. To deliver this transformational change, the OfS has set long-term goals for the sector to:

- Eliminate the unexplained gap in non-continuation between the most and least represented groups by 2024-25, and the absolute gap[15] by 2030-31;
- Eliminate the unexplained gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between white students and black students by 2024-25, and the absolute gap by 2030-31; and
- Eliminate the gap in degree outcomes (1sts or 2:1s) between disabled students and non-disabled students by 2024-25.[16]

1.16. Providers registered with the OfS in its Approved (fee cap) category and wish to charge above the basic tuition fee must have in place an approved access and participation plan. This needs to set out how they will work towards ambitious targets and ensure equality of opportunity for underrepresented groups. The 2020-21 onwards access and participation plans[17] now cover a 5-year period, and providers are required to set stretching outcomes-based targets to improve outcomes for underrepresented students. The plans should articulate how these targets will be achieved through strategic measures. To ensure that providers are held accountable and are delivering on their plans, the OfS will monitor the plans and take action if progress has not been made.

1.17. The OfS will also identify and promote effective practice, and support providers to prioritise evidence-based measures within their access and participation plans. Using evidence and evaluation is an important priority for the OfS,[18] and in addition to its own effective practice function, the OfS has funded a new independent 'What Works Centre' – the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO), which will use evidence and evaluation to provide resources that will support providers in meeting their ambitious targets and eliminating gaps within HE.

1.18. Within this context, the evaluation of the ABSS programme provides a valuable and insightful view into what works in HE study participation, attainment and successful continuation for underrepresented groups, including lessons to be learned, further research questions and issues to be explored in more depth in the future.

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[14] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/815249/CCS001_CCS0319891868-001_Office_for_Students_Report_and_Accounts_TEXT__4....pdf

[15] The absolute gap is defined by OfS as 'the gap caused by both structural and unexplained factors'. See https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/546d1a52-5ba7-4d70-8ce7-c7a936aa3997/ofs2018_53.pdf (p.4).

[16] OfS, A new approach to regulating access and participation in English higher education (December 2018), p.4. See: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/546d1a52-5ba7-4d70-8ce7-c7a936aa3997/ofs2018_53.pdf

[17] See: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/access-and-participation-plans/.

[18] See: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation-and-effective-practice/strategy-for-evidence-and-evaluation-in-access-and-participation/

1.19. The approach and methods adopted to meet the evaluation requirements are described in more detail below.

Evaluation approach

1.20. The evaluation was organised in three main strands:

a. A formative evaluation, with the main focus on the progress made by the funded projects in meeting their objectives and identification of good practice;

b. Facilitating capacity building for project-level evaluations for the funded projects (including formative support where needed); and,

c. A summative evaluation, drawing on the full range of emerging findings, outputs, evidence and project evaluations to deliver an assessment of the programme.

1.21. The formative evaluation focused on 'how' the programme was delivered, and getting a better understanding of the aims, objectives and composition of the funded projects, progress made over time and their early achievements, and the role of partnerships and collaboration in transmitting and scaling up successful interventions to tackle differential student outcomes. In particular, the evaluation sought to collect evidence and identify successes, feasibility and challenges faced by the funded projects, as well as good practice for wider adoption in relation to:

- The benefits of working in collaboration with other partners – over and above what would have happened at individual intervention or provider level;
- What worked well in the project partnerships and why – identifying the conditions that facilitate effective partnerships that lead to improved success outcomes for students in partner institutions;
- Early experiences in replicating, testing or trying to embed new initiatives that aimed to address differential outcomes within a faculty or an institution, including challenges and solutions identified to address these; and
- Early evidence on what difference the ABSS funding was making – by exploring what had been delivered, and how activities and actions were impacting upon academics, students, and management teams, and processes and systems in place at institutional and partnership level.

1.22. A range of tasks was undertaken to inform this strand of the evaluation. These included:

- Early review of background documents and data (to set out the wider policy context for the programme). This involved building on the existing research and policy knowledge base by:
  - Extracting and distilling key messages from national policy for access and student success in HE;

  - Summarising findings from academic research into student outcomes, widening participation and inequalities in HE; and
  - Reviewing relevant data (e.g. student education outcomes and graduate employment data).

- Consultations with strategic stakeholders to gauge their views on policy commitments and investments to address the causes of differential student outcomes. Stakeholder organisations interviewed at that stage included:
  - Disabled Students Sector Leadership Group (DSSLG)
  - Equality Challenge Unit (ECU)
  - Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE)
  - GuildHE
  - Higher Education Academy (HEA)
  - HEFCE
  - Higher Education Race Action Group (HERAG)
  - Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC)
  - Office for Fair Access (OFFA)
  - The Runnymede Trust
  - Universities UK (UUK)
- Two rounds of consultations (a mix of telephone interviews and face-to-face meetings) with all 17 project leads between July 2017 and February 2018, and a first round of telephone interviews with project leads in partner providers in March and April 2018. The purpose of these discussions was to better understand the activities undertaken by the projects, elucidate early experiences from partnership and project working, and inform the development of a typology of interventions/approaches for addressing barriers to student success and learning potential under the programme. All discussions were based on open-ended questions.
- Development of a communication plan (for the programme, projects and evaluation team).
- Development of an overarching evaluation framework (a copy of which is attached in Appendix A).
- Production of a briefing note for HEFCE in October 2017.
- Production of the first evaluation report in October 2018.

1.23. A comprehensive capacity-building programme was embedded into the evaluation process at this stage to support the funded projects. This programme included the following activities:

- A first assessment of evaluation plans produced by the ABSS projects, and commentary that informed early feedback to projects and requests for further clarification, produced between July and August 2017.

- Production of logic models for all 17 projects; these were shared and discussed with the projects and the client (HEFCE) team (these were produced in August and September 2017).
- A webinar that was focused on the development of logic models (to support project capacity for firming up evaluation approaches and completing the first monitoring return to HEFCE).
- Guidance on preparation of logic models, shared with all 17 projects, produced in September 2017.
- A second review of evaluation plans to establish the extent to which comments had been addressed in September 2017.
- Review of monitoring forms returned to HEFCE by the ABSS projects in September 2017.
- Discussing/working with the project leads and partners to identify practical opportunities (with good probabilities of success) for:
  - Using and implementing experimental and/or quasi experimental methodologies (where appropriate/relevant);
  - Using counterfactual analysis to help illuminate the level of attribution, causality or correlation in order to determine the 'net' impact of different types of interventions; and
  - Establishing cost-effective and proportionate measures of measuring the impact of the projects.
- Responding to individual support requests from project evaluation teams.
- An evaluation workshop with project managers and evaluation leads in November 2017, including good practice examples from NESTA (on randomised control trials) and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF).
- Detailed review of monitoring forms returned to HEFCE by the ABSS projects in February 2018.
- Contribution to a programme conference organised by the OfS in May 2018.

1.24. Between October 2018 and October 2019, the ABSS-funded projects focused on collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative information, to feed into the assessment of their activities, production of final project reports and a range of dissemination activities. The evaluation tasks during this period included:

- An extensive consultation programme including face–to-face and telephone interviews with projects (leads and partners), academics and students. In total, 205 consultations were conducted in the 17 ABSS projects. These included consultations with 63 academic staff, 84 professional services staff, 24 senior management and 34 students. All discussions were based on open-ended questions. The full list of all those organisations consulted during the different stages of the evaluation is provided in Appendix C.

- Production of report-writing guidance to assist projects in collating evidence from project activities.

- A workshop with project partners and their evaluation teams in November 2018.

- Desk-based review of all final project reports (and evaluation reports, where a separate such document existed) and provision of feedback to project leads and OfS, followed by a final review of revised reports.

- Consultations with 11 strategic stakeholders in the following organisations (see also Appendix D):
  - Advance HE
  - Association of Colleges (AoC)
  - Bloomsbury Institute
  - Disabled Students' Commission
  - FACE
  - GuildHE
  - HERAG
  - Independent HE
  - National Union of Students (NUS)
  - OfS
  - UUK

- Collection, review and analysis of project related quantitative data e.g. number of students reached and academics involved, and data related to educational outcomes achieved by the ABSS projects.

- Review and analysis of national data that relate to continuation, attainment and progression for the providers participating in the ABSS programme and the HE sector in England.

1.25. The summative evaluation sought to collect evidence to provide an assessment of the impact of the programme at a variety of levels, e.g. on individuals, providers, funded project partners and the HE sector. The main tasks during this strand are described below:

- Review and update the initial formative findings, including two specific issues that were identified during the formative strand of the evaluation:
  - What works, and lessons learned from inclusive practice vs. targeted interventions; and
  - Student engagement in the ABSS-funded projects.

- Capture and collate outputs from the 17 projects, categorising and aggregating activities and interventions.

- Establish and explore the range of qualitative and quantitative measures of impact across the programme (considering both the original aims, formative developments and wider

unplanned impacts). As stated in paragraph 1.7, the evaluation aimed to assess how successfully the ABSS programme: a) supported collaborations that have developed systematic and strategic approaches to address differential student outcomes; and b) identified how good practice and interventions delivered by the funded projects can be validated, replicated, transmitted and embedded across a diverse range of providers.

However, as depicted in the programme's logic chain (Figure 1.1), the ultimate outcomes and impacts of the programme are associated with activities aiming to reform institutional approaches and address barriers to student success (as measured by retention, attainment, transition and continuation). Shorter-term outcomes are associated with increased student satisfaction with their modules or courses – or with HE studies in general – in increased confidence, more positive attitude and motivation, and attainment. Shorter-term outcomes also comprise providers recognising that cultural changes are needed within their organisations and across the wider sector to deliver sustainable results.

- The literature review also indicates that other shorter and intermediate outcomes can emerge as a result of interventions tackling structural issues that endeavour to reduce differential outcomes for underrepresented groups of students. These could include (as also set out in the evaluation framework in Appendix A):
  - For students: enhanced sense of belonging and better interactions with staff.
  - For academics involved in the programme: better understanding of structural issues relating to the causes of differences in student outcomes, changes in behaviours and teaching performance and enhanced quality of teaching materials (all ultimately leading to improved student satisfaction).
  - For providers involved in the programme: adoption of a systematic institution-wide approach to better understanding of students' experiences in a HE setting, particularly those from underrepresented groups.
- Discuss the wider scalability and utility of programme outputs, and likely impact, taking into account the strength of evaluation and evidence of wider utility (for example where multiple projects may have been successfully implemented in multiple locations and contexts, or otherwise validated, replicated, transmitted and embedded).
- Drawing on all the above, the summative strand of the evaluation also identifies lessons learned, and provides recommendations for policy and research going forward.

1.26. Whilst the 17 ABSS projects were funded under the same theme of addressing barriers to student success, each partnership explored different ways of tackling these barriers. Each project also adopted a bespoke intervention, and data collected by the projects to monitor and assess benefits and impacts vary significantly. Therefore, it has not been possible to aggregate information across all outputs and outcomes listed in the programme's logic chain in Figure 1.1. This means that there may not necessarily be a programme-wide insight on what works to addressing students' barriers to success, but a range of effective practice arising from individual projects. These can inform policy and operations undertaken by other providers of HE as well as

further research into structural issues relating to addressing barriers to students' success, especially for underrepresented groups of students.

Report structure

1.27. The report is structured as follows:

- Section 2 provides an overview of the type of projects funded, principal activities undertaken and outputs delivered by the funded projects.
- Section 3 provides feedback on benefits that have emerged, and what has been learned from the delivery of the programme. Lessons learned include both factors enabling successful delivery and challenges faced by the project partners.
- Section 4 presents an overview of project benefits under four categories of interventions: inclusive and active teaching and learning practices; wellbeing for students; progression to postgraduate study; and graduate employability.
- Section 5 discusses the benefits of the programme and its added value. It also provides an assessment of the wider scalability of programme outputs and potential impact upon students and institutions.
- Section 6 draws conclusions and makes recommendations for providers and OfS.

2. The ABSS projects

2.1. This section provides an overview of the type of projects funded, and the main outputs delivered by the ABSS projects to the end of the programme.

Funding of the projects

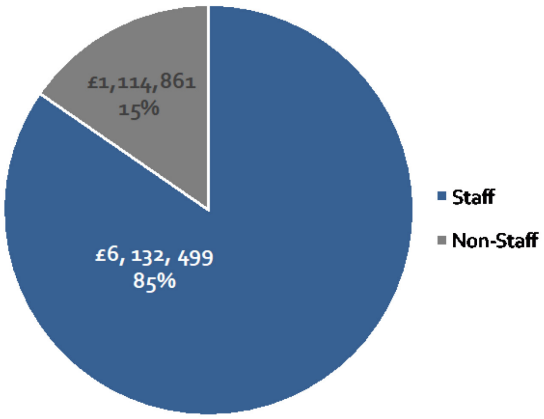
2.2. The OfS allocated £7.42 million over two years across the 17 projects.[19] Providers involved in the programme also committed their own resources in the form of both cash funding and in-kind contributions as follows:

- In-kind contributions by providers (e.g. staff time) totalled £8.81 million. In-kind contributions were approximately £590,000 more than institutions had projected in their original applications, most likely reflecting the six-month no-cost extension to the programme. In-kind contributions per project ranged from £145,108 to £1.07 million.
- Cash funding by providers included expenditure to run relevant events and produce dissemination materials. Only two projects originally committed cash funding, to the value of £100,600. However, by the end of the programme, two further projects allocated cash funds bringing the total value to £119,848 – an increase of £19,248 on projected spend.

2.3. Combining the OfS and providers' funding, the total value of the ABSS programme was £16.17 million.

2.4. Staff costs comprised 85% of the total actual spend of the OfS funding (see Figure 2.1). This was less than originally projected (£6.7 million). This variation is explained by difficulties or delays in recruiting staff at the beginning of the programme and in retaining fixed-term staff to the end of the programme.

Figure 2.1: ABSS spend on staff and non-staff costs (actual)



2.5. A greater amount of the OfS funding was spent on non-staff costs than originally projected, from £720,000 (10% of all OfS funding) to £1.1 million (15%) – an increase of £395,000. Non-staff spend

[19] The total actual spend of OfS funding from March 2017 to September 2019 was £7.24 million, with an underspend on projected allocations of approximately £179,000 (representing 2% of the total funding allocation).

was used to fund project activities and workshops, dissemination conferences and materials, and travel costs.

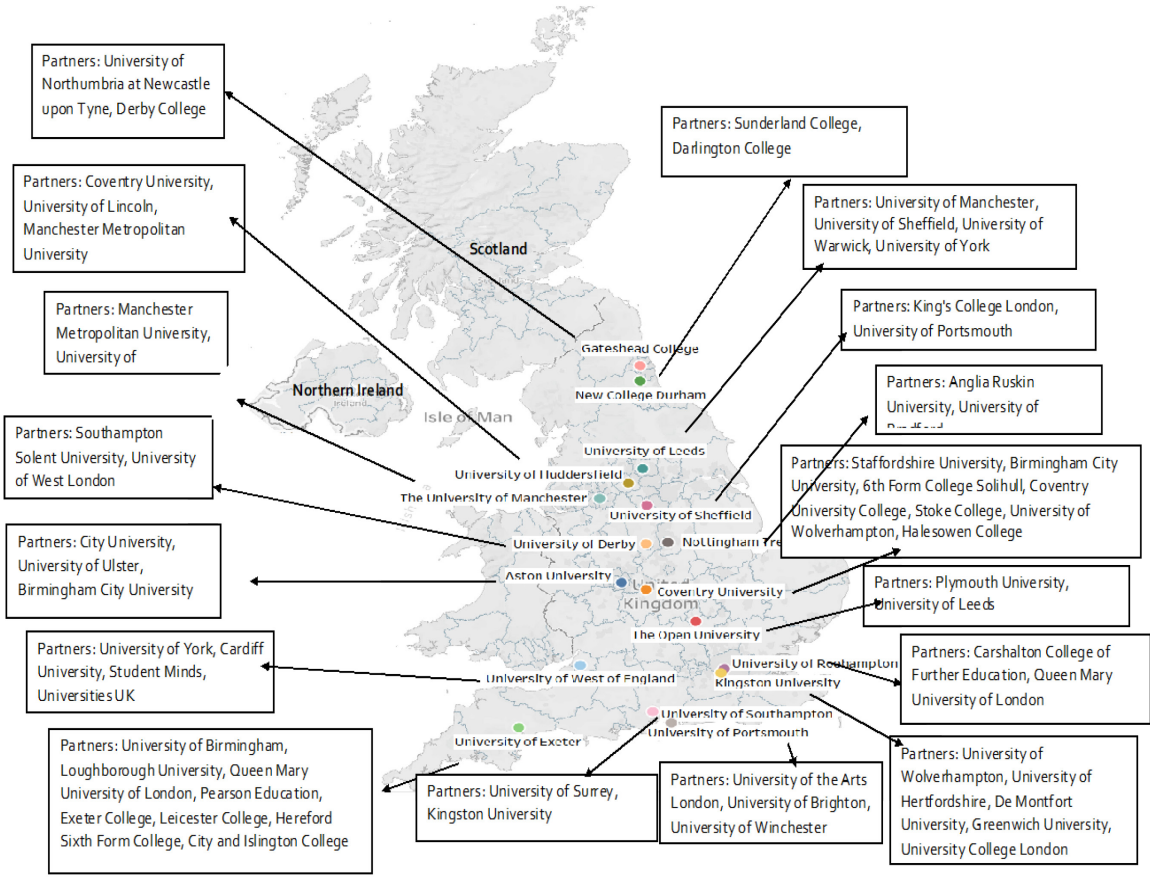
2.6. On an individual basis, total project funding (including both the OfS funding and providers' own contributions) varied depending on the nature of the activities undertaken and the partners involved. For example, taking into account both the OfS and providers' own contributions, individual project funding ranged between £444,708 and £1.56 million, with the average[20] project just under £950,000.

Project Partners

2.7. The 17 ABSS projects involved 57 providers and 27 other organisations, including charities and businesses. An overview of all ABSS projects, detailing the lead provider, partners and project titles, is provided in **Appendix B**.

2.8. As shown in Figure 2.2, the ABSS projects were delivered across England. Two ABSS projects also brought in partners based in the other UK nations i.e. Northern Ireland (Ulster University) and Wales (Cardiff University).

Figure 2.2: ABSS-funded projects



2.9. The projects varied in terms of the number of partners involved and the type of institution. For example, the size of partnerships per project ranged from three institutions (the minimum as per

[20] Based on median values.

the call for expressions of interest – see paragraph 1.9) to nine institutions. Of the 17 projects, nine involved three partners and eight involved more than three partners; 12 providers were also involved in two projects. Project partners also encompassed a range of institutional types, including larger and smaller institutions, research-focused universities, teaching-focused universities and FE colleges.

2.10. During the course of delivering the programme, three projects experienced partners withdrawing their involvement, due to specific organisational circumstances, e.g. internal restructuring and lack of resources to commit to the project.

Types of interventions

2.11. The ABSS projects covered the whole student lifecycle, from transitioning to university, through support and attainment whilst studying, to graduation and award outcomes including progression to employment or further study. The projects focused on any, or all, of the following types of approaches to tackle or eliminate structural barriers for underrepresented students:

- Inclusive and active teaching and learning practices;
- Well-being for students;
- Progression to postgraduate study; and
- Graduate employability.

2.12. Of the 17 ABSS projects:

- Ten projects focused on developing or expanding inclusive learning and teaching practices;
- Four projects focused on student wellbeing;
- Two projects focused on graduate employability; and
- One project focused on progression to postgraduate study.

2.13. The ABSS projects were mostly concerned with addressing barriers for students at meso and micro levels (with the expectation that addressing issues at these levels will eventually influence the macro level). To eliminate barriers at meso level, project activities tested scaling up new approaches in relation to providers' internal structures and practices (as stated in paragraph 1.6, these form the contexts that influence student outcomes). To remove barriers at micro level, project-funded activities focused on better understanding and improving the micro-interactions that take place on a day-to-day basis within a HE environment e.g. staff (academic and professional services) perceptions of and communications with students within and outside the classroom.

2.14. The ABSS projects used a combination of targeted and inclusive approaches to address barriers to student success. For the purpose of this evaluation, 'targeted' refers to interventions designed to benefit specific student groups (e.g. BAME students), whereas inclusive interventions are designed to benefit all students, though are likely to be particularly beneficial for students from

underrepresented groups. Of the 17 ABSS projects:

- Ten used exclusively inclusive approaches.
- Four used targeted interventions, engaging with specific student group(s) or with specific schools, departments or courses with a relatively higher proportion of underrepresented students.
- Three used a combination of inclusive and targeted approaches.

2.15. Figure 2.3 provides an overview of the number of ABSS projects engaging with each underrepresented student group. In general, the majority of ABSS projects set out to address causes that affect more than one underrepresented group of students. However, the main focus for the majority of projects was on improving differential outcomes for BAME students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The projects also designed and developed interventions targeting other student groups, including students with BTEC qualifications, commuter students, care leavers and international students, as follows:

- Care leavers[21] (by one of the projects);
- BTEC students (by two projects);
- Students who are commuting (by two projects);
- International students (by one project);
- White working-class male students (by two projects);
- Success in STEM subjects (by two projects); and
- Muslim female students (by one project).

Figure 2.3: Number of projects by student group focus[22]

BAME	Low socio-economic status	Disability	Mature	BTEC, Care leavers, Other
13	11	7	3	11

2.16. In terms of crossover between intervention type and underrepresented students, as shown in Figure 2.4, the majority of projects focused on inclusive learning and teaching practices for BAME students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

[21] In England, the official care-leaving age is 18, but young people can leave care from the age of 16. The legal definition of care leavers does not cover all adults who have experienced care and who may need support as they enter HE later in life. So, when providers develop activities to support this group, they can include all those who have experienced care at any stage of their lives. This is particularly important as many care leavers return to education as mature students. See: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation-and-effective-practice/care-leavers-and-looked-after-children/

[22] The total number of projects adds up to more than 17 as projects targeted more than one underrepresented student group.

Figure 2.4: Number of projects by intervention type and student group focus

Focus of ABSS Projects	BAME	Low socio-economic status	Disability	Mature	BTEC, Care leavers, Other
Inclusive and active teaching and learning practices	8	7	4	3	8
Wellbeing for students	2	1	1	0	2
Progression to postgraduate study	1	1	0	0	0
Graduate employability	2	2	2	0	1
Total	13	11	7	3	11

Main project outputs

2.17. The main project deliverables included:

- Production of final project reports based on the guidance developed by WECD – all 17 projects have produced reports detailing the nature of their projects, key findings and lessons learned.

- Production of effective practice materials, e.g. toolkits and brochures, for wider use by the sector. Examples of these include:

  – Co-production of 'Mental Health Strategies with Students: A Guide for the Higher Education Sector and the Wellbeing' toolkit,[23] produced by Student Minds, a partner in the ABSS project led by the University of West of England (UWE).

  – A continuous professional development (CPD) toolkit for personal tutors, produced by the project led by the University of Sheffield with partners King's College London and the University of Portsmouth.[24] The CPD toolkit can be used in groups or individually to help reflect on what the personal tutor role involves and deal with key issues that might arise when engaging with students on their learning experience.

  – The production of an employability toolkit by Ulster University, a partner of the Aston University-led project (the other partners being Birmingham City University and City, University of London). The toolkit is an online resource that is accessible from all project partners' websites.[25]

  – Two toolkits created by the Open University (OU) project (together with the University of Leeds and the University of Plymouth) on the language of disability[26] and inclusive approaches to group work.[27]

[23] See: http://www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/wellbeing_toolkit.pdf
[24] See: http://www.raratutor.ac.uk/
[25] See: https://www.ulster.ac.uk/employability-toolkit
[26] See: https://weblab.open.ac.uk/incstem/language/
[27] See: https://weblab.open.ac.uk/incstem/groupwork/

- Dissemination events by all 17 projects, as well as project websites, including:
  - Kingston University's BAME Attainment Gap project.[28]
  - Nottingham Trent University's (NTU) project on active and collaborative learning.[29]
  - The Changing Mindsets projects, led by the University of Portsmouth.[30]
  - The University of Derby's Student Attainment Project 2.[31]
- New courses in place, changes in curricula, and pedagogical or student support practices to reflect lessons learned from testing new approaches in tackling differential student outcomes. For example, these included:
  - The OU developed a mental health first aid course for fieldwork, in collaboration with the University of Leeds' counselling service and disability service.
  - Anglian Ruskin University (ARU), part of the project partnership NTU and Bradford University, undertook a curriculum refresh by which every course would have an active learning element to it. The project also drove a change in the assessment regulations at ARU.
  - Coventry University (CU) established a Curriculum 2025 team to template, review and storyboard curriculum across the CU group by 2025, with the key aim being to ensure that all courses are inclusive (CU was leading a project in partnership with four universities and four colleges). Other activities included development of academic writing materials, and revision of grade descriptors. Staffordshire University (SU), a partner in the same project, focused on the transition of BTEC students and in collaboration with its partner college, Stoke-on-Trent College, put in place a new series of transition events. Through the same project, the University of Wolverhampton (UoW) developed Independent Learning Profiles (ILP) for new students to be used as part of the Personal Tutoring process. UoW also established a Graduate Teaching Assistant (GTA) scheme that employed graduates to work in courses which had identified a high proportion of 'at risk' students, or which had low retention and attainment figures.

2.18. As shown in Figure 1.1 (i.e. the logic chain of the programme), the main outputs expected to be generated by the programme as a result of the projects outputs were:

- More students reached and supported;
- More academics and departments engaged; and
- Innovative approaches tested, adopted or scaled up in new contexts – with lessons learned reported back to the sector (through reports and dissemination events as described above)

[28] See: https://closingtheattainmentgap.co.uk/
[29] See: https://aclproject.org.uk/
[30] See: http://mindsets.port.ac.uk/
[31] See: https://stuattainment.wpengine.com/

or embedded within the respective institutions.

2.19. Based on the information provided in the projects' original business cases, it was anticipated that the projects' activities would reach and support circa 40,000 students. However, not all projects collected information about the underrepresented groups of students reached and supported by ABSS projects between March 2017 and October 2019. Projects involved in targeted interventions were more likely to collect and provide this information than those pursuing inclusive approaches.

2.20. Nevertheless, information provided by 37 project partners representing nine projects (i.e. just over half the ABSS projects) [32], indicated that ABSS project activities reached and supported a range of students underrepresented in HE. This included: 4,370 female students, 2,773 BAME students, 2,265 disabled students, 1,618 care leavers, 338 students from low participation neighbourhoods (POLAR3 quintiles 1 and 2), 327 BTEC students, and 227 mature students.[33]

2.21. As stated in paragraph 2.7, the 17 ABSS projects involved 57 providers and 27 other organisations, including charities and businesses. This indicates that, in addition to the 17 lead partners, 40 more providers and 27 organisations were involved in activities that aimed to test or implement innovative approaches in tackling barriers to students' success. Feedback provided during the discussions with projects partners indicated that it would not have been possible for these providers and organisations to be involved in similar activities without the support of the ABSS programme, particularly to the same extent and within this timeframe.

2.22. It is also estimated that 9,250 academics and professional staff were engaged and reached through various innovative project activities (based on information provided by 47 project partners across the 17 projects). Feedback provided during the discussions with academics and project managers indicated that this level of engagement would not have been possible without the support of the ABSS programme.

2.23. A range of innovative approaches were tested or adopted by more providers as a direct result of the support offered by the ABSS programme, with a number of them highly transferable and effective in raising awareness around differential outcomes and the structural conditions for reducing inequalities within HE. Section 5 looks at the difference these interventions have made, including what has worked well and what could be improved, as well as the lessons learned and scalability and replicability opportunities for providers. An overview of some of the innovative approaches tested or adopted on a wider scale is provided below:

- Active and collaborative learning (ACL) – this refers to an inclusive pedagogy that offers an alternative to discursive practices like lectures and seminars. ACL focuses on problem-solving and enquiry-based activities carried out in groups; it usually involves a combination of group work, immediate feedback, flipped learning, peer teaching, and teacher-facilitated discussion and debate. Research evidence to date suggests that ACL has a positive impact on outcomes for students from underrepresented student groups, including ethnicity; benefits of ACL include improved student engagement, attendance, progression and

[32] Therefore, it is likely that the number of students affected from target groups is higher.

[33] It is worth noting that students' characteristics and identities intersect, and one student could be part of more than one target group.

attainment.[34] One ABSS project (involving three providers) specifically focused on ACL and teaching approaches to address differential student outcomes.[35] The project used two forms of ACL, TBL, and student-centred active learning (SCALE-UP). As a result, project partners reported an increase in both courses and modules adopting ACL (resulting in improved participation and attainment for underrepresented groups as discussed in section 5).

- New approaches aiming at enhancing staff-students communication and relationships. Research has found that poor HE learning relationships can lead to student disengagement, dissatisfaction, a lack of motivation and productivity, and possible withdrawal.[36] Quality learning relationships are significant in alleviating attainment gaps as lecturers play a key role in raising students' aspirations.[37] One example of developing and enhancing staff-student relationships was of ABSS projects exploring and adopting Personal Tutoring (PT) systems (defined primarily as academic guidance and support, including career guidance and signposting students to other relevant support services). One project (three institutions) focused specifically on PT support, whilst three further projects (seven institutions in total) involved elements of PT support or staff-student relationship support in their interventions.

- New approaches with relation to student feedback and assessment. Feedback and assessment form a central part of students' HE journeys, and link to attainment and progression. For example, research has shown that a high number of assessment interventions incorrectly place the onus on students to change their own behaviours to improve their attainment and progression instead of providers delivering institutional change to support students.[38] Three projects (involving nine providers) implemented different types of interventions around assessment and feedback practices as follows:

  - One project implemented a holistic student self-regulatory assessment feedback approach, focused on student equity, agency and transparency (EAT)[39] of the assessment process;

  - A second project[40] focused on deconstructing assessment and curricula and making assessment practice fairer and more transparent; and

  - A third project[41] trialled a series of pedagogic tools at module level, looking at understanding the assignment, assignment checklist and examinations' checklist.

[34] E.g. see: Beichner et al. (2007): http://www.percentral.com/PER/per_reviews/media/volume1/SCALE-UP-2007.pdf; Beichner (2014): https://doi.org/10.1002/tl.20081; Haidet, Kubitz, & McCormack (2014): https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4643940/; Hettler (2015): https://doi.org/10.1007/s11294-015-9539-7.
[35] The project led by NTU.
[36] Mountford-Zimdars et al., *Causes of Differences in Student Outcomes* (2015), p.28: https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/23653/1/HEFCE2015_diffout.pdf
[37] See: Cousin & Cureton, *Disparities in Student Attainment* (2012), p.15 (https://tinyurl.com/wwpkjf7)
[38] Journeys to Success (Hall et al., HEA, 2010).
[39] Enhancing assessment feedback practice in higher education: The EAT framework ©Carol Evans (2016) (https://www.southampton.ac.uk/assets/imported/transforms/content-block/UsefulDownloads_Download/A0999D3AF2AF4C5AA24B5BEA08C61D8E/EAT%20Guide%20April%20FINAL1%20ALL.pdf). Project led by the University of Southampton.
[40] Re-Imagining Attainment for All 2 (RAFA2), led by the University of Roehampton: https://rafa2.org/homepage/
[41] Student Attainment Project 2, led by the University of Derby.

- Wider application of technology in inclusive learning environments. Research has shown that adopting and embedding inclusive learning and teaching into the curriculum is central to ensuring equal opportunities for all students to achieve, i.e. designing curriculum to be inclusive of all students without the need for adaption or specialised design. Removing barriers to allow individuals to live and study independently is particularly relevant for disabled students, with the use of technology such as tablets one way of achieving this.[42] Existing evidence suggests that good practice exists in this area,[43] but more can be done to embed inclusive practice across the sector.

- New approaches to student support. Four projects specifically developed and provided academic and professional services support for students to improve their wellbeing and ultimately improve retention and success. These included: pre-entry and induction support; personal tutoring and academic support (as described earlier); and professional services support and building support networks to enhance students' employability prospects.

- New methods that tackled the 'psycho-social and identity factors' causing differential outcomes, as identified by Mountford-Zimdars et al.[44] This refers to expectations which academics have about students, and students have about themselves. One project (four institutions)[45] used a student and staff workshop-based intervention to help develop and build a growth mindset, i.e. the belief that intelligence is not a fixed characteristic and can be increased through effort.[46] The main aim of the workshops was to reduce stereotype threat and implicit bias as barriers to student success by encouraging both staff and students to explore their own beliefs around the nature of ability and intelligence, and the impact of this on their expectations for self and others, on their behaviour and decision making, and on their language and feedback (internal and to others).

2.24. Delivery of all these new initiatives was supported by two distinct processes (discussed in more detail in the next section):

- Bespoke project management and partnership arrangements in each of the 17 projects; and

- Student engagement in the design and delivery of the interventions in seven projects.

Project evaluation activities

2.25. The majority of projects adopted a mixed methods approach to monitor and assess the results and impacts of new approaches – combining qualitative and quantitative methods and bringing together the findings of primary and secondary research. Primary research included surveys, workshops and consultations with students and staff across project partners. Secondary research and analysis involved a wider use of learner data and analytics methods.

[42] Manzoor, M., Vimarlund, V. Digital technologies for social inclusion of individuals with disabilities. *Health Technol.* 8, 377–390 (2018). https://doi.org/10.1007/s12553-018-0239-1
[43] HEFCE – Supporting Disabled Students in HE.
[44] See: Causes of Differences in Student Outcomes, p.28.
[45] Changing Mindsets, led by the University of Portsmouth.
[46] This is in contrast to a fixed mindset that refers to the belief that intelligence is something that you are born with and that you cannot do much to change. See: Dweck, C. (2017). *Mindset: changing the way you think to fulfil your potential.*

2.26. Analysis of results and evidence in most projects was based on 'before-and-after' evaluation designs, where 'before' refers to a measurement being made before the intervention was introduced to a group and 'after' refers to a measurement made after its introduction. Randomised control trials (RCTs) were used only by one project, led by the University of Leeds and delivered in partnership with the universities of Manchester, Sheffield, Warwick and York. The project aimed to support BAME students and students from low participation neighbourhoods[47] to progress to postgraduate taught (PGT) study. The project trialled two non-financial interventions, based on previously successful undergraduate initiatives at Leeds, and both interventions were evaluated using RCT methodologies.

2.27. One of the ABSS projects also adopted a comprehensive process evaluation. The project, led by the University of Southampton and delivered in partnership with the University of Surrey and Kingston University, used Moore et al.'s (2015)[48] model of process evaluation framework to evaluate the effectiveness of their intervention (Maximising Student Success through the Development of Self-Regulation) in relation to: a) fidelity – the extent to which the interventions were implemented according to the design principles of EAT; b) dose: how much was needed to have impact; c) reach: the extent to which the interventions met the target audience; and d) significance: the relative impact of approaches.

[47] Students from low participation neighbourhoods were defined by the project as those from POLAR3 quintiles 1 and 2. See: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/young-participation-by-area/about-the-data/.
[48] Process evaluation of complex interventions: Medical Research Council guidance
BMJ 2015, 350: https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.h1258 (Published 19 March 2015).

3. Delivery of the ABSS programme

3.1. Delivery of the ABSS programme and projects has been distinguished by two processes: namely, collaborations between providers and students' engagement in the delivery of various initiatives that the projects have implemented as part of this programme.

3.2. This section provides feedback on how these processes have contributed to producing a range of step changes and structural reforms within partner institutions as well as the lessons learned for scalability and replicability of the tested interventions. Lessons learned include both factors that enable successful delivery and challenges that need to be overcome, i.e. the conditions that need to be present for successful delivery and positive outcomes, for other providers to replicate.

Project partnerships

3.3. There was broad consensus across the projects that they largely assembled the right partnerships to deliver their projects. During the consultations with the projects, of the 53 interviewees that responded to questions on partnership members (providers' staff directly involved in managing and delivering the projects), 49 (92%) agreed that the partnerships were sufficiently strong and effective at scaling up activities to address barriers to student success and that, overall, they operated efficiently. It was also widely felt that the partners have been generally committed and positive about the partnerships. Some of the comments provided during these consultations are presented below.

> *'Collaboration has been the most successful aspect of the project; expected to see more competitiveness and less sharing.'*
>
> *'Worked well; it enabled a more structured and focused collaboration than before.'*
>
> *'One HE provider doing this project on its own would not have the same impact.'*
>
> *'Sharing of experiences and challenges added value to the project.'*
>
> *'Support and communication from the leading partner was fantastic.'*
>
> *'Working with the other institutions is fantastic - being able to come together with other colleagues and being inspired by each other. Also bringing students together from across the institutions.'*

3.4. Only a few interviewees (four out of the 53) pointed out that partnerships 'were not what they had expected' although they acknowledged their usefulness and positive aspects. The reasons cited were the challenges facing some partners, such as limited resources and staff commitment, and the absence of genuine collaboration, attributed to the top-down approach employed by the lead partner – as opposed to a two-way communication. As pointed out:

> *'Good to talk and share ideas but partners joined at different stages and points in time. So, [we] couldn't take on board some outputs and activities that others produced; a lot of activities/interventions didn't resonate.'*
>
> *'... [There are] different projects at each HE provider. ... Not necessarily collaboration as such – though we discussed the project with [the partner] before the pilot.'*

Main benefits

3.5. There was agreement amongst all those consulted (53) that the main benefits deriving for the partner institutions from their engagement in ABSS projects were related to awareness and experiential gains and benefits associated with collaborative work. Examples of awareness and experiential gains that were reported include:

- Knowledge of new methods and models and adoption of good practices;
- Awareness of individual partners' practices as well as problems, challenges and needs;
- Achieving ACL across institutions, and embedding it in individual providers via project delivery; and
- Sharing lessons learnt and achievements with non-participant providers.

3.6. Collaboration-related benefits that were highlighted during the consultations include:

- Development of closer links with partner universities (for all projects), and at the same time, for some projects, evidence of closer relationships with other regional partners (for four projects out of the 17) and/or commitment to post-project collaboration (for five projects out of the 17);
- Strengthening of relationships across teams at operational and academic levels (a point highlighted by interviewees in all projects);
- Helping to increase influence within a provider (a point highlighted by interviewees in all projects) – input from other providers means the intervention and concepts are taken more seriously at a senior level, given that management buy-in requires reassurance that the proposed activities are working;
- Expansion of the scope of collaboration, with a few projects (five projects out of the 17) reporting that engagement in the ABSS projects led to participation in joint bids and other teaching and learning project activity;
- Opportunity for development of networks for students across partnerships (for six projects); and,
- Enabling smaller providers to enhance their capacity and capabilities and build useful networks (a point mainly highlighted by smaller project partners).

3.7. Examples of comments provided by project partners are given below:

> *'One of the benefits of doing this type of projects has been the partnership. Each partner brought different strengths and ideas. About establishing a community at the start of the project. Interesting to see other providers' context and approaches.'*
>
> *'Working and collaborating with [the partner] university; supporting each other in a two-way process. The project really strengthened the relationship.'*

'... it was to create relationships with the universities and learn more from the University [we] directly partnered with.'

3.8. Finally, most project reports noted that although it may be early to capture the impact of the projects on the success outcomes of underrepresented students, the partnerships formed for the delivery of the ABSS projects directly contributed to producing a range of step changes and structural reforms within partner institutions, as illustrated by the following examples.

Project: Intervention for Success (I4S)
Lead partner: University of Huddersfield
Project partners: Coventry University, University of Lincoln and Manchester Metropolitan University

'A holistic approach to intervention design has strengthened relationships between faculty and across specialist teams within and between the higher education institutions involved, which has fostered a sense of joint responsibility to improve retention and achievement of targeted groups. Consequently, the project has fostered institution-wide shifts in attitudes and practices to address differential achievement and this continues to have impact.

'Whilst the complex and institution-specific cultures that surround these interventions sometimes militate against their simple or wholesale adoption across all partners and across the sector, the project has shown that judicious editing of the materials and / or nuancing of the approaches, as well as sustained and tenacious promotion of adoption can help with transfer and uptake. The project funding from the OfS has been instrumental in allowing this to occur, because project partners have been given both the time and the authority to broker new approaches across their institutions, working with teams with whom they would not normally come into contact.

'The project has enabled all partners to continue and strengthen their use of data to analyse student practices and has enabled new activities that incorporate innovative data analytics, which are currently informing future work in the area of differential achievements within some of the HEIs involved.

'The initiatives continue to be developed and aspects are now embedded across the partner institutions…The process of scaling has been significant both horizontally across the project but also vertically within each institution and is ongoing.'

Project Report to the OfS, June 2019.

Project: Student Attainment Project (SAP) 2
Lead partner: University of Derby
Project partners: Solent University and University of West London

'The impact on each of the institutions has been demonstrated in the initiation of policies and strategies which use SAP2 as their foundation or where learning from the project has influenced existing policies and strategies. By incorporating attainment data as part of an annual institutional review of quality metrics for all undergraduate programmes, feeding into the University's quality assurance processes through continual monitoring, staff at the University of Derby have gained a greater understanding and ownership of any attainment gaps that exist in their programmes. … Academic Colleagues are owners and co-creators of the institutional work and the opportunities to adapt the interventions to meet the needs of their subject disciplines has led to a relationship of trust between them and the project team.

'At Solent University learning from the project has been incorporated into the Beating The Attainment Gap (BTAG) Action Plan 2018-2020, it has also been embedded into the teaching and learning staff development programme, the Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education and with further online implementation of the interventions being undertaken to make these more accessible to staff and for first time use. An observation from the Solent Project Team is that as their approach develops, "…staff are more open and confident in discussing and exploring the sensitive issues involved in this work".

'The University of West London (UWL)has identified that, '…In order to assess real-life impact and ensure sustainability, there is a need for monitoring and reviewing student attainment continually. Reflecting on SAP2 outcomes and lessons learned, UWL's mission will continue i) embedding cultural change, ii) engaging students as partners, iii) being committed to key performance indicator rates, and iv) ensuring effective internal/external collaborations.'

Project Report to the OfS, April 2019.

Project: Embedding and Sustaining Inclusive STEM Practices
Lead partner: The Open University
Project partners: University of Leeds and University of Plymouth

'*The cross-institutional collaboration was seen as important as it enabled the team to consider a broad range of student experiences and institutional approaches, aiding applicability to different organisational contexts. The intra-institutional collaborations were found to be particularly productive, as it enabled pockets of good work around disability to join up in a more cohesive and strategic way, supporting a whole-institution approach to inclusivity.'* **Project Report to OfS, October 2019.**

Furthermore, as one member of staff commented during the consultations for this evaluation: *'The project has drawn together lots of pockets of good practice around disabilities, accessibility and inclusion at all partners. More people are listening (e.g. senior leaders, academic staff, course and technology developers) and the project [is] creating opportunities for conversations and change – this wouldn't have happened without the funding.'*

3.9. In general, the ABSS programme has been important for bringing providers together. The funding has enabled more resources and processes to be put in place to bring different organisations together including organisations operating in different geographies and contexts. It has also helped by making things happen earlier than would have been the case without this support. As stated by project partners during the consultations:

> *'We would have been an awful lot slower if we did not have this funding.'*
>
> *'This approach has saved us 2-3 years.'*
>
> *'We wouldn't have been able to expand out of the Business School without the project; we may have expanded but in a much longer timeframe.'*

3.10. Within this context, the partnership-based delivery model of the ABSS programme has been instrumental in **accelerating knowledge exchange** of what works between providers, and has led to adoption of a range of innovative practices by a diverse group of providers in a relatively short period of time. This wider adoption of practices that have proven to work in enhancing student (and staff) performances has created the appropriate social and education context that could benefit underrepresented students (and potentially all students) in a shorter period of time than what would have been the case without the ABSS support.

Lessons learned

3.11. There was broad consensus among projects that partnerships were developed around shared objectives. These alone, however, were not sufficient to ensure fully smooth and effective collaboration. Several factors came into play – particularly at the early stages of the projects – and influenced partnership working. Examples of enabling factors and challenges discussed with the interviewees are presented below.

Enabling factors

3.12. In all cases (17 projects), the majority of project partners came together on the basis of previous work they had jointly undertaken in the past or, general knowledge of one another's relevant characteristics and policies – at academic, operational or management level – as illustrated by the following feedback:

> *'The two teams know each other well through the Learning Gain project.'*
>
> *'The project collaboration was driven by good relationships at Pro Vice-Chancellor (PVC) level, and working with HE providers that would have this senior level support, and thus be well-placed to 'get things' done. There is strong alignment between this project and institutional priorities.'*
>
> *'Five universities joined us in this project. Two had worked with us previously, and three others: joined the project at the outset. All were committed to addressing the attainment gap but had very different histories and were at different stages.'*

3.13. Interview findings show that well-established relationships and experience of working together at the institutional and leadership levels presented clear advantages for smooth partnership workings and delivery. Similarly, active engagement of partners in the bidding process and/or at

the initiation stage of a project fostered relationship-building and group formation, and promoted a shared understanding, mutual trust and ownership – essential elements for successful partnerships. As stated by project partners during the consultations:

> *'Already worked with [the lead partner and a partner] before so done quite a lot of groundwork.'*
>
> *'Worked well overall. … Already had an established relationship with the [lead partner] …the PVC Education had come from there. Also had already worked with [a partner] on the Learning Gain project.'*

3.14. Collaborations within new partners (mainly with FE colleges) was also smooth overall. However, the process of joint project delivery between HE and FE made it also very clear that mutual understanding of practices in the two sectors is relatively low.

3.15. Interaction and communication were regular, although frequency varied. For example, in one project there were fortnightly meetings with the lead partner, and regular monthly and *ad hoc* meetings at the project level. Interaction and communication took place via the usual channels, including face-to-face meetings, informal discussions and online tools. Several interviewees (in all projects) pointed out that this culture of openness and communication facilitated learning and sharing of good practice and expertise.

3.16. Similarly, active engagement of partners in the bidding process and/or at the initiation stage of a project fostered relationship-building and group formation, and promoted a shared understanding, mutual trust and ownership – essential elements for successful partnerships.

3.17. Collegiality and support, in combination with capacity-building initiatives (such as training events and subject-specific webinars for partners), according to some, enabled partnerships to overcome obstacles and facilitated smooth project delivery. At the same time, a few interviewees (in two projects) attributed the smooth project delivery to formal arrangements, i.e. rules or protocols, regulating individual partnerships. As highlighted by one of the interviewees in these projects:

> *'The main reason for the project running smoothly was having in place a really good collaborative agreement as a mechanism to hold each other accountable.'*

Main challenges

3.18. A number of challenges came up in the consultations with project partners, most of which are related to the circumstances of individual institutions, while a few are particular to the programme.

3.19. In particular, resources required for the smooth delivery of the interventions has been a major obstacle. For example, 35 providers from 16 projects (out of the 17 projects) reported staffing issues. Resource challenges included changes in key personnel and senior leadership, organisational restructuring resulting in redundancies and difficulties with recruitment.

3.20. Delays in recruitment mostly affected project delivery in the first six months of the programme, with some planned activities taking place later than originally scheduled. For example, delays in

the sign-off of partnership agreements affected project staff appointments, which delayed the launch date of projects – 12 providers from six projects specifically reported this issue as a challenge. Consultations and evidence from project final reports suggest that project partners were unable (due to institutional procedures) to recruit to project roles until legal agreements and financial processes were signed and in place. Such institutional processes affected project delivery in the first six months of the ABSS programme, which meant projects got off to a slow start.

3.21. Staff departures affected projects within the final nine months of the programme, and had an impact on some (four out of 17) projects' ability to deliver the final outputs of their projects (e.g. reports) on time. Loss of core project members could potentially have a negative impact on relevant institutional knowledge (i.e. project related knowledge weakening in the respective institutions following the departure of core project members).

3.22. In addition, some ABSS projects faced challenges with technology, particularly technical support required for delivery of the projects – 19 providers from 11 projects reported challenges in this area. Such challenges usually surfaced in the first year of the ABSS programme and were mainly due to a lack of an early collaboration between the project and the institutional IT teams.

3.23. Furthermore, access to data and data sharing difficulties, exacerbated by the introduction of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), were reported. This was due to the different arrangements in place (regulations and services) around legal, data protection and ethical matters, which render internal processes long and cumbersome. In total, 16 providers from seven projects reported GDPR as a specific challenge, which led to project delays within the first six months. These obstacles were, generally, underestimated at the initial phase of the projects, according to consultations. Nevertheless, GDPR challenges had longer-term impacts on the projects, as they hindered the ability of project teams to collect and share data required for the evaluation of their projects.

3.24. In addition, 27 providers from ten projects reported issues with accessibility, readability and comparability of student and institutional data, affecting project delivery and evaluation throughout the programme's lifecycle. For example, one project reported (in the final project report and during the consultations with project members) difficulties with analysing student data from the different project partners, especially between HE and FE providers, as the information collected by the project partners was not always directly comparable.

3.25. The impact of differing institutional cultures between project partners was occasionally problematic and offered multiple barriers at differing stages for a few projects (partners in five projects reported challenges in this area). In these cases, strong institutional commitments and good project management was identified as a crucial feature to enable continuous collaborative working between project partners.

3.26. Finally, all projects mentioned that the timeline of the ABSS projects was relatively short for some outcomes to materialise within the funding period of the projects, and did not align well with the academic year. This impacted on project planning and delivery and evaluation methodologies. Examples of comments fed back by some interviewees are listed below:

'The original timeline of the project just didn't work – student engagement can only take place at certain times of the year, avoiding exams, deadlines and holidays. '

'The project timeframe was challenging…it was a quick start [and] we were unable to do a proper comparison of different years and cohorts for the evaluation…this seemed a huge shame.'

3.27. It is worth noting that some partners saw the above challenges as largely unavoidable, and a useful learning experience that was shared across the partnership.

Conditions for successful collaborative projects

3.28. Drawing on lessons learned by the ABSS projects, good practice steps to be taken in future collaborations among providers for similar or other projects are summarised in Figure 3.1.

Figure 3.1: Good practice steps for successful collaborations among providers

3.29. Each main element is briefly described below:

- Regular meetings/discussions – although online platforms and tools were convenient for busy individuals, personal relationships, face-to-face meetings and lots of informal conversations were necessary to move a project forward. At a very practical/project management level, pre-planning all the meetings until the end of the project ensured project partners were available.

- Flexibility for local implementation, particularly when different contexts and disciplines were involved.

- Standardisation of tools enabled a consistent approach to project delivery and to collecting and analysing data and evaluation. Standardisation also saved time and resources. However,

this was coupled with flexibility to accommodate each individual partner's operational environment.

- Project partners consulting with legal, ethics and data protection teams within their own institutions and across partners' institutions at an early stage meant that projects were not delayed, and mitigating measures were in place for any anticipated challenges (e.g. data transfer).

- Engagement of both senior management and students/student representatives in a project was found to be critical for its success, with the former seen as a major enabling factor by all ABSS projects. Nevertheless, as discussed in more detail later on in this section, dedicated (and often significant) resources were needed to manage the expectations of both these groups, and guide them through the whole process to ensure their continuous interest and commitment.

- Providing short cuts and practical tips for academic staff development, rather than long sessions of training, meetings or completion of paperwork, were welcome by academics as academic staff members were pushed for time. This was confirmed by both project staff directly involved in the delivery of the projects and academics.

- Need to factor in sustainability of the interventions and results from the beginning of the project – focusing on a systematic approach to monitoring student outcomes and the HE environment. A systematic approach to staff training on related issues helped to achieve this, ensuring that when funded ended, the knowledge would remain amongst the staff base.

- Engagement of all project partners in scoping of the projects, followed by a 'back to basics' approach before signing up to collaborations of this nature (i.e. good resource planning and budgeting), ensured smooth and timely delivery of the projects.

3.30. There was broad agreement by all projects that senior management's engagement, commitment and support were crucial for the delivery of the projects. These were manifested via active participation in committing resources, project steering and advocacy for the projects. Active engagement and commitment of senior management, according to the consultations, helped raise awareness, influence senior and middle management across departments, and set the foundations for a culture change. As pointed out during the consultations with project members:

> *'The fact that two project posts have been made permanent shows senior commitment.'*
>
> *'The senior management [was] enormously encouraged by commitment up to Vice-Chancellor (VC) level, with the Academic Registrar on board [and] the Director of HR champion at University Executive Board.'*

3.31. Only a very small number of interviewees pointed to limited engagement and commitment, attributed to insufficient buy-in and absence of diversity at the senior management level, and also lack of advocacy at the leadership level.

'Supportive senior management but without real engagement … Not an appreciation of race equality…So [we] did a workshop with the senior executive team; this helped focus the senior management.'

Student engagement

3.32. Student engagement included students being consulted in the early stages of the ABSS projects in order to inform the basis of projects, through interviews, focus groups and surveys. It also involved incorporating student perspectives into project governance structures e.g. project management groups and steering groups. Students were also engaged in the production of project outputs such as reports, dissemination events, and relevant toolkits and guidance. Specifically, student engagement included:

- Involvement in research, undertaking fieldwork or contributing to surveys, and participating in consultations and focus groups;
- Participation in peer-led group discussions on curriculum areas, tutorials with postgraduate students, and one-to-one support and co-creation sessions with staff on drivers and obstacles to attainment;
- Development and production of resources, including learning and assessment tools and promotional material, for example, videos for the project website and handbooks;
- Participation in dissemination events within the partner providers and externally, for example, career events, tasters and conferences in secondary schools;
- Involvement in paid internships or other paid or voluntary work during the lifetime of a project; and,
- Participation, through the Student Union, in project-governance structures within individual providers through their elected representatives, engaging in, or facilitating project design and delivery.

3.33. The importance of student engagement in design and delivery has been highlighted by a number of projects, as demonstrated by comments provided during the consultations, as follows:

'Student engagement and co-production of interventions and materials has been the most important aspect of the project.'

'Institutions can provide the focus, organisation and direction; students can provide the student voice, legitimacy and engagement.'

'It is hard to encourage students to engage…more grassroots involvement is needed, students could be part of the [intervention] design, for example, postgraduate students studying social inequality.'

3.34. Students' involvement in piloting new initiatives varied across projects and within individual projects. For example:

- 10% of Year 1 students from across a project partner contributed to research for a mental wellbeing project, while focus groups held over two days attracted 60 students.
- All BTEC students from a project partner's Business and Sports Schools participated in a Maths support intervention aimed at enhancing skills and confidence. Furthermore, 600 and 160 students from the Business and Sports Schools, respectively, engaged in a trialled academic mentoring activity.
- Nine FE students, including BAME students and female and white male students, participated in a two-year apprenticeship scheme in the construction industry. In the same project, approximately 470 young individuals (including 160 female young individuals) attended construction-related careers events – the events aimed to change the image of the sector and encourage a diversity of students to consider a career in the sector.

Main benefits

3.35. The consultations with the projects indicated that engaging with students delivered a range of benefits, including:

- Designing interventions that were fit for purpose, i.e. most appropriate for the students being targeted;
- Higher take-up of interventions that aimed to address differential outcomes by targeted students; and,
- More useful and accessible teaching and learning materials, given that the resources produced were designed with inputs from the end-users.

3.36. One of the most decisive factors leading to these benefits was that students were seen as the best placed to identify the barriers faced by themselves and their fellow students. This enabled projects to gain a deeper understanding of what is needed.

3.37. Seven projects also recognised that role models and representation were important when aiming to tackle barriers to success, and in general students could relate more to other students rather than staff members. This meant that involving students (in particular from target groups) in the design and delivery of projects resulted in greater take up of the interventions by students.

3.38. In addition, intervention materials that were developed by students were seen as more useful and accessible to other students. This was specifically the case for two projects that focused on students' progression: one on progression to postgraduate taught study for BAME students, and the other on progression into careers in the construction industry for BAME students and female students. Three projects linked role models (students or academic staff) to project outcomes, for example, citing the presence of BAME lecturers as being integral to enhancing students' sense of belonging, and the belief that a career in HE is indeed possible (based on feedback provided by students).

3.39. Student engagement in design and delivery also proved beneficial for those students involved in six projects, as the following comments illustrate:

> *'Peer-led interventions can make the foundations for interactive and engaging sessions where the relationship between students and leaders is seen as one of peer development where both parties develop in different ways.'*
>
> *'Student and staff partnership in developing the interventions was particularly effective, yielding a strong sense of collaboration and motivation, helping students understand and realise their potential as well as fostering a strong sense of belonging.'*

3.40. Benefits to students, as reported by the projects, included:

- Eleven institutions from six projects reported stronger connections between academic staff and students, enabling the student voice to be heard, and the environment within which academics and management operate to be better understood by students – based on feedback provided by participating students.
- Eleven institutions from four projects reported co-production of project materials giving students a stronger sense of belonging – as reported by students.
- Ten institutions from six projects reported students experiencing increased confidence levels following their engagement with the project.
- Twelve institutions from five projects reported students developing and enhancing transferable skills (e.g. presentation, communication).

Lessons learned

3.41. There are a number of factors that have enabled successful student engagement, alongside challenges. These are described below.

Enabling factors

3.42. Discussions with project teams and findings from project reports have identified facilitating factors to successful student engagement in the delivery of projects. The general consensus was that when students were given appropriate training, and when good project management was in place, student engagement was rewarding for both the project and students. As one commentator put it:

> *'If properly supported and guided, peer leaders will deliver effective and interactive interventions and will be a useful tool for reaching more participants.'*

3.43. Further to this, involving students in governance structures ensured local ownership of activities and helped students gain a better understanding of the value of projects and what they were trying to achieve.

3.44. Another facilitating factor was offering incentives for students including paying students for their time and offering vouchers to students who participated in surveys and research. As stated in the following comment:

> *'Students have a wide range of priorities and time constraints – paying for the student's time has meant that the programme is sustainable across the academic year.'*

3.45. It was also pointed out that an important factor is 'getting a balance between student-led and institution-led projects', ensuring that pressure and responsibility was not put onto the shoulders of students. Being flexible was also highlighted as important, to enable students to take ownership and pride in their work.

Main challenges

3.46. As noted in paragraph 2.23 three different projects (involving nine providers) implemented interventions around assessment and feedback practices:

- One project implemented a holistic student self-regulatory assessment feedback approach, focused on student agency and transparency of the assessment process;
- One project focused on deconstructing assessment and curricula and making assessment practice transparent and fair; and,
- One project trialled a series of pedagogic tools at module level, looking at understanding the assignment, assignment checklist and exam checklist.

3.47. All three projects involved an element of student co-creation, engaging students in the development, design and delivery of resources and changes to feedback and assessment practices. This approach informed project understanding around perceived barriers, and students' concerns around assessment and feedback, for example, clarity of assessment briefs. One project noted, however, that they could have engaged students more at the beginning of the project, and that there needs to be more student involvement in curriculum development in the future. Furthermore, it is important not to place too much burden on students to develop and deliver pedagogic change interventions. Whilst it is important to have diverse student voices inform the curriculum, some students expressed anxiety about a potential backlash from staff, especially when talking about race and attainment.

3.48. Challenges faced by the projects generally related to the difficulty of gaining enough engagement from students to begin with, and the staff resource required to successfully manage student-led interventions. Lack of time was identified as the principal barrier for students to get involved, as the following comments indicate:

> *'The role is a significant time investment for students.'*
>
> *'The main barriers to student engagement are time and money.'*
>
> *'Students can only engage at certain times during the year.'*

3.49. Differences between institutions meant that what worked in one institution did not necessarily work in another. There could be a number of reasons why this might be the case, for example, the project interventions could overlap with existing initiatives or the size of the institution. Differences within institutions was also identified in some institutions, with one interviewee in one of the projects observing that student engagement levels are different within different academic areas.

Conditions for student engagement in addressing barriers to student success

3.50. The feedback provided by all the projects engaging students in interventions that aimed to address differential outcomes indicates that student-engagement models require resources, and could be management-intensive for academics or administrative staff involved. Additional good practice tips also came from the interviewees as follows:

> *'Students won't do something that is extracurricular unless they see the benefit to them. Even then, students won't always get involved; it definitely works better when it's embedded into curriculum.'*
>
> *'They [students] would have struggled without the tutors' support – some even commented they rely on support.'*

3.51. The following project case study provides a comprehensive example of what works well and what conditions are needed to successfully replicate a similar approach. The project, led by the University of Manchester with project partners the University of Birmingham and Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), explored whether a co-production approach, where paid students (student ambassadors) worked directly with academic staff and professional services to co-ordinate and deliver activities, could improve outcomes and experiences for BAME students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds. Manchester and Birmingham already had similar schemes in place while the ABSS programme enabled MMU to pilot its own programme, learning from the Manchester and Birmingham models. All three partners have now committed to strategically and financially supporting their ambassador schemes in the future.

Project: Diversity and Inclusion Student Ambassador Programme
Lead partner: University of Manchester
Project partners: University of Birmingham and MMU

The programme had three main objectives:

a. To build meaningful relationships among students and between students and staff through the development of internal and external networks;
b. To open up a dialogue on inclusive learning and teaching environments, academic support and teaching on their course; and,
c. To tackle the negative effects of stereotypes and micro-aggressions by encouraging people to challenge racism and other forms of discrimination on campus.

Benefits and outcomes to date

Forty-six students were employed as lead ambassadors and 100 students as volunteers across the three partners. The programme had a number of benefits for students involved as lead ambassadors, including:

- Improved academic performance (self-reported by students);[49]
- Increased confidence (e.g. in challenging micro-aggressions, in running for society or student elections, and in other issues affecting their student experience and academic performance);
- An improved sense of belonging – ambassadors felt included, represented and valued;
- An enhanced sense of 'self-worth' and empowerment, and a sense of achievement and pride;
- Being taken seriously – ambassadors felt their views and opinions were taken on board;
- Stronger relationships among students, including friendship building and peer networking, and between staff and students;
- The creation of a pipeline of future Equality and Diversity leaders; and,
- Developing and enhancing employability skills, including presentation and teamwork skills.

Lessons learned

Based on the feedback provided during the consultations with academic staff and students, the project provides important lessons around a co-production approach and student engagement, as follows:

- A balance between having a student- and institution-led project – both grassroots and top-level engagement and commitment is needed. The institution can provide focus, organisation and direction, whilst students can provide the student voice, legitimacy and engagement.
- The scheme was not as easy to directly transfer to other providers as first thought. Whilst the principles of the scheme could be transferred, flexibility was needed to suit individual institution-specific structures, needs and contexts. In addition, some preparatory work may be needed to better understand each other's contexts and align expectations. For example, members of staff from one provider commented that there was a 'disconnect between different teams' at the early stages and that more aligned thinking and joined up working was needed prior to starting – issues like this may affect how easily the programme can be established.
- Another lesson learned is to recognise that projects taking a co-production approach do not necessarily fix things straight away. Co-production ambassador schemes need to be embedded as part of a longer-term strategy, otherwise they could be seen as a box ticking exercise. Investment in time and resources are needed to establish these schemes – it takes time for ambassadors to be recruited and trained, and to build trusting student-staff relationships. As one member of staff involvement commented: *'The whole project is based on working with students, and setting this up takes a while – it took a lot longer than expected.'*
- Implementing a student ambassador scheme could be resource-intensive and has cost implications. Student ambassadors will need paying for their time, as this promotes engagement and long-term sustainability, especially if students need a job alongside their studies. As one member of staff involved commented: *'You can't do this programme on the cheap…to have an impact you need to invest time and resources. Paying for the students' time meant the programme was sustainable across a whole academic year – otherwise engagement trails off.'*
- Time was also a key consideration. It is a significant time investment for ambassadors. Moreover, engaging students with the scheme, both as ambassadors and participants, is better at certain times of the year. For example, it is best to avoid exam and assignment

[49] The project final report noted that this could not be verified as outcome data were not collected.

periods, as well as non-term time. Providing incentives for volunteers can help engagement (lead ambassadors were paid). For example, at Birmingham, volunteer hours contributed to the achievement of the Personal Skills Award (PSA), an employability programme.[50]

- Projects like this can also generate a lot of emotions for both students and staff. For example, student ambassadors expressed fears that their grades may be affected if they got into disputes with staff at workshops. Being overtly critical may also prompt academic staff to be defensive or perceive that they are being personally attacked for attainment gaps. Whilst instances were rare, there needs to be sensitivity when discussing race with academic staff.
- Collaboration between students across providers was particularly beneficial for students, as one student ambassador explains: *'The network of ambassadors is important – we learn from, support and inspire each other. We know we are not alone.'*

Similar experiences were also reported by the University of Roehampton's ABSS project, which also took a student-led approach.[51]

3.52. Figure 3.2 summarises emerging good practice considerations for successfully engaging students in the design and delivery of institutional initiatives that aim to improve outcomes for underrepresented groups of students. Based on the feedback from the ABSS projects, student engagement in institutional initiatives tends to be not very strategic at this stage; in general, it is limited to expression, consultation and participation, as these are defined in Figure 3.2. These processes involve academic and administrative staff gathering and using student perspectives, feedback and opinions to inform change. Therefore, students are engaged, but there is no evidence among the projects to suggest that students are systematically engaged and empowered to assume more leadership.

3.53. Providers could also assess their current practices around student engagement by using, for example, a modified version of the student voice benchmarking tool, as presented in Figure 3.3.[52] This tool can be used to assess institutional approaches to student engagement and inform providers about how to design meaningful student voice strategies, particularly in relation to addressing barriers to student success.

[50] See: https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/employability/psa/aboutthepsa.aspx
[51] See: https://rafa2.org/homepage/.
[52] See also: Toshalis and Nakkula, "Motivation, Engagement, and Student Voice"; Mitra, "Student Voice in School Reform"; Adam Fletcher, "Intro to Meaningful Student Involvement", SoundOut, January 31, 2015, available at https://soundout.org/intro-to-meaningful-student-involvement-2/; Jean Rudduck, "Student Voice, Student Engagement, and School Reform", in *International Handbook of Student Experience in Elementary and Secondary School*(2007), available at https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F1-4020-3367-2_23.

Figure 3.2: Good practice for successful student engagement in institutional initiatives

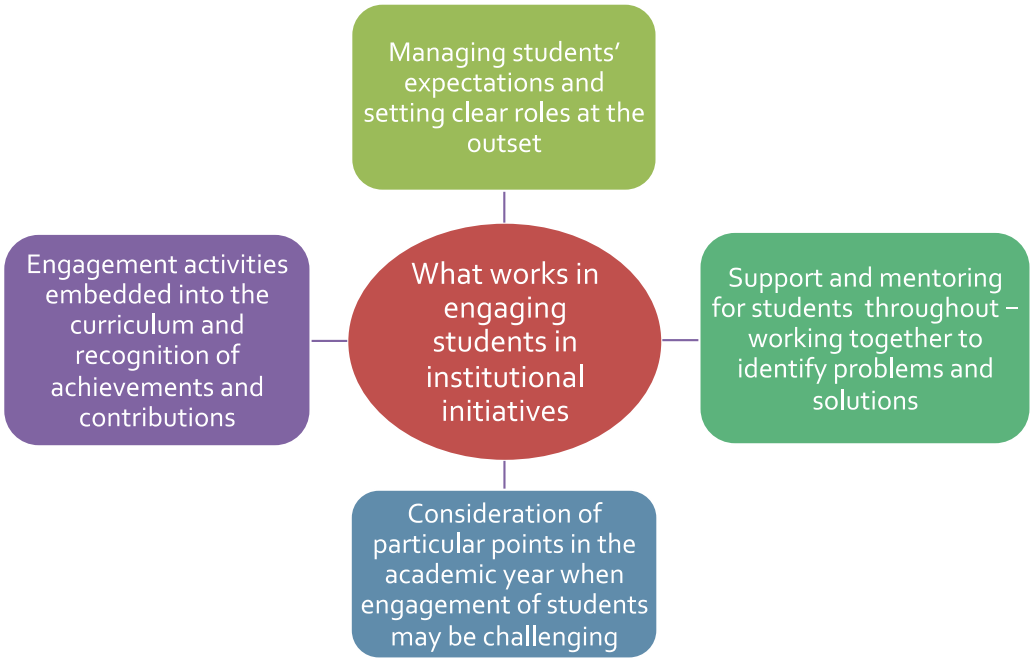
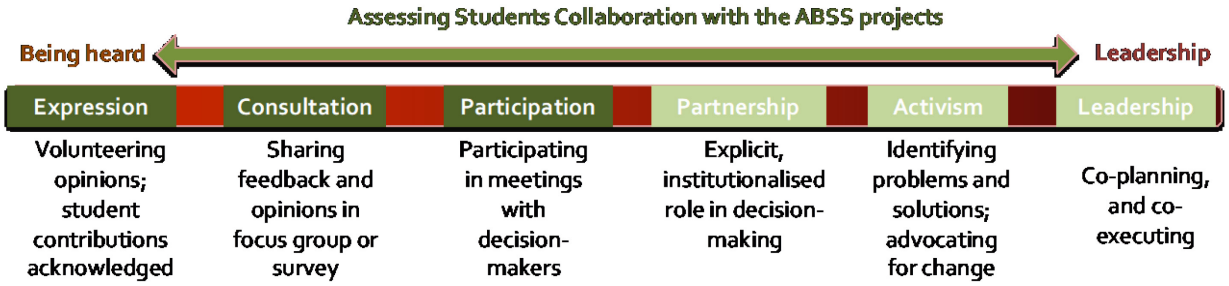


Figure 3.3: Benchmarking tool for assessing extent of student engagement



Adapted from: Elevating Student Voice in Education,
by Meg Benner, Catherine Brown, and Ashley Jeffrey August 14, 2019
https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2019/08/14/473197/elevating-student-voice-education/

4. Benefits of the ABSS programme

4.1. This section discusses the benefits of the various interventions implemented by the ABSS projects, under the following four thematic areas:

a. Active teaching and learning practices that improve students' social and emotional development, and ultimately their academic development and success (based on ten projects).

b. Academic and professional services support focusing on wellbeing for students (based on four projects).

c. Practices focusing on supporting and enhancing progression to postgraduate study (based on one project).

d. Practices focusing on strengthening graduate employability (based on two projects).

4.2. As noted in the introduction, whilst the 17 ABSS projects were funded under the same theme of addressing barriers to student success, each partnership explored different ways of tackling these barriers. Each project also adopted a bespoke intervention, and data collected by the projects to monitor and assess benefits and impacts vary significantly. Therefore, it has not been possible to aggregate and monetise same or similar benefits and impacts across all projects. This means that there may not necessarily be a programme-wide insight on what works to addressing students' barriers to success, but a range of best practice arising in each broad area of intervention.

New active (inclusive and targeted) teaching and learning practices

4.3. ABSS projects used a combination of targeted and inclusive approaches to address barriers to student success through active teaching and learning practices. 'Targeting' refers to interventions designed to benefit all students, but with a focus on one or more groups, and/or exclusive interventions explicitly directed at one or more minority groups.

4.4. The majority of ABSS projects (10 of 17) used an inclusive approach, whilst four projects adopted an explicitly targeted approach; three projects used a combination of targeted and inclusive approaches. There was at least one case of a lead institution and partner institution using different types of interventions within the same project.

Inclusive practices

4.5. As discussed in paragraph 2.23, an example of a new inclusive learning intervention was adoption of team-based learning for all students as part of a new practice. This involved ACL that used a combination of individual study and group work, immediate feedback, and teacher-facilitated discussion to create a motivational framework for students' learning. Feedback from one of the ABSS project partners in this project suggested that students with protected characteristics (e.g. BAME students) and students from low-participation neighbourhoods (POLAR3 quintiles 1-3[53])

[53] The reference to POLAR3 in this report is consistent with the measure used by the ABSS projects in their

seemed to do better in modules with TBL. Preliminary data collected by this project also indicated that this approach reduced the attainment gap; at the same time, attendance, engagement and interaction of all students improved during modules using TBL, implying that all students are benefitting in some way.

4.6. Another example of an inclusive intervention involved enhancing the accessibility of fieldwork for all by deploying/using new technologies. The project trialled ways of using technology to widen student access and participation in fieldwork, whether they are in the field, in a vehicle in the car park, or back in the classroom. Tools like virtual mapping, remote cameras, tablets, and portable microscopes allowed everyone to experience the field, though it was particularly beneficial for students with mobility, mental health, learning or sensory issues. A blog, by a student who took part in a six-day field trip gives an account of accessible fieldwork.[54]

4.7. At the same time, feedback received from some projects highlighted that inclusive practices might unintentionally widen the gap of educational outcomes between groups of students; five institutions from three projects reported that their inclusive interventions had unintentionally widened attainment gaps. Another project also had to complement an inclusive approach with a more targeted intervention to counter for unintended results. For example, in encouraging students to use a pre-assessment checklist to aid with their assessment preparations, it was noted that it was more likely for these pre-assessment lists to be used by the more engaged students, thus leading to a further widening of participation and achievement gap between students. In this instance, provision of a relatively small incentive for all students, i.e. allocating credits for the completion of the checklist, acted as a catalyst to engage all students and positively change their behaviour and performance.

4.8. Therefore, the potential of unintended consequences arising from inclusive approaches will need to be considered in designing and delivering these schemes, particularly in the early stages of implementation, to avoid exacerbation of the very issues that the interventions are meant to address.

Targeted interventions

4.9. Other interventions used a targeted approach, exclusively aiming to address and support success of students with certain characteristics, e.g. BAME students or students transitioning to university with BTEC qualifications. For example, one of the ABSS projects used learner analytics to target specific student groups through small-scale interventions with the aim of improving these students' confidence, resilience and sense of belonging, with the potential effect of increasing attainment and retention rates. For example, the project:

- Targeted commuter students with specific events to foster peer networks; and
- Held a quiet-enrolment week for students with learning disabilities, enabling them to adjust to university life in a more relaxed and supported atmosphere.

original funding cases and throughout their project lifespan – POLAR4 came into use in Autumn 2017 once the ABSS projects were set up and running and is not routinely referred to by projects.

[54] See https://edingeoslife.com/2019/01/22/access-anglesey-2018-encouraging-diversity-and-inclusion-within-geoscience/#more-6714.

4.10. Feedback provided by academics suggested that one challenge with targeted interventions was that academic staff sometimes found it difficult talking about issues related to specific groups' attainment rates, and gaps relating to specific groups of students. For example, a few institutions reported that they first had to address staff discomfort talking about race, before delivering the intervention. Several institutional teams also reported that raising awareness of attainment gaps amongst academic staff, prior to introducing a new approach, formed a central part of their projects, and also delivered results.

4.11. Feedback provided during the consultations also suggested that there is a general caution in the HE sector in adopting targeted approaches, as targeted approaches could reinforce a 'deficit model', i.e. that students from particular underrepresented groups have weaknesses that need supporting.

Main benefits

4.12. Some of the immediate benefits that emerged from the ABSS projects that focused on adopting new teaching and learning practices are summarised below:

- More students reached and supported via tutorials and ACL.
- Changes to curriculum and pedagogy, with changes seen at all levels of teaching practice, from individual modules, to courses, to departments.
- Greater student and staff engagement via pilots on attainment gap metrics and co-creation.
- More academic staff involvement in student workshops aimed at addressing barriers to learning and attainment.

4.13. Based on the feedback provided by the ABSS projects, outcomes attributed to new or scaled-up active learning practices also included:

- Higher standards of work and higher grades achieved by students.
- Increased students' confidence in their ability to progress.
- Engagement that strengthened students' ability to debate and challenge.
- Raised awareness among academic staff of gaps in attainment.
- Evidence-based decision-making at institutional level – making maximum use of learner data and data analysis.
- Changes and influence of institutional strategies and policies, i.e. participating in an ABSS project raised awareness of attainment gaps at a high level, and enabled project teams to influence senior management.

What works

4.14. Active learning refers to 'instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing'.[55] Active teaching and learning, therefore, represents a student-centric approach to teaching and learning that encourages student engagement, builds self-esteem, creates a sense of community, and supports development of a sense of belonging. There is a lot of research on the benefits of active learning, including development of critical thinking and problem solving, as well as academic development and increased content knowledge for learners. Indeed, recommendations from the 'What Works? Retention and Success' project suggest that inclusive interventions are more effective.[56] At the same time, inclusive teaching and learning practices strive to proactively make HE accessible, relevant and engaging for all students, which will have positive outcomes for students in relation to their retention, achievement and progression.[57]

4.15. Fostering such a student-centric environment within an institution, and accommodating all students' needs and preferences may not always be straightforward. In general, the evidence from the ABSS project evaluations suggests that the use of active learning could benefit underrepresented student groups, if it is carefully designed and well resourced. Findings from some of the ABSS projects, however, indicated that there are a few challenges to be overcome when adopting student-centric approaches. For example, introduction of new active learning approaches will need resources for staff preparation and training (academic and professional services), and may initially lead to lower levels of student satisfaction or wider participation and success gaps. Preparing both students and academics, as well as managing expectations will be critical in these cases. Some evidence also suggested that some active learning interventions may not be suited for all groups of students. For example, one ABSS project found that group working may not always work for students with particular physical or mental health disabilities. Involving diverse groups of people in active or group work generally requires careful planning and preparation. Lessons learned by the ABSS projects in relation to what works in this area are discussed below.

4.16. In relation to academic staff, the ABSS projects found that:

- CPD, training and resources for staff were important to support a change in existing practices. Discussions with academics participating in the programme indicated that the changes brought about by new approaches that are tested and adopted (including CPD) are very welcome and beneficial to them and their students. However, the academic workload increased with the introduction of new schemes.

- Therefore, additional resources may need to be in place during these interventions to ensure continuous academic engagement and endorsement but also confidence in implementing changes. As an example, in one ABSS project, dedicated support provided by

[55] Bonwel, Charles C. & Eison, James A. Active Learning: Creating Excitement in the Classroom. 1991 ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Reports Association for the Study of Higher Education; ERIC Clearinghouse on Higher Education, Washington, D.C.; George Washington Univ., Washington, DC, School of Education and Human Development (https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED336049.pdf)
[56] Thomas et al., *What Works? Student Retention and Success* (2017): https://tinyurl.com/wae7tpy.
[57] See: Thomas & May, *Inclusive Learning and Teaching in HE* (2010), p.5 (https://tinyurl.com/vzrwxll)

in-house professional services staff (e.g. educational developers) was important in offering expertise, and boosting academic confidence in implementing changes.

- Academics' motivation, buy-in and time commitment were all essential elements to introducing active teaching and learning that worked for all and specific student groups. Review of the ABSS project activities also showed that in implementation of new practices, academic buy-in benefited both students and the academics themselves, in the sense that it helped raise awareness and changed attitudes and perceptions. Importantly, however, joint activities to address shared concerns strengthened the relationship between students and academics and, arguably, encouraged further engagement and collaboration.

4.17. In relation to students, the findings from the work of the ABSS projects indicated that:

- Students need to understand the changes introduced, and be supported through these changes to develop their own skills, reflective practice, and improve confidence.

- Students from underrepresented groups need to be encouraged to participate in co-production – project evidence suggested that discussing concerns with staff over aspects of curricula, including assessment and implicit bias, aided sense of belonging and value.

- Students need to be proactively supported; as stated by one student:

> *'One-to-one support is the most valuable. Support available is a key aspect of why [students] enjoy attending the college.'*

- As discussed earlier, technology proved beneficial in developing inclusive learning environments.

4.18. In relation to institutions, the findings from the work of the ten projects involving new active learning practices indicated that:

- Curricula interventions need to take a joined-up, integrated and strategic whole-institution approach – with a wide variety of academic and professional services teams on board, as well as students.

- At the same time, the flexibility to adapt interventions to department, course and institutional context was essential – ensuring buy-in. Mandating a bad fit intervention is not a recipe for success.

- Wholesale curricula changes should not be implemented part way through a student's HE journey, as they would increase the likelihood of disruption.

- Changing learning and teaching methods may initially result in negative student satisfaction – it is therefore important to manage expectations.

- Collaborations between academic and professional services staff and teams need to be encouraged through a systematic process.

Academic and professional services support for student wellbeing

4.19. The ABSS projects developed and provided academic and professional services support for students to improve their wellbeing, and ultimately improve retention and success. Support provided took the form of:

- Pre-entry and induction support – this type of support mainly sought to prepare students for HE, aiming to ease the transition from FE. The rationale for this type of project intervention was that, when supported through this transition, students should be more confident, and have an improved sense of belonging that would lead to higher levels of retention.
- Personal tutoring and academic support – supported by related CPD training sessions targeting academics involved in personal tutoring and support.
- Professional services support – the link between professional services support teams and school or departments across institutions was seen as important to provide students with a holistic support package, with the aim of improving student wellbeing, including support for mental health.
- Building support networks – interventions that promoted networking among students, and between students and staff created crucial support networks for students; these could lead to increased sense of belonging, higher retention and success.

Main benefits

4.20. A range of benefits emerged to date from projects focusing on student wellbeing. Examples include:

- Greater engagement of BAME students in the co-production of materials, master classes and the design of interventions.
- Greater awareness of the providers' commitment to addressing issues such as mental health conditions.
- Increased awareness of attainment gaps and student wellbeing issues affecting attainment across the institution.
- Increased adoption of personal tutoring and academic support – with projects reporting evidence of contribution of this support to improvements in the students' learning experience, boosted engagement, and raised confidence and resilience (evidence here is mainly drawn from qualitative research e.g. consultations with students and feedback provided during focus groups).
- Better working relationship between HE and FE providers – as evidenced by the feedback provided by both, HE and FE providers interviewed during this evaluation.
- Enhanced staff understanding of transition issues for BTEC students, and confidence in supporting BAME students and students from other underrepresented groups.

- Institutional changes with the introduction of new action plans on participation, diversity and equality, incorporating elements of project interventions.

4.21. Only a small number of ABSS projects specifically focused on interventions that enhanced academic and professional services capabilities and capacity to proactively improve students' wellbeing. Nevertheless, feedback from these projects indicated that one-to-one support has been particularly popular with students from lower participation areas (POLAR3 Quintiles 1 and 2), disabled students, and those with a disclosed mental health condition. The projects also reported that dedicated academic support boosted confidence levels, retention and success among: a) mature students who have been out of education for a number of years; and b) students who have other responsibilities and need additional support to manage their personal and academic time.

4.22. Feedback from the projects (consultations with project partners and project reports) highlighted that, in general, it was too early to demonstrate the direct impact of interventions upon students' success, retention and progression. Nevertheless, a few projects reported improved retention and achievement amongst BAME students and commuter students. Furthermore, some projects reported impacts beyond the lifecycle of their projects. For example:

- The Student Ambassador (see paragraph 3.50) scheme has already generated interest in the HE sector beyond the partners directly involved in the ABSS project.

- One of the ABSS project partners is working together with FE colleges in their respective region on the development of further training material, and other resources for student groups that are traditionally underrepresented in HE.

4.23. There is also emerging good practice of specific interventions that benefit students' wellbeing and could be replicated in the wider sector, as described below.

Pre-entry and induction support – what works

4.24. Interventions have included online pre-entry modules and intensive induction programmes. This has involved helping students realise what will be involved in studying in HE, academic and soft skills development, information on what support services are available during their studies, and in some cases, the opportunity for students to build relationships with their peers and staff.

4.25. These interventions were found to improve students' sense of belonging, confidence and engagement. For example, 'Flying Start' from the 'Intervention for Success' project (led by the University of Huddersfield) enabled students to be familiarised with buildings, other students, lecturers and course contents, which in turn made them feel more welcome and reduced their anxiety about transitioning into university (evidence based on consultations with students).

4.26. Crucial factors identified by the projects as facilitators in the success of these interventions included: the sustained promotion of adoption, and careful editing of materials and nuancing of the approaches to suit institutional and discipline differences. Other factors related to better coordination between university teams to effectively embed the support into the culture of the school or department, and in organisational processes involved in recruitment, admissions, teaching, learning and assessment, and personal tutoring.

4.27. The experiences of the ABSS projects also indicated that, when implementing similar interventions, certain caveats should be considered. For example:

- In one project, mature students reported a feeling of disjunction between some of the activities and resources, and their needs and expectations of study, suggesting that a peer-support network might have been more suitable.

- The timing of some interventions was found to be an issue. For example, induction programmes, in particular nine-to-five each day, were too long for certain groups of students, such as those with a disability, with long commutes and with caring, employment or other responsibilities.

Personal tutoring and academic support – what works

4.28. Based on the feedback and evidence provided by one of the projects, it is crucial to equip tutors with the resources and relevant information required to effectively support students, and to recognise when students need signposting or referring to further support. For example, the 'Intervention for Success' project (led by the University of Huddersfield) scaled up the use of analytics to identify both groups and individual students who were most at risk of underachievement and/or withdrawal, and to introduce proactive strategies for monitoring, intervening and supporting them. As a result, the HE Academic Support Tutor (HEAST) initiative was introduced; this offered one-to-one support, group tutorials and online resources, with the aim of improving students' confidence and attainment.

4.29. Listening to the student voice was raised as an important factor by a number of projects that focused on supporting students. This includes engaging with students to understand what barriers they face, and what support they might need or want. This is particularly important, as student cohorts can vary between different institutions, and even between different academic disciplines.

4.30. Another important aspect of support for students is the flexibility in how and when they can access it, which is particularly important for some students, e.g. those studying part time or in the evenings.

4.31. Another finding was that students were not always aware of what support was available and how to access it. This indicates that more needs to be done to improve the visibility of support systems – this was achieved in some projects through revised induction processes.

4.32. Consistency of support was also seen as important for both students and staff. For students it is the need to have consistent support throughout their modules and their time in HE, and for staff, consistency of approach.

4.33. Timeliness is another area that needs to be considered for academic support and personal tutoring, where students will want to access support and resources at the point of need (for example, before an exam) and depending on their stage of study. This would involve proactively targeting resources at students at points where they are most likely to be of use or interest, or having resources accessible throughout the year and 'on demand'.

4.34. A further lesson learned is the difference between FE and HE personal tutoring systems – student-staff personal tutoring relationships are often closer at FE, meaning that the jump to HE may be uncomfortable for some students, who are used to closer levels of support. One provider used learning from their relationship with a partner FE to develop a number of 'Academic Coach' roles – roles without teaching responsibilities. These roles have now been extended to all faculties since the end of the project funding.

4.35. Finally, an important factor for consideration could be the level of resources (both money and time) required to implement personal tutoring and academic support systems. Nevertheless, the evidence from the ABSS projects indicates that a whole-institution approach, whereby personal tutoring systems are embedded, cohesive and joined-up with wider central and departmental student support services (e.g. welfare, finance, mental health), appear to have greater impact than short-term, individual interventions.

Professional services support – what works

Project: Implementing a Strategic Approach to Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education
Lead partner: University of the West of England (UWE)
Project partners: Cardiff University, University of York, Student Minds and Universities UK

The programme had three main objectives:

d. To raise the strategic importance of mental wellbeing across HE through sector-wide engagement;
e. To implement local approaches in the partner universities;
f. To develop a resource and support toolkit for universities; and,
g. To test the extent to which the UUK StepChange Framework could be a tool to bring about systemic change within a university and the wider sector.

The StepChange Framework provides a toolkit to support universities to reconfigure themselves as mental health-promoting and supportive environments.[58] It was developed by UUK in collaboration with the Mental Wellbeing in Higher Education (MWBHE) working group.

Benefits and outcomes to date

The project has had the following benefits and outcomes for students, staff, individual universities, and the HE sector as a whole, as follows:

- One university partner has introduced and embedded emotional resilience learning into the curriculum of all four of its faculties (though not all courses).
- The project has created good practice and learning around student co-production approaches, forming the basis of the Student Minds Co-Production Guide.[59] This is a practical resource created for the wider sector that aims to support HE providers with the tools to meaningfully and effectively engage with students around institutional mental wellbeing strategies.
- One university partner has implemented mandatory online mental health training for staff (both academic and professional services), whilst another partner has introduced Mental

[58] More information about the framework can be found here: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/stepchange
[59] See: https://www.studentminds.org.uk/co-productionguide.html#

Health First Aid training for staff with over 700 attendees so far, which has helped initiate culture change around awareness and understanding of mental health.

- The project has led to a strengthening of internal and external relationships, for example, between academic and professional services teams, and between the university and the local council, NHS and Clinical Commissioning Group. As one member of staff involved commented, *'The key learning has been around developing and strengthening links between academic staff and professional services teams around student support and mental health.'*
- A further, perhaps unintended, benefit of the project has been around the improvement of the collection and use of data to enhance university mental health support services.
- At a sector level, the project has led to the improvement and further development of the UUK StepChange Framework and mental health self-assessment audit tool, following feedback and learning from the three universities.
- Also, at the sector level, the project partners have seen a significant change in the prioritisation of mental health in the sector, including a significant increase in the awareness of the UUK StepChange Framework and an increased understanding of the benefits of a whole-institution approach to mental health. As one member of staff involved commented, *'The programme has helped make mental health more of a sector priority.'*
- Furthermore, the project has led to the establishment of a HE-focused platform as part of the What Works for Wellbeing Centre.[60]

Lessons learned

Based on the feedback provided during the consultations with academic staff and students, the project provides important lessons around a implementing a strategic, whole-institution approach to mental wellbeing, as follows:

- A key lesson learned is that there is general agreement amongst the partners that a whole-institution approach to mental health is the way forward, giving impetus and credibility to UUK's StepChange Framework.
- An important factor in successfully implementing a whole-institution approach to mental health is the adoption of a hub and spoke model, embedding generic support services at a local departmental level, while retaining centrally-supplied professional services.
- An essential factor in successfully adopting a whole-institution approach to mental health wellbeing is senior leadership. As one member of staff involved commented, *'This type of project won't progress without senior management commitment – there needs to be a formal champion and a senior driver of the project, someone at University Executive Board level.'*
- The project also found that, to adopt a whole-institution approach, there is a need for strong staff engagement on every level. An important improvement to be made would be to equip all staff who are student-facing with the knowledge of when and where to signpost students to seek further support. As one member of staff involved commented, *'Getting everybody on the same page is important – buying into the strategy, allocating resources.'*
- Using a co-production approach has benefits for the development and implementation of mental health strategies – the approach needs a good balance between student and staff input, including involvement from clinicians and health professionals, and working with local NHS and third sector providers.

[60] See: https://whatworkswellbeing.org/category/he-mental-health/

- However, there are also challenges around student engagement, particularly at certain times of the year, for example, during the end of terms, exams and when Student Union Officers get elected – new officers can mean a change in priorities.
- The evidence from this project also confirmed that data available on students' mental health is limited to those who disclose a mental health condition during admission processes or within university, meaning the extent to which mental health affects students' experience and success can be underrepresented.
- Project partners also recognised the potential impact on staff that supporting student mental health may have, including feeling stressed or overwhelmed. This has led to another recommendation for institutions: to not only develop approaches to support student mental health, but also approaches to support staff.
- A further key lesson learned is that there are lots of pockets of effective practice around mental health throughout individual institutions, but this good work is not joined up and sometimes leads to duplication. A finding from some institutions, particularly larger ones, was the disconnection between different areas, including professional services teams and schools and departments. The project was therefore important in bringing academic and professional services staff teams together and working towards a common goal. As one member of staff involved commented, *'There are good pockets of work [around mental health] but this is all in silos. The project has been vital in embedding structures and thinking strategically.'*

Further information can be found here: www1.uwe.ac.uk/about/mentalwealthfirst.aspx.
The UUK StepChange Framework can be found here: www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/stepchange.

Support networks – what works

4.36. Part of the Diversity & Inclusion Student Ambassador Programme (see paragraph 3.50) involved support to build meaningful relationships among students, and between students and staff, through the development of networks both internally and externally. This was found to enable student ambassadors to interpret, understand, and articulate their personal experiences, as well as identifying proactive ways in which barriers for students from different student groups could be addressed.

4.37. Through some of the ABSS projects, students were able to work with other universities, collaborating and developing their networks. This has been a critical factor in creating stronger relationships, alongside co-production models that enabled students to work across their own institution and develop connections with staff.

4.38. The evidence provided by the ABSS projects indicates that, to improve students' sense of belonging, more work can be done with Student Unions to ensure that they are representative of the diversity of the student population, and that they actively promote a range of ways to include students, with the availability of different forms of networking and socialising to suit various preferences and cultures.

4.39. Commuter students might also need further support to develop broader networks whilst at university. Providers could actively consider how to support these students by, for example, being mindful of the timing of events so they are easier to join, and proactively considering how

teaching, learning and assessment practices encourage working with different students, including commuter students.

Progression to postgraduate study

4.40. Interventions with the focus of progression to postgraduate study (two projects) have been two-fold: providing students with relevant and accurate information to enable them to make informed decisions about their options, and supporting a successful transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study. These have involved:

- New online courses produced to support the transition of BAME students and students from lower socio-economic groups to postgraduate study.
- Information/awareness-raising events, including webinars and online resources.
- Mentoring sessions and taught Masters taster sessions, delivered by postgraduate students and staff (respectively).

Main benefits

4.41. A finding from one intervention that provided a programme of information, advice and guidance (IAG) for undergraduates was that, following the intervention, there was a decline in the number of students intending to go on to postgraduate taught study. Although this might not have been the expected outcome of the intervention, the evaluation of the project (undertaken by the project itself) found that, following the intervention, students experienced an increase of confidence in their knowledge, and the proportion expressing uncertainty over future plans reduced significantly. The project's evaluation report concluded that these findings indicated that the information provided allowed the students to make informed decisions on what is the best progression pathway for them.

What works

4.42. Feedback from the consultations with academics and professional staff indicated that facilitating factors in the successful delivery of IAG included using current postgraduate students and alumni (with students citing this as an important aspect of the interventions), and offering information that is specific and relevant to individual students. Another intervention, a pre-arrival online course for postgraduate-taught students – although poorly engaged with students in some instances – provided a range of benefits to students. For example, students reported that it helped them feel more prepared and confident, which could potentially lead to increased retention.

4.43. One of the ABSS projects also found that the impact of interventions varied for different groups of students. For example:

- Postgraduate admissions and funding information sessions were well received by all students. However POLAR quintile 1 and 2 students were twice as likely to sign up and attend, compared with the rest of the cohort.

- BAME students were twice as likely to participate in mentoring, which paired undergraduate mentees with postgraduate mentors, compared to the rest of the cohort.

4.44. One of the projects also showed that, although pre-entry support could have a positive impact on student transition and retention in postgraduate study, there are a few important points to consider, especially when targeting certain groups of students. For example, the time commitment can be too much, in particular for students who have full-time employment prior to starting. The project also highlighted that there are factors that affect students' decision-making processes that are, perhaps, outside of the control of institutions, e.g. financial support, employer sponsorship, cost of living, and fear of further debt. As stated in the project's report:

> *'The [student] survey showed that the financial impact of postgraduate study remains concerning for students, despite the introduction of the postgraduate loan. Access to additional financial support or employer sponsorship were cited frequently by students as areas which would influence decision making. The most prominent factors affecting student decisions were course fees, the overall cost of living, and fear of further debt. Similarly, important were considerations of how postgraduate study may fit into a particular career path.'*

4.45. Drawing on the evidence provided by these two projects, points to consider for institutions planning on implementing interventions to support students into postgraduate study include:

- The transition from undergraduate to postgraduate study is challenging;
- As with undergraduate study, role models such as current students and staff remain relevant; and,
- Advice and guidance need to be impartial and apply to postgraduate courses at all institutions, not just the at the institution where they are currently studying.

Employability

4.46. Projects that focused on progression into employment opportunities (two projects) developed and implemented interventions aimed at developing skills and confidence for interviews, supporting students into work placements and mentoring from business professionals. One project focused on under-representation in the construction industry, by developing a range of interventions designed to address the barriers to participation and improve the diversity of graduate recruitment and career uptake in this sector.

Main benefits

4.47. Progression into graduate employment (or into postgraduate study) is a longer-term outcome, with some student data not available within the timescales of the two-year ABSS programme.

4.48. Nevertheless, a range of benefits were reported by projects aiming to enhance students' employability opportunities. These included:

- A reduction in the gap in finding placements for targeted groups of students (i.e. BAME students, students from lower socio-economic backgrounds and disabled students).

- More students from underrepresented groups benefitted from the scaling-up of placement schemes in partner providers. For example, 300 students from a partner university were offered placements, while 100 secured their own. Furthermore, nine college students secured paid internships.

- Employability modules were produced by academic and professional staff with inputs from students, while new marketing materials were prepared by students with an interest in placements.

- Enhanced placement activity resulted in an increase in resource within the participating providers, with the establishment of new posts.

- Placement activity encouraged the development of networks and contacts with benefits for the institutions and the students.

4.49. In general, the uptake of placements and paid-internship opportunities enhanced students' awareness of the options available to them, and their understanding and perception of the sector(s). It also broadened their horizons and boosted their experience and skills, thereby enhancing their employability offer. Evidence suggests that a number of students secured employment via their placements. Furthermore, engagement in other employability activities (e.g. the preparation of marketing material and feedback on employability modules) boosted students' confidence and sense of self-worth (as evidenced by the feedback provided by the students involved in these projects).

What works

4.50. Feedback from the two ABSS projects involved in this type of support highlight that a variety of employability opportunities will need to be on offer for students (to suit different student circumstances). For example, micro-placements (two to five-week placements in students' first and second years, to support career exploration for those with no previous professional work experience) may appeal to students who are not yet ready for longer placements, or are not sure what career they would like to go into. Furthermore, micro-placements were found to not work well for technical degrees, where longer placements are the normal route.

4.51. Similarly, speed recruitment and networking events do not suit all types of students; because of the level of pressure and spontaneity required, these events typically worked better for students studying business- and creative-related degrees.

4.52. The findings from the two projects also indicate that providers must consider the needs of employers and their skills shortages, alongside students' needs and demands, and work closely with employers to play a part in students' careers' education and support.

5. The added value of the ABSS programme

5.1. This section discusses the added value of the ABSS programme, as demonstrated by institutional changes and impacts on students that would not have happened to the same extent and within the same timeframe without the support of this programme.

The added value of the programme for providers

5.2. The evaluation has shown that the ABSS projects are beginning to deliver institutional changes that address barriers to student success, directly as a result of the ABSS programme. For example, to maximise benefits for the students and ensure sustainability, the ABSS projects led to organisational improvements (including strengthening institution-wide strategies with specific reference to widening participation and social mobility), built and reinforced new approaches to teaching, enhanced student-support mechanisms, and raised awareness across the sector.

5.3. As discussed in paragraph 3.30 of this report, participating in an ABSS project has raised awareness of attainment gaps at a high level, and enabled project teams to influence senior management. As stated by a senior manager at one of the providers participating in the programme, the impact of a relatively small project is that '*…everybody is talking about BAME in their institution, the project has enabled establishing intersectionality across the institution and throughout the student support systems and student journey, in the classrooms, delivery of professional services and across the campus – the value for money derived from ABSS activities is therefore perceived to be relatively high'.*

5.4. Whilst it is difficult to attribute changes to institutional strategy and policy solely to the ABSS projects, the ABSS projects clearly have helped in shaping the institutional debate around attainment and barriers to student success. Consultations with VCs and senior management teams indicated that the ABSS support has helped to take the message further, and made clearer the links between students' successes, academics' delivery and institutional performance.

5.5. Evidence of the added value of the ABSS projects is shown through additional or new investments in facilities, resources, software and staff. For example:

- One partner institution converted teaching spaces to active learning rooms.
- Other institutions invested in online software and platforms to aid the student experience. For instance, at one institution Poll Everywhere (an online service for classroom responses)[61], which was initially only used for courses taking part in the ABSS project intervention, is now being used institution-wide.
- Another project invested in an online platform for staff and students for the personal academic tutoring scheme.
- One provider is recruiting four new Educational Developer posts, one of which should have expertise in team-based learning – a recommendation made by the ABSS project team.

[61] See: https://www.polleverywhere.com

- Another provider is involving students in the validation process across all courses.

- In another project, recruitment and CPD of teaching academics has been informed by lessons learnt through the ABSS project.

5.6. Furthermore, ten of the projects have contributed to the development of new institutional strategies as a result of their involvement in the ABSS programme. For example: one project fed into an institution's new Education Strategy; another project developed best practice guidelines for accessibility and inclusion policies; one project fed into its institution's curriculum refresh, particularly in relation to assessment regulations; and another project provided the impetus for an institutional strategy on mental health.

5.7. A further emerging benefit of the ABSS programme has been the embedding of student-support services within HE institutions. Five projects (involving 18 providers) scaled up student support in the classroom, through dedicated and specially trained academic and professional services staff. Other providers updated their resources and delivered training for students, materials of which are accessible online.

5.8. Three projects scaled up and enhanced personal academic tutoring systems, based on successful schemes at lead partners, as follows:

- The first project provided specialised tutors for HE students to help increase their academic and communication skills – there is evidence that this is already having the desired impact.

- The second project created a proactive support hub for students, which can re-engage disconnected students, and signpost students to appropriate specialised services; the service initiated approximately 30,000 phone calls in the last academic year.

- The third project focused on graduate employability, and used the ABSS funding to recruit additional dedicated careers resources to increase the take-up of placements amongst BAME students – the project has already seen emerging impacts of increased student engagement, and increased confidence around career readiness.

5.9. Other projects held training on academic skills and mental health, backed up by electronic and physical resources. For instance, hosting masterclasses for students on topics such as de-coding assessment criteria and understanding how to use assessment feedback, providing materials such as submission checklists, and an online platform explaining how to get the most out of a personal academic tutor meeting.

5.10. Other examples of positive changes at institutional level that emerged as a direct result of the ABSS programme are described below.

New pedagogy and curriculum practices

One example of changes to pedagogy as a result of the ABSS programme is the introduction of inclusive curricula. This has taken the form of changes to facilities, teaching delivery methods, assessment methods and accessibility. One project has scaled up team-based learning (TBL). The project has helped academic module leaders to think more about course design, which has knock-on effects for whole programmes; for example, one course is now developing more modules with TBL content due to a successful one-module pilot.

Another project is enhancing accessibility to equipment and course content for disabled students. The team has trialled an initiative which enables the testing of online equipment by students before their module takes place, so that reasonable adjustments can be made and issues fixed – if successful, the initiative will be embedded into the curriculum for certain courses.

One of the projects reported that the project is driving a change in assessment regulations at their institution, since TBL modules assessments cannot be adequately captured by the current student records system. The project is now supporting a change in the University's regulations – for example, regarding re-assessment.

Two projects have embedded resilience and mental health training for students into course curricula, delivered as part of lectures or incorporated into tutorials.

Another institution reported that there is a strong indication of future changes in design as a result of the project – for instance, changes to the length of lectures and method of assessment. This will help make teaching more inclusive, changing the delivery of courses rather than supporting students to fit the traditional ways of teaching and learning at universities.

The above examples are drawn from the following ABSS projects:
- Coventry University, DRIVER
- University of Derby, SAP2
- Kingston University, BME Attainment Gap Project
- New College Durham, HEAST
- Nottingham Trent University, SCALE-UP
- Open University, IncSTEM
- University of Portsmouth, Changing Mindsets
- University of Roehampton, RAFA2
- University of Sheffield, RARA
- University of Southampton, EAT

Academic staff professional development

A further benefit emerging from the ABSS programme is additional targeted CPD for academic staff. For example, one new element of academic staff CPD is increasing awareness and understanding of attainment gaps and related issues. One institution has altered its delivery of staff workshops, in order to address staff discomfort around talking about race. Several projects had developed online resources and toolkits for staff. For instance, one institution has created curriculum design notes that will inform and enable academics to embed resilience training within course content and teaching – the notes are available via the staff intranet. Another

institution has created guidance notes on the language of disability, to enable courses and modules to be more disability inclusive.

Examples of ABSS projects that have led to the introduction of additional professional development courses for staff include:

- Aston University, Levelling the Playing Field through Work-Based Learning
- Gateshead College, BRIDGE Project
- University of Huddersfield, I4S
- Kingston University, BME Attainment Gap Project
- Open University, IncSTEM
- University of Portsmouth, Changing Mindsets
- University of Roehampton, RAFA2
- University of Sheffield, RARA
- University of Southampton, EAT
- University of the West of England, IMWB

5.11. In the majority of projects involving scaling-up, use of data analytics across the lead or partner institution to inform management policies or improve teaching and learning methods in the classroom became more widespread as a result of the ABSS. Understanding the benefits of using data also reached more staff, and in particular, teaching academics and tutors. ABSS has also enabled in some cases buying in additional resources relating to data analytics (e.g. staff or staff time) and use of analytics is now embedded into several departments' practices, enabling the tracking of attainment targets and issues at a local level. A range of innovative approaches were tested, with a number of them highly transferable and effective in raising awareness around differential outcomes. An example of these is provided below – demonstrating that the tools used can be easily transferable and provide credible data to engage management and academic staff with the concept of attainment gaps as the first step in addressing barriers to differential outcomes.

Project: Value Added Metric and Inclusive Curriculum Framework
Lead partner: Kingston University
Project partners De Montfort University, the University of Greenwich, the University of Hertfordshire, University College London, and the University of Wolverhampton.

The project involves two interconnected interventions:

- A **Value Added (VA) metric** – a data dashboard which highlights differences in attainment between white and BAME students that cannot be explained by entry qualifications or subject (looking at faculty, school, department and course level); and,
- An **Inclusive Curriculum Framework (ICF)** – a multi-dimensional framework which identifies points where principles of inclusivity can be introduced in academic programmes.

The project explored whether these two interventions could be successfully scaled up across the partnership and assessed their transferability to the wider sector. The project took an institution-wide approach, implementing the VA metric and ICF across all faculties in the five partner HEIs, supporting long-term sustainability and impact. The two interventions are complementary, with the ICF a solution to the question posed by the VA metric: what can we do about the BAME attainment gap?

Benefits and outcomes to date

The VA metric has been successfully scaled up and embedded at all five partners, with all involved committed to its ongoing use. Partners reported that the VA metric data dashboard was a powerful visual tool that encouraged staff buy-in and engagement with the concept of attainment gaps. As one member of staff commented: *'The VA has been absolutely invaluable. It provides academic data which speaks to academics down to programme level and busts the urban myths'.*

Whilst the VA metric was wholly adopted, the scaling up of the ICF was more nuanced. Partners adopted the principles of the ICF, but tailored it to their own institutional contexts. This flexibility was seen positively as it enabled cohesion with existing inclusivity policies and curriculum processes, as well as encouraging buy-in and empowering academics to change their programmes and modules. The ICF therefore enhanced the work the partners were already doing in this space.

The project **has positively impacted student attainment, progression and attainment. For the four partners which reported data, the VA score for BAME students rose significantly, leading to a reduction in the BAME attainment gap for three of these partners.** However, white student attainment also increased significantly at one partner, meaning the BAME attainment gap widened. Progression and retention data is more nuanced, though broadly positive, with improvements in BAME student progression from Year 2 to Year 3. The long-term impact of the interventions on attainment will be monitored and will become clearer in the next few years.

Students were involved in project delivery as trained and paid 'curriculum consultants', with 36 students employed across the five partners to date. Whilst titles and exact roles varied, all partners adopted this approach and engaged students in reviewing, critiquing and designing curricula. This approach ensured students were involved in creating institutional change, with all partners seeing value in the consultant roles. Benefits for the student curriculum consultants included: an increase in their awareness and understanding of attainment gaps; feeling more empowered to take action; and reporting an improved sense of belonging.

Over 750 members of academic and professional services staff have also attended training workshops on the VA metric and ICF across the five partners to date. Evidence collected by the project (interviews and surveys) suggests that the training: increased staff awareness and understanding of the BAME attainment gap and the underlying reasons for its existence; increased staff understanding of principles of inclusive teaching and learning; enabled staff to make practical changes to the curriculum to benefit students; and developed staff confidence in using the ICF to stimulate conversations with colleagues and embed changes in departmental and institutional practices. As one member of staff commented: *'I became aware of the diverse needs of my students and how to address each student's needs without compromising the overall learning environment'.*

One method of engaging academic staff was appointing BAME Attainment Leads for each faculty. This method also had the effect of embedding the project within faculties and indicating the importance the institution places on tackling the BAME attainment gap.

Lessons learned

The implementation of the VA metric and dashboard is not necessarily a quick process. Technical expertise is critical to create and maintain the dashboard (e.g. in the form of data analysts), as is the ability to obtain the data in a usable format. It also requires upfront investment in staff time to set up, and an ongoing commitment to purchase HESA datasets. The collaborative element of the project also enabled the development of communities of practice, for example, around inclusive curricula. The range of institutions and staff involved (e.g. strategic planners, learning and teaching leads, equality leads) also enabled partners to see different ways of addressing attainment gaps, and demonstrates how the VA metric and ICF can be embedded in a variety of HE provider contexts. As one member of staff involved commented: *'The collaboration has been really positive…there are huge benefits from this approach. We [the project partners] will continue to work together in some form after the project finishes'.*

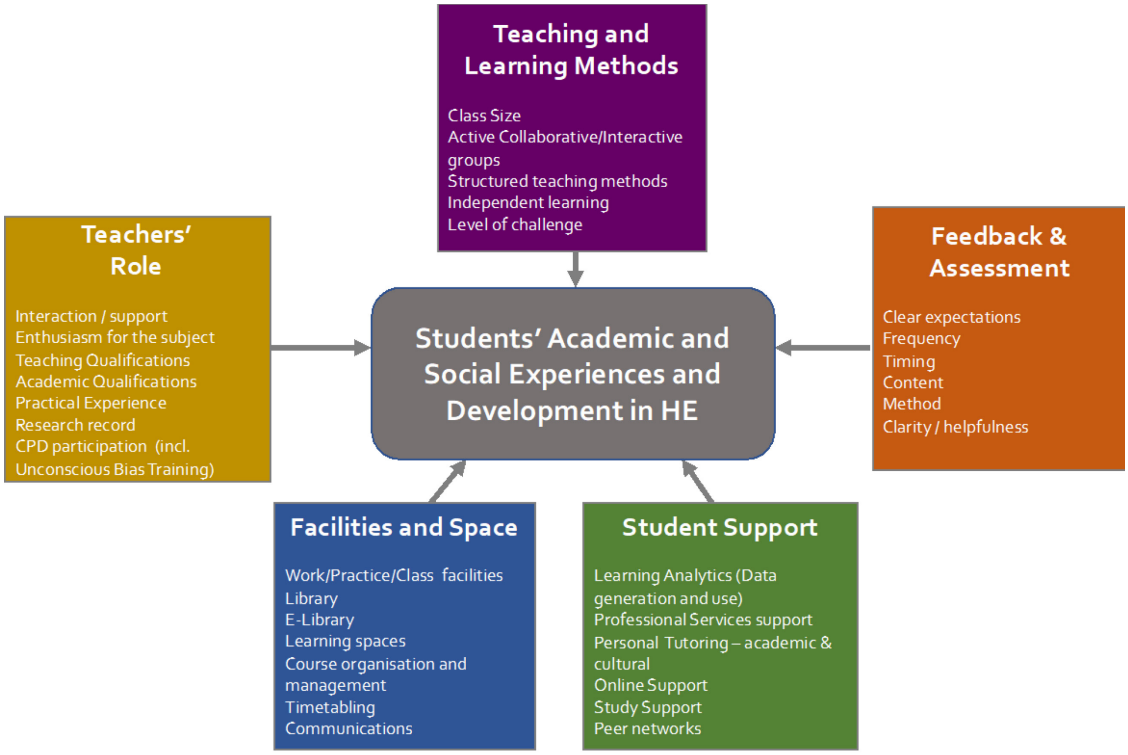
Further information can be found on the project website: https://closingtheattainmentgap.co.uk/.

5.12. In general, organisational changes may be incremental but they have been instrumental in delivering step changes in the HE environment. Benefits from organisational change may also take a long time to materialise. However, feedback from the projects has indicated that organisational performance indicators, as well as educational outcomes, have experienced positive change where new approaches initiated by the ABSS projects have been introduced. Examples of improved performance indicators include a reduction in student appeals, improved grades, improved attendance, and improved attainment (including significant reduction in attainment gaps among various student groups, i.e. from 20% down to 4%). Furthermore, there is evidence that institutional and teaching and learning changes implemented as part of the ABSS programme are making a difference to students, as discussed in the previous sections.

5.13. There was also broad agreement amongst those consulted that the activities, and related benefits of the ABSS projects, are largely sustainable. Furthermore, the ABSS programme has generated new evidence on what works and to what extent for different groups of students in HE, particularly in relation to inclusive institutional practices and active teaching and learning, as discussed in section 4.

5.14. Within an HE setting there is raft of activities and interactions that have the potential to impact upon student development (academic, social, cultural and potentially financial and economic), including that of students underrepresented in HE. These activities are summarised in Figure 5.1. The ABSS programme has enabled student-centric principles and practices to be tested or scaled up across a range of these activities, including teaching and learning methods, student support, feedback and assessment, facilities and space, and development of teachers/academics. Findings from these interventions have shed more light on our understanding of what works better for different groups of students.

Figure 5.1: Testing and scaling up student-centric practices



Source: WECD

The added value of the programme for student development

Student satisfaction

5.15. The evidence from the ABSS projects suggests that student satisfaction has increased where new practices were implemented. A student focus group at one provider reported that its dedicated academic support tutor – an additional resource funded by the ABSS programme – was a key aspect of why they enjoyed attending the institution. This evidence has been backed up by an independent report by an external consultancy; this notes that the role 'adds value' to the student experience.

5.16. Two institutions reported improved recent NSS results, particularly regarding assessment and feedback. The project teams noted that it is difficult to assess how far the ABSS project contributed to an increase in NSS scores, but feedback and assessment were key elements of each institution's project.

5.17. Furthermore, one provider reported that students had an improved understanding of the personal academic tutoring scheme as a result of new materials and resources developed by its ABSS project. A focus group with students indicated the resources were welcome and met their needs.

Confidence

5.18. Ten institutions (from six projects) reported students experiencing increased confidence levels as a result of the ABSS project interventions. One provider noted that its dedicated academic

support tutor helped increase confidence, particularly in relation to combating anxiety over studying and examinations.

5.19. Discussions with students and academics as part of this evaluation highlighted that, confidence (as well as sense of belonging and satisfaction) are complex issues requiring multiple levels of intervention and support, including (structured) peer support, support in and out of the classroom during teaching and learning, and also preparation for assessments and work production (e.g. explaining referencing and structuring of a report).

Skills

5.20. A further emerging benefit for students resulting from ABSS projects is increased skills – both academic and lifelong career skills. For instance, one provider reported that the project's intervention – a dedicated academic support tutor – helped develop and improve students' key academic skills, such as referencing, paraphrasing, critical thinking and debating (as above). The project team also noted that students had enhanced their career skills, for example, communication and presentation skills, and time management. This evidence comes from academic and student focus groups, and a report by an external consultancy.

5.21. Another provider noted how the project has helped students gain leadership and presentation skills. The institution has embedded resilience training in its peer-assisted learning scheme, whereby students lead training workshops attended by their peers. Peer leadership has also helped increase student engagement in the workshops and intervention.

Widening participation

5.22. Some providers reported increased participation from underrepresented student groups as a result of ABSS projects. However, given that a range of widening participation-related initiatives is implemented in most institutions, it is not very easy to isolate the impact of a single ABSS project. Nevertheless, early positive outcomes were reported. For example:

- One institution reported an increase in female participation on a built environment and engineering programme: in 2016 females made up 4% of the cohort, rising to 27% in 2017, and holding at 25% in 2018. BAME students made up 17% of students on the 2018 cohort of the same programme, compared to 0% in 2016 and 2017.

- Another institution reported a marked increase in the number of students enrolling from a regional college project partner, from the typical number of 70 students per year to 110 in the 2017/18 academic year (following pre-entry and induction support to prepare students for HE).

Attainment

5.23. Five institutions (in five different projects) already noted an impact on student attainment and outcomes as a result of an ABSS project. A few of the providers reported that academic staff had seen higher standards of work and higher grades, thanks to their intervention involving a dedicated (sometimes non-academic) support tutor. This improvement was backed up by

students, during a focus group and in an independent report commissioned by one of the providers.

5.24. One partner institution reported improved attainment and progression, particularly amongst BAME students and students from low-participation neighbourhoods. The project team noted that these students seemed to do better in modules with elements of active collaborative and team-based learning. Similarly, another institution on the same project reported that students have responded positively to TBL, and evidence suggests an increase in student attainment as result.

Engagement

5.25. Eleven institutions (in six projects) noted an increase in student engagement as result of the interventions funded by the ABSS programme. For example, all three institutions involved in one project noted an improvement; the project focused on scaling up and embedding TBL practices (see paragraph 2.23). The institutions reported that student engagement had increased, particularly in relation to course content, and that attendance and interaction during modules had improved.

Student-staff relationships

5.26. A further, perhaps unintended, benefit emerging from the ABSS programme was better relationships between academic staff and students, as highlighted in the previous sections. Several institutions (11 institutions in six projects) reported that staff and students have been working more closely as a result of the projects. This was particularly apparent in projects focusing on personal academic tutor schemes – one provider reported that relationships were 'richer' as a result of the scaling up and enhancement of the scheme.

Wider reach

5.27. The ABSS programme has also provided additional value to the wider HE sector. The ABSS projects have helped promote conversations around attainment and inclusion at a national level, and institutions not directly involved have shown interest and been proactive in contacting project partners.

5.28. Providers have been proactive in disseminating the principles and initial outcomes of their projects at national and international conferences, and at institutional conferences; for example: Advance HE, The Association for Higher Education Careers Services (AHECS, Ireland), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), the National Education Opportunities Network (NEON), and the International Academy of Technology, Education and Development (IATED). Several projects also have journal publications forthcoming and submissions planned, and a few projects have organised their own dissemination conferences.

5.29. Several projects have been approached by non-ABSS institutions in relation to their projects. For example, one partnership has received visits from 10 providers and a regional careers network to share best practice around supporting graduate employability amongst BAME students. Another partnership has been contacted by a non-ABSS project institution that is interested in

applying TBL and other inclusive teaching practices, developed as part of an ABSS project at their own institution.

5.30. The ABSS project participants are also influencing wider HE sector bodies. For example, one institution is working with professional accreditation bodies to change policies to be more disability inclusive. Another institution is collaborating with Advance HE to set up a national online assessment and feedback community of practice for academic staff – three webinars have been held so far.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

6.1. By enabling scaling up of effective approaches, the ABSS programme was designed to deliver a step change in addressing barriers to student success, and in tackling differential outcomes in terms of participation and attainment during their studies, progression to postgraduate study, and progression into work.

6.2. The specific aims of the ABSS programme were defined as follows:

- To support collaborations that would develop systematic and strategic approaches to addressing differential student outcomes;
- To support collaborations that would scale up successful innovations for students with specific learning difficulties;
- To support collaborations that would scale up successful innovations which support students with mental health conditions; and,
- Identify how good practice and interventions can be validated, replicated, transmitted and embedded across a diverse range of providers, and identify what conditions are required to facilitate this.

6.3. The evaluation has shown that a range of benefits has emerged from the delivery of the programme, and a range of lessons can be shared with others in the HE sector. An overview of these is provided below, followed by specific recommendations for providers and the OfS.

Overall conclusions

6.4. Support from the ABSS programme has enabled the scaling up of good practice across institutions, aided by collaborative partnerships. Scaling up may have gone ahead without this support, but potentially at a smaller scale and within longer timeframes. In particular, the partnership-based delivery model of the ABSS programme has been instrumental in accelerating knowledge exchange of what works between providers, and has led to adoption of a range of innovative practices by a diverse group of providers in a relatively short period of time.

6.5. This wider adoption of practices that have proven to work in enhancing student (and staff) performance has created the appropriate social and education context that could benefit underrepresented students (and potentially all students) in a shorter period of time than would have been the case without the ABSS support.

6.6. The evaluation has shown that, overall, as a result of the support offered by the ABSS programme, more new learning and teaching interventions have been tested. Findings from these interventions have shed more light onto our understanding of what works better for different groups of students, and under what conditions. Furthermore, a number of organisational outcomes and impacts have already emerged – and more are expected in the future – and effective practice has been shared among providers participating in the programme and the wider HE sector.

6.7. Interventions have largely been inclusive, rather than targeting specific groups of students

underrepresented in HE. Nevertheless, the ABSS programme has enabled student-centric principles and practices to be tested or scaled up across a range of activities, including teaching and learning methods, student support, student feedback and assessment practices, facilities and space, and development of teachers/academics. Feedback provided during this evaluation indicates that:

- Targeted interventions require thorough preparation and planning, as they could reinforce a deficit model. Furthermore, institutions may have to check and address staff awareness and understanding of issues surrounding underrepresentation of specific groups of students in their classrooms, prior to introducing specific schemes.

- Academic staff engagement and buy-in is crucial at the local level, i.e. where interventions are being implemented. Several providers found this to be lacking, with intervention activities suffering as a result. Part of this may be due to academic staff discomfort and lack of knowledge around attainment gaps and talking about topics like race.

- Technology can play an instrumental role in providing an inclusive environment while meeting the needs of underrepresented groups of students. For example, tools like virtual mapping, remote cameras, tablets and portable microscopes allow everyone to enhance their learning experience, but they can be particularly beneficial for students with mobility, mental health, learning or sensory issues.

6.8. In general, the feedback received from the ABSS projects highlights that the potential of unintended consequences arising from inclusive (including active learning) approaches will need to be considered in designing and delivering these schemes, particularly in the early stages of implementation, to avoid exacerbation of the very issues the interventions are meant to address.

6.9. In relation to student engagement, the evaluation of the programme shows that student engagement in strategic decisions taken by providers is limited in the HE sector, i.e. there is no evidence to suggest that students are systematically engaged and empowered to contribute to institutional initiatives that aim address differential outcomes. The experience of the ABSS projects engaging students in their interventions indicates that student-engagement models benefit students in many ways. However, these interventions require resources and could be management-intensive for academics or administrative staff involved.

6.10. In terms of organisational impacts, providers participating in an ABSS project have raised awareness of attainment gaps at a high level within their institutions, and enabled project teams to influence senior management – and senior staff engagement and buy-in has been important to the success of the ABSS projects. As a result, the programme has generated a range of institutional changes. For example, there is evidence of providers embedding effective teaching practice at module, course and departmental levels. The evidence provided suggests that relatively small projects have often triggered and enabled significant changes within an institution. Although not all positive changes can be attributed to the impact of and value added by the ABSS programme, the project partners involved in ABSS projects attach a relatively high added value to the contribution of the programme.

6.11. The ABSS support has enabled additional recruitment of project management staff, as well as staff directly supporting students (e.g. HE academic support tutors, careers advisors). However,

wider scaling up of changes institution-wide will require more time and resources. Some projects have already built momentum to achieve this; others may need additional stimulus.

6.12. In terms of its delivery model, the collaborative approach of the ABSS programme has enabled interventions to have a greater impact than an individual institution (smaller ones, in particular) can achieve by itself, and supports the adoption of effective practice. The programme has enabled providers to recognise synergies, observe different ways of working and strengthen relations between providers – during the programme and, in some cases, for the future.

6.13. As intended, the ABSS programme has encouraged the sharing of effective practice, and there is emerging evidence of the benefits of participating in collaborative projects in achieving this aim: partner providers have adopted and adapted interventions, projects have helped promote conversations around attainment and inclusion at a national level, and institutions which are not directly involved in the programme have approached project partners and arranged visits to learn about what works. Several ABSS institutions have developed sector-level guidance notes and resources around best practice to enable take-up by other providers, whilst a few projects are influencing and collaborating with wider HE sector bodies.

6.14. However, it is not clear at this stage what the future legacy of ABSS projects will be at some institutions, and whether institutions will continue investing in resources for scaling up and wider implementation of interventions beyond the lifetime of the ABSS funding. The sustainability and legacy of some interventions could be at risk, due mainly to the lack of firm plans by providers for ongoing tracking and analysis of data and impacts.

Recommendations

For the OfS

6.15. Funding innovation and continuous-improvement teaching and learning is well received by the sector, and there is evidence that this approach is generating step changes while representing good value for money. However, the nature of the ABSS project-based approach to funding may not promote sustainability. The OfS will need to look beyond competitive funding for a more coherent, proactive and strategic approach across the sector in addressing differential outcomes for specific groups – a more strategic approach could include both application of regulatory powers and also guidance and funding support for the whole sector.

6.16. At the same time, the review of the ABSS project interventions indicates that interventions targeting specific groups of students underrepresented in HE (or with declining numbers in participation and continuous engagement) remain very limited. For example, very few interventions have focused specifically on mature learners or disabled students. BAME students also tend to be treated as a single group. To enable a better understanding of what works for these student groups, targeted funding may work better. This is even more important in the light of key facts and figures related to differential outcomes in HE showing that although there are improvements across the sector, some educational outcomes for some groups of students remain comparatively low.

6.17. Within an HE setting there is a raft of activities and interactions that have the potential to impact upon student development (academic, social, cultural and, potentially, financial and economic)

including those students underrepresented in HE. The ABSS programme has enabled student-centric principles and practices to be tested or scaled up across a range of these activities, including teaching and learning methods, student support, feedback and assessment, facilities and space and development of teachers/academics. Findings from these interventions have shed more light on our understanding of what works better for different groups of students. However, fostering a student-centric culture across the HE sector would require additional interventions.

For providers

6.18. The evaluation has shown that more can be done to enhance joined-up thinking and action across all HE areas that have the potential to impact upon student development (academic, social, cultural and, potentially, financial and economic), including those students underrepresented in HE. Fostering a student-centric environment within an institution, while aiming to accommodate all students' needs and preferences, should involve a pan-institutional strategic approach, significant resources and planning, and clear, relevant and realistic lines of accountability.

6.19. Delivery of the ABSS programme has shown that a range of innovative approaches tested during the programme are highly transferable and effective in raising awareness around differential outcomes and generating the conditions for reducing inequalities within HE. At the same time, the evaluation has shown that scalability and replicability of new approaches need to be well thought through and planned. If poorly implemented, they are less likely to be successful. Furthermore, adoption is most likely to be successful where there is a sense of genuine ownership of change or new practices by all involved, including students, academic staff, and professional staff at all levels of an institution. Such an approach requires senior management support, and alignment of strategic policies and documents with resource allocation.

6.20. Students are engaged, but there is no strong evidence to suggest that students are currently systematically engaged and empowered to assume more leadership and take on greater responsibility and accountability in institutional policy changes. Clearly, more can be done at both an individual institutional level and in the wider HE sector.

6.21. For the ABSS and similar programmes, building evaluation into the projects and programme early on (internal evaluation and external evaluation) improves the sense of accountability among all participants. At the moment, evaluation and assessment of impacts of various interventions in a systematic way is under-resourced and sporadic at institutional level. Understanding of impact is often synonymous with or aligned to official data required and collected, rather than bespoke methodologies.

6.22. Evaluation and assessment of processes and impacts of interventions with the potential to impact upon (a large number of) students' academic, social, economic and cultural development needs to be resourced appropriately and proportionately by providers. Assessment of 'what works' may not always be sufficient – a good understanding of 'what works and makes a difference for the target group' is needed.

APPENDIX A: Evaluation framework

The rationale for robust evaluation

Understanding what works – in terms of interventions and the impact they have on outcomes for individuals, the economy and society – is important to ensure that public funding and tuition fee income are being invested effectively.

Providers across the sector have developed and delivered an impressive range of interventions and approaches aimed at improving student success and outcomes. However, few of the interventions that have been initiated to date have been evaluated systematically and a recurring theme across recent research[62] is the need for rigorous and systematic evaluation of different interventions adopted and approaches taken[63].

Addressing the attainment gap remains a key priority for the OfS with student experience and outcomes at the heart of the recently published OfS Strategy 2018-2021. The need for and commitment to a joined-up sector-wide response to secure a step-change that maximises outcomes for all students was informed by the review undertaken by King's College London, ARC Network and the University of Manchester on the 'Causes of Differences in Student Outcomes'[64]. This set out a number of key findings and actions to address effectiveness and impact, namely:

- Higher education providers tend to rely on patchy and anecdotal information that the support delivered is meeting student needs.
- Many providers have concentrated resources in an exploratory phase of confirming the existence of differential outcomes and then understanding their cause, so interventions are fairly recent and impact yet to be realised.
- Consequently, relatively few interventions have therefore been evaluated systematically.
- The time-limited nature of the funding of current initiatives has limited the scope for longer-term evaluation.
- The data issues are complex.
- Frameworks for evaluation are needed and should be integral to project design and planning – making use of lessons from approaches to evaluation in other sectors, such as the What Works Networks (which guide decision making in public services) and the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), which works in the schools' sector.

This means that the evaluation of ABSS needs to be aware of, learn from, and contribute to the wider body of evidence on access, student success and progression but it also needs to provide fit-for-purpose, robust and actionable recommendations that can inform delivery and approaches almost immediately as well as for future programmes and delivery.

Aims and objectives of the evaluation of the ABSS programme

The key aim of the evaluation is to explore and assess 'what works, why and in what context'. National data shows that the sector has made significant progress on access and participation, but it is increasingly untenable not to be able to demonstrate which interventions (in which contexts, and to

[62] For example, HEFCE (2015) Student opportunity outcomes framework research: in depth study, CFE Research; HEFCE (2015) Student opportunity outcomes framework research: data return project, CFE Research.
[63] As originally articulated in HEFCE proposals for approaches to quality assessment in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland: Consultation (June 2015).
[64] See: https://tinyurl.com/y9z2orh2

which learners) have been instrumental in delivering the genuine progress that has been made, and which could have the most impact. Within this context, the objectives of the evaluation are:

- To identify the extent to which funding is spent according to plan (accountability for public funds);
- To enable an overall assessment of the difference to student, society and economy outcomes that can be attributed to this funding (impact assessment);
- To demonstrate the value of any impact at individual, provider, project and national levels (return on investment);
- To identify differences between project approaches to see if these differences are associated with differential participation rates and progress (benchmarking of outcomes); and
- To discuss the emerging effects of different types of interventions (what works, why and in what circumstances) and highlight areas for future research and methods to further explore and establish the causal effects of these interventions.

The evaluation particularly focuses on:

1) The role of partnerships and collaboration in scaling up successful projects: Assessing how successfully the ABSS programme and individual projects are driving/have been driven by collaborations and partnerships that have: developed systematic and strategic approaches to address differential student outcomes; supported collaborations that have scaled up successful inclusive practice interventions for disabled students; met specific project aims, objectives and success criteria; invested funds according to plan; and achieved overall programme objectives. In particular, the evaluation seeks to: identify good practice for wider adoption; validate good practice interventions and the necessary conditions and practices to facilitate it; identify if and how good practice can be replicated, transmitted and embedded across a diverse range of providers; and improve and enhance local project evaluation. Main issues to be explored during the evaluation are:

- The rationale for working in partnership on student success and outcomes;
- What are the benefits of working in collaboration with other partners?
- What works well in the partnerships and why?
- What the challenges have there been for partnerships and solutions/mitigations?

2) What works and lessons learned from inclusive practice vs. targeted interventions drawing upon:

- The rationale for why certain projects have chosen to focus on one or the other type of intervention;
- Their own definitions of what inclusive practice means (if they are using inclusive methods);
- Any ethical issues associated with using one or the other method; and
- Potential impacts on the student of inclusive practice vs. targeting (where possible).

Approach – evaluation questions and lines of enquiry

Figure A.1 summarises the overarching lines of evaluation enquiries at programme and project levels and Figure A.2 presents the different aspects of the formative and summative evaluations.

Figure A.1: Summary of ABSS evaluation objectives at programme and project level

Evaluation at Programme Level	• The extent to which funding as a whole is spent according to plan (accountability for public funds) • An overall assessment of the difference to student, society and economy outcomes that can be attributed to the funding (effectiveness and impact assessment) • Capturing qualitative and quantitative value of any impact (and hence return on investment) at individual, provider, project and national levels (efficiency and 'return on investment') • Assessment of various approaches (benchmarking of outcomes) • Exploring the causal effect of different types of interventions in particular in the areas of collaborations and partnerships and inclusive vs targeted approaches (what works, for whom, why and in what circumstances/conditions) and the routes to scaling up and sustainability (including behavioural and institutional change) • Disseminate lessons and make recommendations to inform OfS's advice to Government on future student success policy (learn, share, influence)
Evaluation at Project Level	• Evaluate the success of the projects against the wider aims of the programme • Evaluate the progress, outputs and outcomes of each project funded against their individual aims and success criteria • Capture challenges faced by the projects, and the conditions and contexts within which they operate • Identify emerging themes and particular issues as they arise • Identify knowledge gaps across the programme for which further investigation is required • Disseminate findings amongst the projects and the wider external audience

Figure A.2: Summative and formative evaluation lines of enquiry

		Lines of Enquiry and Research	Methods	When
Formative Evaluation	**Review of Processes**	• Description of activities – alignment/fidelity with original business case • Description of pathways to impact (i.e. from funding to delivering change)	• Desk-based review • Consultations with Project Leads	May 2017-March 2018 (interim) April 2018- March 2019 (final)

		Lines of Enquiry and Research	Methods	When
		• Review of Evaluation Plans • Review of Partnership Arrangements – operational models	• Consultations with Evaluators • Consultations with Project Partners • Consultations with academics and management teams	
	Review of Progress	• Progress with activities • Achievements – in terms of activities delivered and outputs • Progress with monitoring and evaluation	• Desk-based review • Consultations with Project Leads • Consultations with Project Partners • Consultations with academics and management teams • Consultation with Evaluators	
	Experiences and Lessons	• What is working • What could have been better developed • What needs to be/can be changed • Understanding of the context – enablers, barriers, challenges • Emerging Good Practice • Review of the extent to which providers refine their projects as a result of this formative evaluation	• Desk-based review • Consultations with Project Leads • Consultations with Project Partners • Consultations with academics and management teams • Consultation with Evaluators	
	Evidence from Projects (presented in	• What has been the investment on the programme to date (grant and other expenditure) • Has there been a difference between originally proposed resources and actually committed • How many and who has been engaged (students, cohorts, academics, departments, providers – fully, partially and not at all,	• Information from the individual projects (desk-based reviews of data contained in Management Information Systems	

		Lines of Enquiry and Research	Methods	When
	aggregated format)	even when targeted) • Evidence of experience from participation (students, cohorts, academics, departments, providers – fully, partially and not at all, even when targeted) • What has been achieved (comparison with plans and intentions) • What are the short-term/medium-term benefits e.g. to continuation, completion, attainment, satisfaction, employment? (students, cohorts, academics, departments, providers) – based on qualitative information and any baseline information and progress data produced by the projects • Are achievements and impacts attributable to the intervention/the ABSS programme and to what extent • To what extent achievements and impacts go beyond direct participants • How have students, academics/staff and the institution changed as a consequence of this intervention • To what extent activities/benefits are sustainable • Factors affecting/influencing delivery of outputs and outcomes	(MIS) and Financial Information Systems (FIS+ consultations with leads and partners, academics and management)	
Summative Evaluation	**Benefits and Impact Assessment**	• Benefits for learners • Benefits for academics • Benefits for the organisation • Benefits for the sector • Unintended/additional benefits or consequences	Project reports Consultations	March 2019 - February 2019
	Synthesis and Analysis	• Qualitative and quantitative • Summary of findings from all projects • Better understanding of the effectiveness of the operational model i.e. collaborative approaches, and efficiencies achieved • Added value of interventions/the ABSS support • Lessons learned and good practice to inform policy and funding	Project reports Consultations	
	Hypotheses to Be Tested	• Institutional/departmental successes can either be scaled up through a strategic (i.e. top down) approach, a bottom up approach, or a combination of the two. • Differences in attainment/retention among participant providers and non-participant providers – based on desk-based review of	Project reports Consultations	

		Lines of Enquiry and Research	Methods	When

		available research and baseline information (to inform further/later research exploring equivalent data that could provide evidence of significant differences between participants and non-participants)
		• Collaborative projects are (more) effective in delivering results in closing the gap of attainment – providers involved and sector
		• Collaborative projects are (more) efficient in delivering results in closing the gap of attainment – providers involved and sector
		• **For learners (aggregate)**
		  ○ Take up of (new) initiative enhances **awareness, sense of belonging, peer interaction, interaction with staff, motivation, positive attitudes**
		  ○ Take up of (new) initiative improves **likelihood** of completion/degree award, satisfaction, continuation (employment/success)
		• **For academics involved (aggregate)**
		  ○ Participation improves awareness (more academics knowing + academics knowing more)
		  ○ Participation changes/improves behaviours
		  ○ Participation enhances teaching performance (student satisfaction + internal assessment)
		  ○ Participation enhances quality of teaching materials
		• **For providers**
		  ○ Adoption of initiative at departmental/institutional level improves student satisfaction (department/institution)
		  ○ Adoption of initiative improves attainment at departmental level
		  ○ Adoption of initiative catalyses a strategic commitment to embed practice at departmental level and/or whole institutional level		

APPENDIX B: ABSS projects

Project Title	Lead HE Provider	Partners
1. **Levelling the Playing Field through Work-Based Learning – Addressing Differential Graduate Employability Outcomes**	Aston University	City University of London, Ulster University, Birmingham City University
2. **Driver: Data Responsive Initiatives as a Vehicle for achieving Equity in Results**	Coventry University (CU)	Staffordshire University (SU), Birmingham City University, 6th Form College Solihull, Coventry University College, Stoke College, University of Wolverhampton (UoW), Halesowen College
3. **BRIDGE: Building Routes Into Degrees with Greater Equality**	Gateshead College	University of Northumbria at Newcastle upon Tyne, Derby College
4. **Using a value-added metric and an inclusive curriculum framework to address BAME attainment gap**	Kingston University	University of Wolverhampton, University of Hertfordshire, De Montfort University, Greenwich University, University College London
5. **HE Academic Support Tutor (HEAST) – additional support to address barriers to student success**	New College Durham	Sunderland College, Darlington College
6. **Scaling Up Active Collaborative Learning for Student Success**	Nottingham Trent University (NTU)	Anglia Ruskin University (ARU), University of Bradford
7. **Embedding and sustaining inclusive STEM practices**	The Open University (OU)	Plymouth University, University of Leeds
8. **Diversity and Inclusion Student Ambassador Programme**	The University of Manchester	Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), University of Birmingham
9. **Student Attainment Project (SAP) 2**	University of Derby	Southampton Solent University, University of West London (UWL)
10. **Transforming Transitions**	University of Exeter	University of Birmingham, Loughborough University, Queen Mary University of London, Pearson Education, Exeter College, Leicester College, Hereford Sixth Form College, City and Islington College
11. **Intervention for Success (I4S)**	University of Huddersfield	Coventry University, University of Lincoln, Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU)
12. **Progression to, and success in postgraduate study, for students from BAME and low participation neighbourhoods**	University of Leeds	University of Manchester, University of Sheffield, University of Warwick, University of York
13. **Changing Mindsets: Reducing stereotype threat as a barrier to student success**	University of Portsmouth	University of the Arts London, University of Brighton, University of Winchester

Project Title	Lead HE Provider	Partners
14. Re-imagining Attainment for All 2 (RAFA 2)	University of Roehampton	Carshalton College of Further Education, Queen Mary University of London
15. Raising Awareness, Raising Aspiration (RARA): A Targeted Personal Tutoring Support Programme for Narrowing Gaps in Student Achievement and Ambition	University of Sheffield	King's College London, University of Portsmouth
16. Maximising student success through the development of self-regulation	University of Southampton	University of Surrey, Kingston University
17. Implementing a strategic approach to mental well-being in HE (MWBHE)	University of the West of England (UWE)	University of York, Cardiff University, Student Minds, Universities UK (UUK)

A full list of partners involved by type of partner (i.e. HE provider or other) is also provided below.

Partner Organisations	Number of providers in this category			
HE Providers	57	Anglia Ruskin University (ARU) Aston University Birmingham City University Cardiff University Carshalton College City and Islington College City, University of London Coventry University (CU) Coventry University College Darlington College De Montfort University Derby College Exeter College Gateshead College Halesowen College Hereford Sixth Form College King's College London	Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) New College Durham Northumbria University Nottingham Trent University (NTU) Plymouth University Queen Mary University of London Southampton Solent University Staffordshire University (SU) Stoke on Trent College Sunderland College The 6th Form College Solihull The Open University (OU) Ulster University University College London University of Birmingham University of Bradford	University of Exeter University of Greenwich University of Hertfordshire University of Huddersfield University of Leeds University of Lincoln University of Manchester University of Portsmouth University of Roehampton University of Sheffield University of Southampton University of Surrey University of the Arts London University of the West of England, Bristol (UWE) University of Warwick

Partner Organisations	Number of providers in this category			
		Kingston University Leicester College Loughborough University	University of Brighton University of Derby	University of West London (UWL) University of Winchester University of Wolverhampton UoW) University of York
Other Partners	27	Student Minds Universities UK (UUK) Chartered Institute of Builders Institution of Civil Engineers Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors Chartered Institute of Architectural Technologists Construction Industry Training Board North East Local Enterprise Partnership	D2N2 Local Enterprise Partnership 3e Consulting Engineers ARUP Cundall Desco Esh Construction Faulkner Browns Architects NAPPER Architects Ryder Architecture Sir Robert McAlpine Summers Inman Construction & Property Consultants Surgo Turner & Townsend	Xsite Pearson Education Persimmon Homes University of Manchester Students' Union Manchester Metropolitan Students' Union
TOTAL	**84**			

APPENDIX C: ABSS project consultations by project

	Academic Staff	Professional Services Staff	Senior Management	Students	Total
Total number of individuals consulted (two rounds of consultations with academic staff)	63	84	24	34	205
Total projects	17	17	17	17	

Project	Institution
Levelling the Playing Field through Work-Based Learning – Addressing Differential Graduate Employability Outcomes	Aston University (lead)
	Birmingham City University
	City, University of London
	Ulster University
DRIVER: Data Responsive Initiatives as a Vehicle for achieving Equity in Results	Coventry University (lead)
	Birmingham City University
	Halesowen College
	The 6th Form College Solihull
	Staffordshire University
	University of Wolverhampton
BRIDGE: Building Routes into Degrees with Greater Equality	Gateshead College (lead)
	Derby College
	University of Northumbria at Newcastle upon Tyne
Using a value-added metric and an inclusive curriculum framework to address BAME attainment gap	Kingston University (lead)
	De Montfort University
	University of Greenwich
	University of Hertfordshire
	University College London
	University of Wolverhampton
HE Academic Support Tutor – additional support to address barriers to student success	New College Durham (lead)
	Darlington College
	Sunderland College
Scaling Up Active Collaborative Learning for Student Success	Nottingham Trent University (lead)
	Anglia Ruskin University
	University of Bradford
Embedding and sustaining inclusive STEM practices	The Open University (lead)
	University of Leeds
	University of Plymouth
Diversity and Inclusion Student Ambassador Programme	The University of Manchester (lead)
	University of Birmingham
	Manchester Metropolitan University
Student Attainment Project	University of Derby (lead)
	Solent University
	University of West London

Project	Institution
Transforming Transitions	University of Exeter (lead)
	University of Birmingham
	Exeter College
	Pearson
	Queen Mary University of London
Intervention for Success	University of Huddersfield (lead)
	Coventry University
	University of Lincoln
	Manchester Metropolitan University
Progression to, and success in, postgraduate study for students from BAME and low participation neighbourhoods	University of Leeds (lead)
	University of Manchester
	University of Sheffield
	University of Warwick
	University of York
Changing Mindsets: Reducing stereotype threat as a barrier to student success	University of Portsmouth (lead)
	University of Brighton
	University of the Arts London
	University of Winchester
Re-imagining Attainment for All 2 (RAFA 2)	University of Roehampton (lead)
	Carshalton College
	Queen Mary University of London
Raising Awareness, Raising Aspiration (RARA): A Targeted Personal Tutoring Support Programme for Narrowing Gaps in Student Achievement and Ambition	University of Sheffield (lead)
	King's College London
	University of Portsmouth
Maximising student success through the development of self-regulation	University of Southampton (lead)
	Kingston University
	University of Surrey
Implementing a strategic approach to mental wellbeing sin HE	University of the West of England (lead)
	Cardiff University
	Student Minds
	Universities UK (UUK)
	University of York

APPENDIX D: Stakeholder consultations

1. Advance HE
2. Association of Colleges
3. Bloomsbury Institute
4. Disables Students' Commission
5. Forum for Access and Continuing Education (FACE)
6. GuildHE
7. Higher Education Race Action Group (HERAG)
8. Independent HE
9. National Union of Students (NUS)
10. Office for Students (OfS)
11. Universities UK (UUK)