

Access and Participation Evaluation



UNIVERSITY OF
BATH

Enhanced Theory of Change: Student Retention &
Success interventions supporting care
experienced, estranged, young adult carer, refugee
and asylum seeker students

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Glossary

Term	Definition
Access	Students' entry to Higher Education (HE).
Care experienced	Someone who has been in care at any stage up to the age of 18 but cannot be recorded as a 'care leaver'. This includes those who were adopted from care before the age of 18, those in foster care, kinship care, residential school, children's unit.
Care leaver	Someone aged 16-25 years old who has been looked after for at least 13 weeks by a local authority at some point since they were 14 years old and were in care on or after their 16th birthday.
Causal pathway	Part of an EToC, where it describes the sequence of activities that lead to outcomes and overall impact.
Change mechanism	Part of an EToC, where it explains how and why change occurs within a causal pathway.
Continuation	Students who continue their study of a HE qualification one year and 15 days after they started their course.
Completion	Students that gain a HE qualification (or continue studying for the qualification) four years and 15 days after they started their course.
Enhanced Theory of Change (EToC)	Visual and narrative representation of a programme/team's inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, underlying change mechanisms and moderating factors.
Equality of opportunity	Individuals are not hampered in accessing and succeeding in HE because of their background or circumstances they cannot fairly influence.
Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR)	A list of national risks to equality of opportunity identified by the Office for Students.
Estranged	Someone who no longer has the support of their family due to a breakdown in their relationship which has led to ceased contact.
Moderating factors	Part of an EToC, where factors influence the strength of any effects.
Outcomes	Part of an EToC, where outcomes define expected behaviour, skills, or attitude change that lead to overall impact.
Progression	Students leaving HE and going into graduate level careers or further study.
Refugee/asylum seeker	Student with refugee, asylum, Humanitarian Protection or Discretionary/Limited Leave to Remain status.
Young adult carer	Someone aged under 25 who looks after a relative or friend due to disability, chronic or terminal illness, mental health problems, alcohol or drug addictions or dependency.

Summary

This report presents findings from a theory-based evaluation of Student Retention and Success (SRS) interventions supporting care experienced, estranged, young adult carer, and refugee/asylum seeker students. It forms part of ten research projects within Bath's Access and Participation Plan (APP), designed to deepen understanding of systemic barriers to equality of opportunity that disadvantaged students may face (see Appendix A).

The evaluation developed an enhanced theory of change (eToC) through participatory workshops in 2025/26 with Student Support and Safeguarding staff and the APP Impact Team. This captured intervention delivery, mechanisms, outcomes, and moderating factors. A visual and narrative eToC was produced and tested against internal institutional data, survey findings, and external evidence to assess the strength and coherence of the model.

Beyond informing local practice, this eToC contributes to the wider sector by providing a structured, evidence-informed explanation of how multiple forms of support interact to improve outcomes for underrepresented student groups. While many institutions provide targeted support for care experienced, estranged, young adult carer and refugee/asylum students, there continues to be limited published evidence describing the mechanisms through which interventions lead to student success. This eToC offers a transferable framework to support programme design, evaluation planning, and institutional reflections across the sector.

eToC overview

- SRS interventions aim to empower students through personalised guidance and sustained support that identifies and addresses challenges early. This enables engagement in studies, succeeding at university, achieving positive academic outcomes, and progressing confidently beyond undergraduate (UG) study.
- Five causal pathways are defined: financial bursaries, named contact support, University referral pathways, communications, social/community engagement.
- Fourteen outcomes are expected across the student lifecycle, including:
 - successful transition to Bath, through degree, and progress beyond Bath
 - stability in students' current circumstances
 - understanding available SRS support and building rapport with named contact
 - improved skills and confidence to navigate university
 - greater social networks, confidence, independence, and belonging
 - increased continuation, completion and progression rates
- Nineteen change mechanisms explain how and why interventions operate, including:
 - reducing financial pressure and enabling engagement
 - building trust-based relationships and encouraging disclosure
 - improving access to coordinated support services
 - strengthening peer connections and sense of belonging
- Eighteen moderating factors shape the effectiveness of interventions, including:
 - availability and sustainability of resources
 - staff capacity, capability, and institutional knowledge
 - student engagement and willingness to access support
 - accessibility and responsiveness of university systems and services
 - wider structural factors affecting student circumstances
- Partnership working is embedded throughout the model, with SRS collaboration across academic and professional service teams contributing to positive outcomes in student engagement, transition, stability, and progression.

Considerations

- The eToC was co-developed with staff and reflects operational and professional perspectives. Future iterations should incorporate student voice and co-production.
- While the eToC is supported by internal and external evidence, some mechanisms remain emerging or under-evidenced and would benefit from future investigation.
- Some outcomes identified currently lack direct measures, particularly around student support referrals and engagement, engagement with studies without avoidable disruption, and building social networks.
- As demand for support continues to grow, the University should consider what additional resources, evidence, data, and student involvement may be required to sustain and further develop effective practice.

Methodology

During academic year 2025/26, the APP Impact Team and SRS staff sought to review the interventions provided to care experienced, estranged, young adult carer, and refugee/asylum seeker students and develop an eToC. The underpinning research questions that supported this development were:

1. What contribution, if any, has the SRS interventions made to students' continuation rates?
2. What contribution, if any, has the SRS interventions made to students' sense of belonging?

Methodology components

- Four participatory workshops were conducted with SRS staff to identify intervention activities, outcome measurements, reasons for expected change, defining moderating factors, and establishing rationale and evidence.
- One staff-led feedback session was conducted to review drafted eToC visualisations by APP Impact Team to inform the finalised writing.
- A rapid literature review task was completed to assess external evidence.
- An internal review of SRS annual survey results between 2022/23 - 2024/25. See Table 1 for response rates.
- An internal review of continuation rates for SRS- supported student groups (start year 2021/22 - 2024/25) and completion rates (start year 2018/19 - 2021/22). See Table 2.

Table 1: *Response characteristics for SRS survey*

Characteristic	Sub-group	Responses (%)
Year of study	Year 1	26%
	Year 2	30%
	Year 3	23%
	Placement	2%
	Year 4 or 5	18%
SRS- supported student group	Care experienced	7%
	Estranged	21%
	Refugee/Asylum	18%
	Young adult carer	52%
Survey year	2022/23	15%
	2023/24	55%
	2024/25	30%

Ethics

A favourable ethics decision for this evaluation was received in March 2026 from the University of Bath's Social Science Research Ethics Committee.

Enhanced Theory of Change (eToC)

Background

Care experienced, estranged, young adult carer, and refugee/asylum seeker students face significant and often compounding barriers to accessing, continuing, and completing Higher Education (HE). These include structural, financial, social, and psychological barriers that frequently interact in complex ways that cannot be addressed through any single intervention.

At a national level, only 14% of care experienced young people are in HE compared to 47% of the wider population, and the dropout rate is 38% compared with 6% for their peers (Bhattacharya & Payne, 2024). Estranged students face similar challenges. Among estranged and care experienced students surveyed in 2025, 43-44% had considered withdrawing from HE, compared with 28% of other students (Ellison, 2025).

Inconsistent and limited national data on refugee/asylum and young adult carer students makes it difficult to understand their journey within HE. In the 2023 UCAS cycle, 4% of applicants were identified as young adult carers (UCAS, 2024). While earlier research estimated that 16% of young adult carers considered dropping out of HE (Sempik & Becker, 2014), more recent work highlights persistent gaps, with this group up to 37% less likely to achieve degree-level qualifications (Carers Trust, 2026). In addition, it is estimated that 7% of refugees access HE (Miri et al., 2025) with limited understanding of progression through UG study.

The Office for Students (OfS) Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (OfS, n.d) acknowledges that care experienced, estranged, and young adult carer students are most likely to experience risks to equality of opportunity. All twelve risks apply to care experienced students, while 58% apply to estranged students and young adult carers (Appendix B). The register also notes risks across the student lifecycle but does not fully consider intersectional characteristics (e.g. ethnicity, disability, low-income) that may exacerbate these risks.

Further analysis of internal University of Bath data, using 4-year rolling averages (Table 2), shows that the continuation rates for care experienced, estranged, and young adult carers fall below the overall UG population. Completion rates are also lower for care experienced and young adult carers, with estranged students only marginally higher than the UG population. Analysis of refugee/asylum seeker students is limited due to small sample sizes.

Table 2: Rolling 4-year average of continuation and completion rates

	UG population	Care experienced	Estranged	Young adult carers
Continuation	96.69%	90.36%	88.11%	96.38%
Completion	96.38%	93.75%	96.67%	96.00%

The University of Bath SRS interventions are designed to address these intersecting challenges across the student lifecycle, from initial eligibility identification through to ongoing support and

transition planning. The service contributes to the delivery of the APP by providing targeted support to students who are typically represented within its priority groups.

A key feature of the SRS interventions is its preventative and proactive model of support. Through early intervention, regular engagement, and relationship-based practice, interventions aim to identify and address any potential challenges before they escalate. This ensures students can access support throughout their UG degree rather than when difficulties may reach a critical point.

The SRS service operates on the evidence-based premise that sustained, relational, and proactively delivered support enables students to continue and complete their studies. This is to ensure that SRS-supported students have equitable opportunities through the student lifecycle. In 2017 the University signed the Stand Alone Pledge and Care Leaver Covenant, and in 2020 received the University of Sanctuary award. In 2025, the University received the NNECL Quality Mark.

Design & Implementation

a) Inputs

SRS interventions require the following sustained inputs to operate effectively:

- Dedicated student support staff (1.58 FTE) with expertise in pastoral care, advocacy, and knowledge of SRS-supported student experiences informed by internal and sector evidence.
- Financial resources for staffing, systems, bursaries, and events.
- Institutional data to support early identification and monitoring of eligible students.
- Institutional administrative systems enabling case management, communication and engagement tracking, and coordination.
- Physical and digital spaces for appointments and engagement activities.
- Cross-institutional partnerships with academic and professional services staff.
- Staff training and resources to build institutional understanding of student needs, SRS interventions, and shared responsibility.
- Feedback tools to gather formal and informal feedback from staff and students on SRS activities.

For this eToC, inputs are grouped into five intervention areas: financial bursaries, named contact support, University referral pathways, communications, and social/community engagement.

b) Activities

Target group

SRS supports care experienced (including care leaver), estranged, young adult carer, and refugee/asylum seeker students. In recent years, its focus expanded from care leaver to the broader care experienced population. The cohort size and profile of students supported by SRS changed significantly between 2017/18 and 2025/26. Overall, the number of UG students supported increased from 59 to 262, representing growth of 344.1% over the period and an average annual growth rate of approximately 20.5%. While the care experienced and estranged populations remained broadly stable, growth was driven primarily by increases in refugee/asylum seeker students, with an average annual growth of 57.6%, and young adult carers, with an average annual growth of 24.1%. SRS staff also support postgraduate students, however the focus of this report is on undergraduates.

Delivery stakeholders

The SRS staff (1.58 FTE) deliver interventions as named contacts throughout the UG lifecycle, coordinating a network of academic and professional services to support. SRS staff often act as a central access point, identifying barriers, facilitating referrals, coordinating activities, and ensuring students receive timely support from the most appropriate service(s).

Some delivery partners include, but not limited to: Directors of Studies, Academic Advisors, Student Experience/Support Officers, Student Support and Safeguarding teams, and Careers service. In part, the effectiveness of SRS interventions is dependent on the availability, responsiveness, and quality of internal partnership services.

Mode and location of delivery

A multi-modal approach includes financial support, one-to-one appointments, online and in-person meetings, communications, events, and staff training. Delivery occurs both on campus and virtually, with some social and community engagements held in external venues in the City.

Timeframes

Interventions operate across the UG lifecycle, with pre-entry engagement beginning in August (prior to enrolment) and, where needed, continuing beyond graduation on a case-by-case basis.

Tailoring

Interventions are tailored to individual needs, where possible. This includes reviewing bursary payment times, adjusting appointment formats and frequency, adapting communication content towards academic cycle touchpoints/stressors, providing bespoke support plans for students, and collaborating with University services to support referral pathways.

Expected change

a) Outcomes

The outcomes displayed in Table 3 relate to the five key intervention areas, with some shared across pathways and occurring at different stages.

Table 3: *SRS intervention outcomes*

Short-term outcomes	Intermediate outcomes	Long-term outcomes
• Students can successfully transition to Bath, through degree, & progress beyond Bath. • Students feel stable in their current circumstances (Financial, housing, mental health & wellbeing, engagement in studies, engagement with SRS, engagement with other University services). • Students understand available SRS support. • Students build rapport with named contact. • Students access & use referred services. • Students increase understanding & engagement with support services. • Students build social networks, confidence, & independence through connection with peers & role models.	• Students feel a sense of belonging at Bath. • Students engage with their studies without avoidable disruption. • Students develop skills to navigate university life. • Students have improved confidence to navigate university life. • Students can successfully transition to Bath, through degree, & progress beyond Bath.	• Increased continuation rates. • Increased completion rates. • Increased progression rates.

b) Impact

Students are empowered through personalised guidance and sustained support that identifies and addresses challenges early, enabling them to engage in their studies, succeed at university, achieve positive academic outcomes, and progress confidently beyond UG study.

Causal pathways, change mechanisms and moderating factors

Causal pathways describe the sequence of activities that lead to outcomes and overall impact. Change mechanisms explain how and why change occurs within a pathway, while moderating factors influence the strength of these effects.

There are five key intervention areas that operate as causal pathways. Individual activities, outcomes, and impacts may appear in multiple pathways, as the model is characterised by the interactions between each intervention component. The causal pathways will be discussed in length within this report, alongside a visual representation of each strand. The visual was developed using Draw.io initially and the full PDF visual can be found on the Student Retention and Success [evaluation project page](#).

a) Causal pathway 1: Financial bursaries

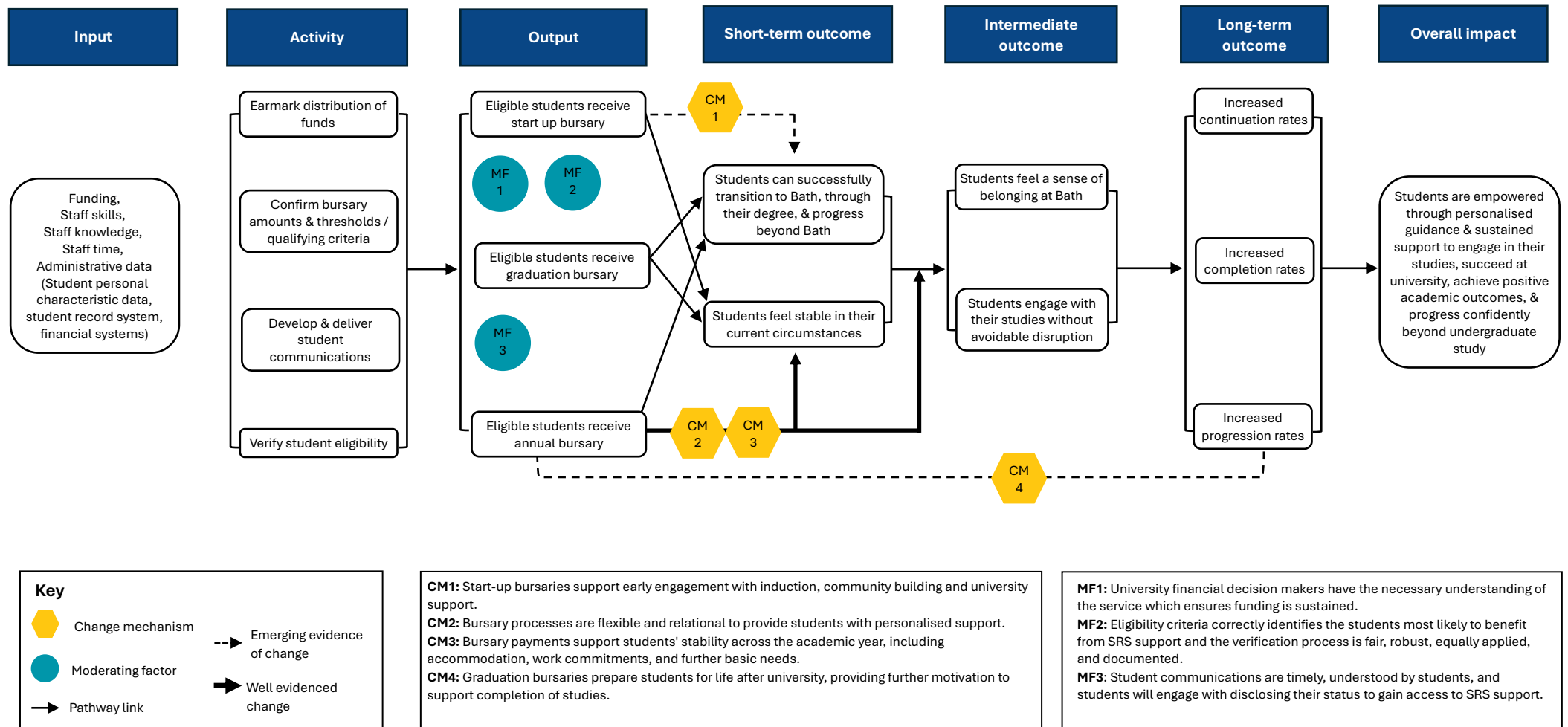


Figure 1: Visual representation of Causal pathway 1: Financial bursaries

Context

Financial bursaries enable students to meet essential costs, including accommodation, study resources, and living expenses. This stabilises financial circumstances and reduces reliance on paid work. This supports academic engagement and participation in university life, enabling belonging.

Start-up bursaries support early transitions, ongoing bursary payments maintain stability, and graduation bursaries support progression beyond university. Collectively, this contributes to continuation, completion, and progression.

Evidence

There is strong evidence that financial support reduces economic stress and enables engagement in both academic and social aspects of university life (Dickinson et al., 2020; The Brilliant Club, 2024). These factors are closely associated with belonging and retention (Thomas, 2012; Tinto, 1993).

Financial hardship, particularly linked to accommodation, estrangement, or caring responsibilities, is consistently associated with reduced wellbeing and engagement (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Young Carers and Young Adult Carers, 2026; Bhattacharya & Payne, 2024; Bland, 2018; Runacres et al., 2024). Students are increasingly undertaking paid work to compensate for funding gaps (Neves et al., 2026), which may not be suitable for all SRS-supported students (Costa et al., 2020).

Bursaries can reduce financial pressures and support student success, particularly during transition to HE (Hatt et al., 2005). They may also act as a form of institutional recognition, contributing to reduced marginalisation and supporting engagement (Harrison et al., 2018).

Internal SRS survey data reinforces these findings, with 87% of respondents reporting that bursaries reduced financial stress and 92% reporting that bursaries supported their ability to continue studying. Additionally, 77% agreed that they were able to balance study, work, and personal commitments, although perceptions varied across groups (ranging from 74%-88%). This may reflect differences in payment structures and household income levels. The University currently offers non-repayable bursaries of up to £7,000 for eligible care leaver, estranged, and refugee/asylum students, and up to £2,500 for eligible young adult carers over a 5-year programme. These values have remained unchanged since 2017 and adjusted for inflation would need to be £9,624 and £3,437 respectively in 2026 to maintain equivalent support. This represents a 37.5% reduction in purchasing power (see Appendix C).

Evidence is more limited on the optimal timing, structure, and flexibility of bursary models, including the specific impact of graduation payments (Stevenson et al., 2020).

Change mechanisms

- Start-up bursaries support early engagement with induction, community building, and university support.
- Bursary processes are flexible and relational to provide students with personalised support.
- Bursary payments support students' stability across the academic year, including accommodation, work commitments, and further basic needs.
- Graduation bursaries prepare students for life after university, providing further motivation to support completion of studies.

Moderating Factors

This pathway assumes that financial decision makers have sufficient understanding of SRS services to maintain sustained funding streams, that bursary amounts are appropriately calibrated to meet student need, and that institutional funding commitments through the APP continue. It also assumes that student communications are timely, accessible, and clearly understood so that students disclose relevant circumstances and access support. Furthermore, it assumes that eligibility criteria accurately identify those most likely to benefit and that verification processes are fair, robust, equally applied, and documented.

b) Causal pathway 2: Named contact support

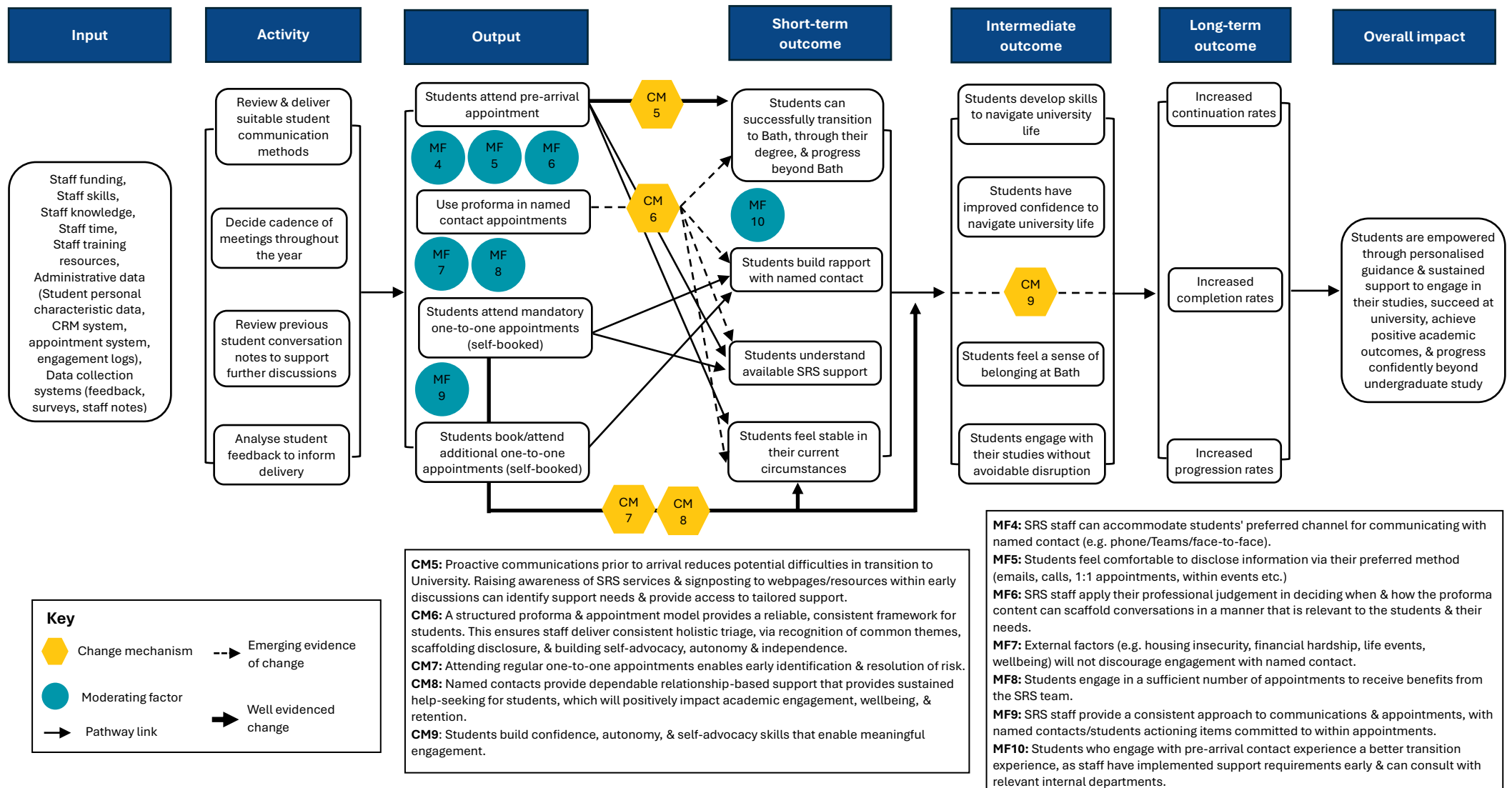


Figure 2: Visual representation of Causal Pathway 2: Named contact support

Context

Regular engagement with a named contact builds a consistent, trust-based relationship that supports disclosure, problem-solving, and personalised guidance. Creating opportunities for authentic dialogues in an open and responsive manner can demonstrate to students that their situations and conversations are valid.

Structured appointment models enable holistic assessment of need, while regular engagement builds confidence, autonomy, and help-seeking behaviours. It also allows for early risk identification and mitigation. This supports academic engagement, wellbeing, belonging, and retention.

Evidence

Student retention is shaped by interconnected academic, psychological, and institutional factors (O’Keeffe, 2013; Picton & Kahu, 2022), with transitions occurring across multiple stages of the student lifecycle (Tett et al., 2017). Students may enter university with differing social capital, with some groups experiencing accelerated independence (Harvey et al., 2022) while others experience a step-change (Cotton et al., 2014).

Relational support enables trust, encourages disclosure, and supports early identification of need. Students often benefit from consistent, approachable staff who provide guidance and act as a stable point of contact, particularly where prior educational or personal experiences may not have prepared them for university systems (Cotton et al., 2014; Lewicka, 2022; Thomas et al., 2002). Student-advisor relationships can support autonomy and self-determination, particularly where support is collaborative rather than directive (Hsu et al., 2019; Kinsella et al., 2024; Ryan & Deci, 2017). However named contact support may vary dependent on caseload and staff experience (Bhattacharya & Payne, 2024; Carers Trust, 2014).

Internal SRS survey data shows strong reported impact of named contacts, with 91% agreeing that they are important in supporting their continuation. Additionally, 97% stated that they have built a good rapport with their named contact, with 94% reporting that they felt comfortable disclosing information to their named contacts, and 93% stating their named contacts listened and understood their needs. In contrast, confidence in accessing departmental support is lower, with only 52% reporting that they are gaining required support from academic departments. This reinforces the importance of a specialist team.

Emerging evidence suggests that proactive engagement, coaching approaches, and relational check-ins support early identification of need, development of self-efficacy, and help-seeking behaviours (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Picton & Kahu, 2022; Raymaekers et al., 2025; Refaeli, 2020; Rogers, 2011). However, evidence is more limited regarding the optimal frequency and format of contact, and the relative contributions of specific components such as proformas and mandatory engagement.

Change mechanisms

- Proactive communications prior to arrival reduces potential difficulties in transition to university. Raising awareness of SRS services and signposting to webpages/resources within early discussions can identify support needs and provide access to tailored support.
- A structured proforma and appointment model provides a reliable, consistent framework for students. This ensures staff deliver consistent holistic triage, via recognition of common themes, scaffolding disclosure, and building self-advocacy, autonomy and independence.

- Attending regular one-to-one appointments enables early identification and resolution of risk.
- Named contacts provide dependable relationship-based support that provides sustained help-seeking for students, which will positively impact academic engagement, wellbeing, and retention.
- Students build confidence, autonomy, and self-advocacy skills that enable meaningful engagement.

Moderating Factors

This pathway assumes that staff have the skills, capacity, and training to deliver effective, relational support. It assumes that staff can accommodate preferred communication channels and frequency of appointments to provide consistent, high-quality, and student-centred support. It also assumes that staff apply professional judgement in deciding when and how to use the proforma, and in prioritising immediate concerns and crisis situations where appropriate. The pathways further assumes that students are willing and able to engage in a sufficient number of appointments to experience benefit, and that external factors (e.g. housing, wellbeing, financial hardship) do not prevent engagement. Finally, it assumes that students feel safe and comfortable disclosing sensitive information, that the proforma successfully scaffolds conversations relevant to student needs, and appropriate mechanisms exist to capture and share information through the University.

c) Causal pathway 3: University referral pathways

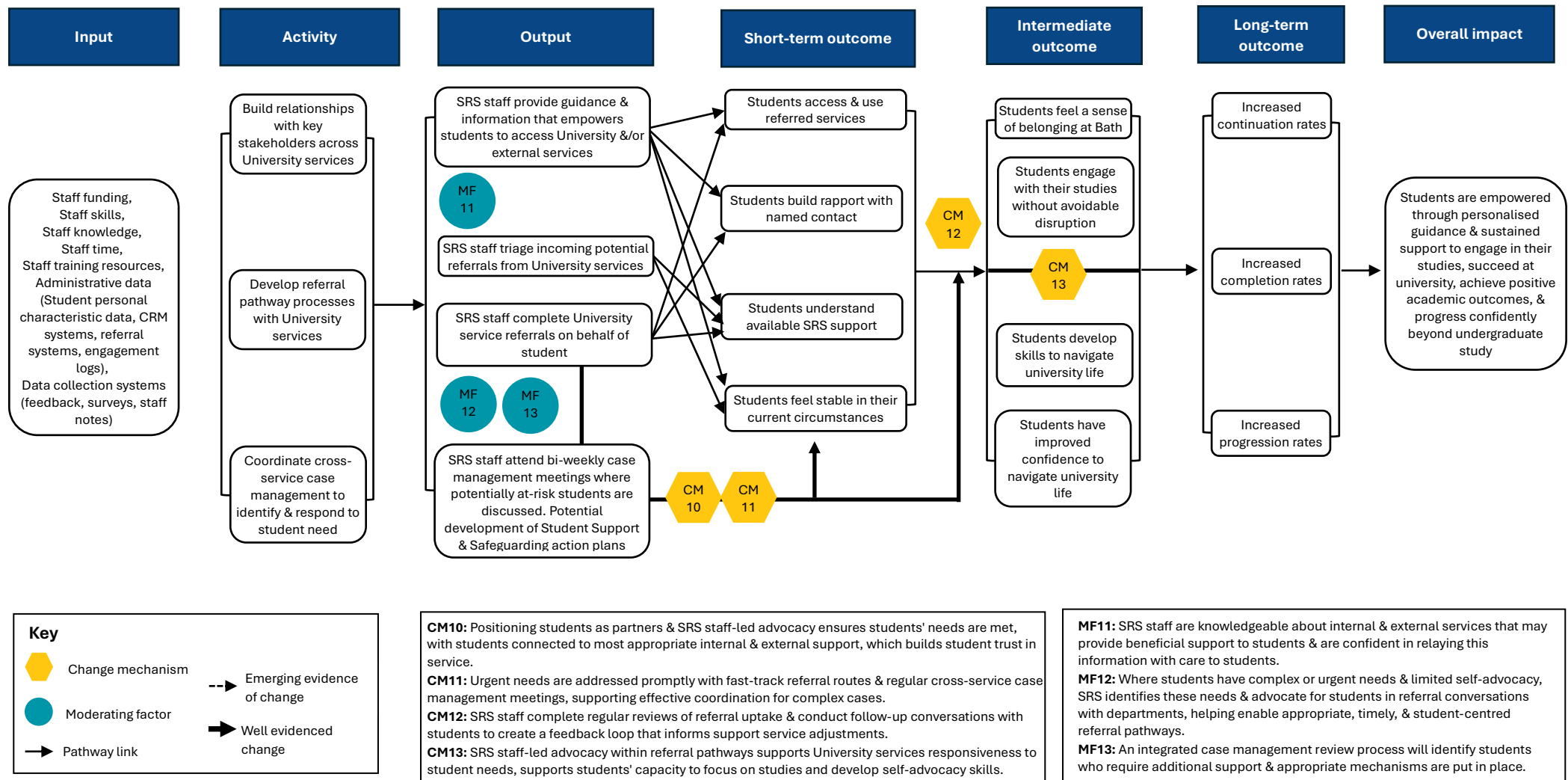


Figure 3: Visual representation of Causal pathway 3: University referral pathways

Context

Coordinated signposting, referral pathways and cross-service case management connect students to appropriate internal and external support in a timely and sensitive manner. Staff advocacy facilitates access to services and reduces barriers, particularly for complex or urgent cases.

Integrated processes support early identification and monitoring of students who may be at increased risk of disengagement, suspension, or withdrawal. Drawing on information gathered through student interactions and ongoing engagement monitoring (with SRS staff and other internal services), these processes enable support to be tailored, prioritised, and adjusted over time. Through continuous review and feedback loops, support can be targeted to changing student needs, helping to stabilise circumstances, build confidence and self-efficacy in navigating university, and enable sustained focus on academic study.

Evidence

Coordinated, multi-disciplinary support and early intervention are critical for students with complex needs. University systems can be difficult to navigate, and students may be reluctant to seek support independently, particularly where stigma, uncertainty, or lack of awareness is present (Deasy et al., 2016; Morosanu et al., 2010; Richards, 2023; Ryan et al., 2010).

University staff can act as gatekeepers and gateways to support (Killmer et al., 2025). Named staff acting as advocates can reduce these barriers, enabling access to appropriate services (Refaeli, 2017; Stevenson et al., 2020). Integrated and wraparound support models are often associated with improved outcomes (Harvey et al., 2017) and referral pathways can support self-advocacy development (Test et al., 2005).

Internal SRS survey data found that 64% reported feeling comfortable seeking help, with 69% confident in understanding, accessing, and navigating available support services. Responses varied across student groups, with care experienced and refugee/asylum respondents generally reporting lower levels of confidence than estranged students and young adult carers. These findings should be interpreted with caution, as these questions were only introduced in the 2024/25 survey and some student groups were represented by small numbers of respondents.

Evidence suggests that staff-led advocacy and coordinated systems reduce the burden on students to self-advocate, which can support engagement and reduce the risk of unmet needs (Crandall et al., 2014; NUS, 2015; Stevenson et al., 2020). However, evidence on the effectiveness of formalised referral systems and case management models remains more limited, particularly in distinguishing their impact from signposting alone.

Change mechanisms

- Positioning students as partners and SRS staff-led advocacy ensures students' needs are met, with students connected to the most appropriate internal and external support, which builds student trust in the SRS service.
- Urgent needs are addressed promptly with fast-track referral routes and regular cross-service case management meetings, supporting effective coordination for complex cases.
- SRS staff complete regular reviews of referral uptake, and conduct follow-up conversations with students to create a feedback loop that informs support service adjustments.

- SRS staff-led advocacy within referral pathways supports University services responsiveness to student needs, supports students' capacity to focus on studies, and develop self-advocacy skills.

Moderating Factors

This pathway assumes that SRS staff have strong knowledge of University and external services and are confident in making appropriate referrals. It assumes that referral systems and communication processes function effectively to support coordination and information sharing across teams. It also assumes that University services are responsive and accessible, and that students are willing to engage with referred support. Finally, it assumes that case management processes are sufficiently integrated to identify students in need and prompt appropriate responses.

d) Causal pathway 4: Communications

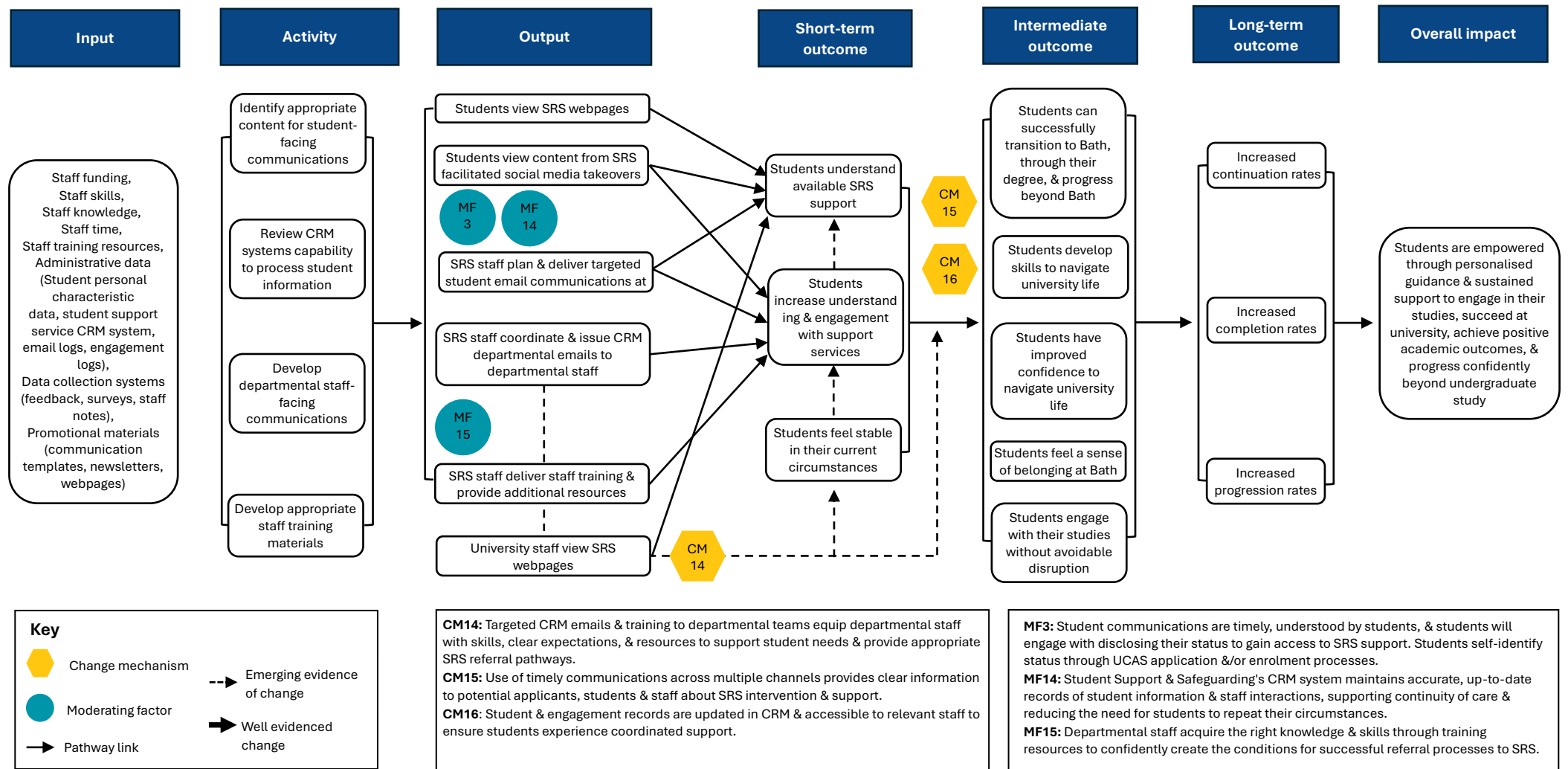


Figure 4: Visual representation of Causal pathway 4: Communications

Context

Timely, targeted, multi-channel communications raise awareness of available support and enable access for students and staff. Pre-entry communications support early identification of need and a smoother transition for students.

Ongoing communications reinforce awareness, prompt engagement, and encourage disclosure. While staff-facing communications and training support appropriate identification of students, awareness of support, and engagement with SRS staff.

Evidence

There is strong evidence that awareness and clarity of support are key determinants of uptake, particularly for students less likely to seek help independently (Stevenson et al., 2020). Lack of awareness among both students and staff can lead to underuse of services and place greater responsibility on students to identify and communicate their needs (Cotton et al., 2014).

Students frequently report challenges associated with repeated disclosure of their circumstances (Kettel, 2020; Richards, 2023), which can act as a barrier to engagement. Where staff are not aware of student context, support can be inconsistent or reactive (Hauari et al., 2019; Kettel, 2020; Smyth et al., 2011).

Evidence supports a whole-institutional approach, where all staff understand students' needs and contribute to identifying and supporting those at risk (Maccabe, 2021; Picton & Kahu, 2022; Richards, 2023; Thomas, 2012). Early, proactive communications have also been shown to reduce uncertainty, support preparation, and improve engagement (Kirton et al., 2012; Kettel, 2020; Palmer & Koenig-Lewis, 2017).

However, evidence is more limited on the relative effectiveness of different communication strategies and how these interact with relational support mechanisms. In addition, there were no direct questions within the internal survey to review students' perceptions on this causal pathway.

Change mechanisms

- Targeted customer relationship management (CRM) emails and training to departmental teams equip departmental staff with skills, clear expectations, and resources to support student needs and provide appropriate SRS referral pathways.
- Use of timely communications across multiple channels provides clear information to potential applicants, students and staff about SRS intervention and support.
- Student and engagement records are updated in CRM system and accessible to relevant staff, supporting coordinated support.

Moderating Factors

This pathway assumes that students accurately self-identify through the UCAS application and/or enrolment process. It assumes that communications are timely, clear, and accessible, and that students engage with them sufficiently to act (e.g. booking SRS appointments, disclosing status, or seeking support). It also assumes that University staff engage with communications and apply guidance appropriately in their interactions with students. Finally, it assumes that CRM systems and University infrastructures enable accurate targeting and tracking of communications.

e) Causal pathway 5: Social/community engagement

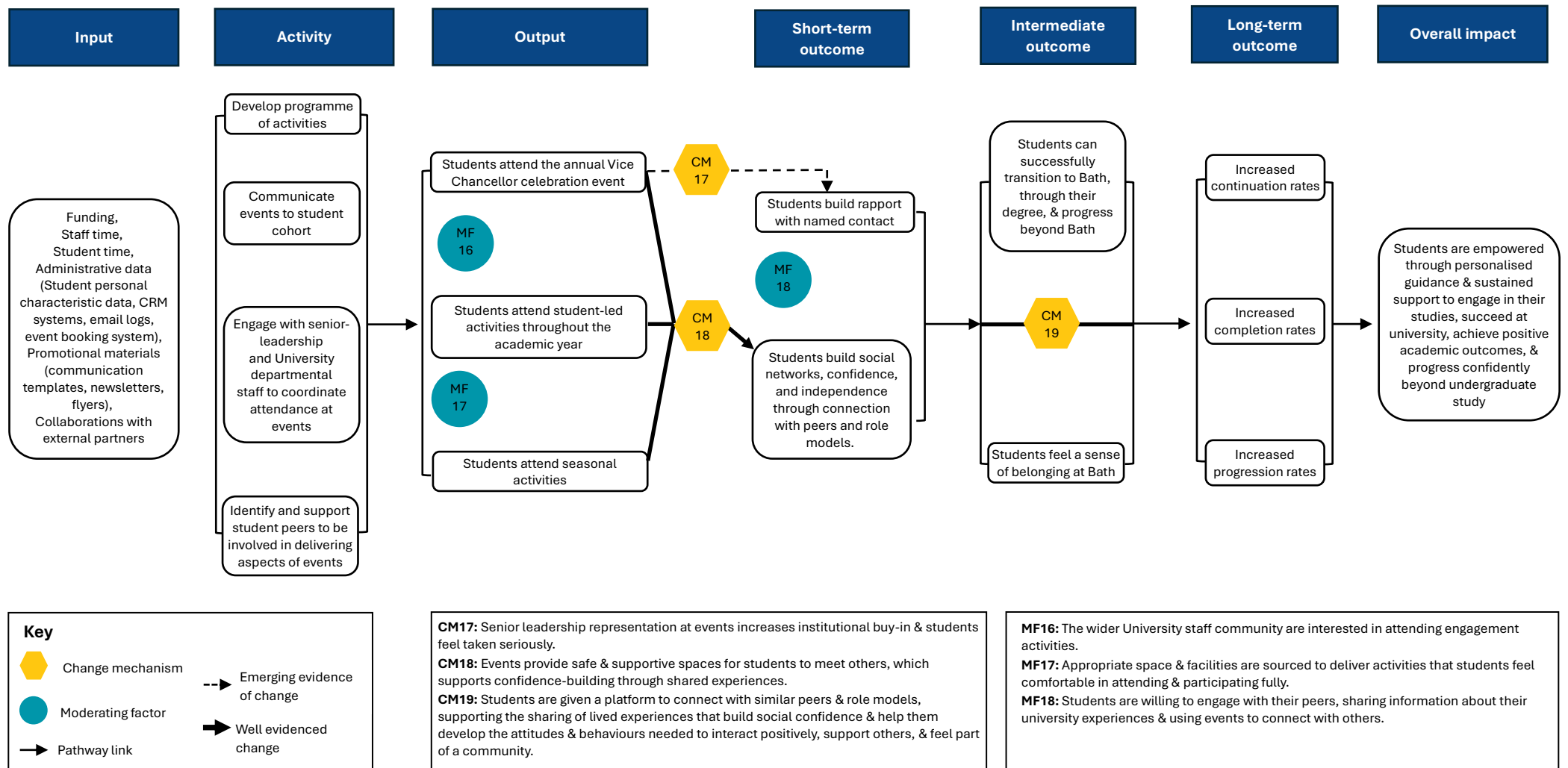


Figure 5: Visual representation of Causal pathway 5: Social/community engagement

Context

Participation in peer-led activities and community engagement events enable students to form connections with peers and role models who share similar experiences. These activities provide safe and supportive spaces that build confidence, independence, and a sense of belonging.

In addition to SRS-led interventions, students are actively encouraged to engage in wider university life, including joining Students' Union societies, participating as Student Ambassadors, and having an awareness of peer mentoring programmes. Opportunities within activities and celebration events reinforce visibility and validation of student identities within the University community. Increased social integration supports wellbeing, engagement, continuation, and academic success.

Evidence

There is strong evidence linking sense of belonging and peer connection to student retention and success (Thomas, 2012). Students who are less socially and academically integrated are more likely to withdraw (Tinto, 1993). By integrating pastoral and social activities, institutions can create “mattering experiences” (Strayhorn, 2018), where students feel simultaneously challenged and supported.

Students from underrepresented groups may experience isolation and lack awareness of peers with similar experiences, limiting opportunities to build communities (Harvey et al., 2022). Peer networks and shared spaces are valued and can bring feelings of comfort or accompaniment (Adley & Jupp Kina, 2017; Kettel, 2020; Rawlinson, 2026; Runacres et al., 2026). However, engagement is shaped by complex factors, including concerns about disclosure and stigma (Richards, 2023). While some students benefit from identity-based communities, others may be reluctant to participate.

External evidence for peer connection and community-building is strong, but evidence on the impact of leadership visibility remains more limited. Visible institutional commitment (e.g. bursaries, dedicated services, leadership engagement) contributes to perceptions of a caring, supportive environment that fosters a shared ethos of responsibility (Carvalho et al., 2010; Harrison et al., 2018; Stevenson et al., 2020). However, further analysis is required to understand the impact of specific activities, formats, and sustained engagement.

Within the 2024/25 SRS survey, a selection of sense of belonging statements were added. 90% of students stated they felt like they belonged in HE, with 87% stating they felt valued as a student at Bath and 85% stating they felt a sense of belonging at Bath. 69% felt respected by other University students and 60% felt connected to others from a similar background. Due to small respondent numbers, it is not possible to disaggregate further. In addition, the survey did not directly review community-based activities and their contribution.

Change mechanisms

- Senior leadership representation at events increases institutional buy-in and students feel taken seriously.
- Events provide safe and supportive spaces for students to meet others, which supports confidence building through shared experiences.
- Students are given a platform to connect with similar peers and role models, supporting the sharing of lived experiences that build social confidence and help to develop attitudes and behaviours needed to interact positively, support others, and feel part of a community.

Moderating Factors

This pathway assumes that students are willing to engage with peers and participate in activities, and that events are designed in ways that feel accessible, inclusive, and relevant. It assumes that appropriate spaces and resources are available and that University staff and partners can effectively coordinate delivery. It also assumes that wider University stakeholders, including senior leadership, support and engage with activities which enhances their legitimacy and impact.

Impact and outcomes measures

a) Impact measures

Table 4: SRS impact measures

Impact	Impact measure
Students are empowered through personalised guidance & sustained support that identifies & addresses challenges early, enabling them to engage in their studies, succeed at university, achieve positive academic outcomes, & progress confidently beyond UG study.	Internal institutional monitoring Student self-report Implementation & process evaluation

b) Outcome measures

Table 5: SRS impact measures

Outcome	Outcome measure
Students can successfully transition to Bath, through degree, & progress beyond Bath.	Self-reported annual SRS student survey
Students feel stable in their current circumstances (Financial, housing, mental health & wellbeing, engagement in studies, engagement with SRS, engagement with other University services).	Self-reported annual SRS student survey
Students understand available SRS support.	Self-reported annual SRS student survey
Students build rapport with named contact.	Self-reported annual SRS student survey
Students access & use referred services.	No direct outcome measure in place
Students increase understanding & engagement with support services.	No direct outcome measure in place
Students build social networks, confidence, & independence through connection with peers and role models.	No direct outcome measure in place. Some proxy measures within self-reported annual SRS student survey
Students feel a sense of belonging at Bath.	Self-reported annual SRS student survey
Students engage with their studies without avoidable disruption.	No direct outcome measure in place. Some proxy measures within self-reported annual SRS student survey
Students develop skills to navigate university life.	Self-reported annual SRS student survey
Students have improved confidence to navigate university life.	Self-reported annual SRS student survey
Increased continuation rates.	Internal institutional monitoring
Increased completion rates.	Internal institutional monitoring
Increased progression rates.	Internal institutional monitoring

Conclusion

This evaluation developed and tested an eToC for SRS interventions supporting care experienced, estranged, young adult carer, and refugee/asylum seeker students. Overall, the model demonstrates a coherent and evidence-informed representation of the causal pathways that explain how intervention activities contribute to short and medium-term outcomes and overall impact on continuation, completion, and progression.

Rather than relying on a single intervention, this model highlights how financial support, relationship-based practice, coordinated referrals, targeted communications, and community-building activities intertwine to create conditions that contribute to student success at Bath. A particularly important finding is the central role of trust, belonging, and sustained relationships in supporting engagement and help-seeking behaviours. This is alongside any financial support provided.

The eToC provides a stronger foundation for future programme development, evaluation practices, and continued institutional learning by making explicit the assumptions, mechanisms, and outcomes that underpin SRS interventions. It also highlights opportunities for future refinement through student co-production, enhanced evaluation measures, and continued exploration of emerging mechanisms of change.

Looking ahead, the findings from this eToC will be incorporated into the SRS team's ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and learning cycle. The evidence gathered through this process has highlighted both areas of strength and opportunities to further enhance delivery, monitoring and evaluation, and understanding of student experience. Over the coming cycle, the SRS team will use this insight to refine approaches where appropriate, strengthen monitoring of key outcomes and mechanisms, and respond to emerging evidence and student need. Through an iterative process, we anticipate that future evaluation cycles will strengthen the team's understanding of outcomes and the contribution of SRS to these. This evidence will be used to refine intervention delivery where appropriate and identify opportunities to strengthen the impact of SRS.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Access and Participation Plan and Risks to Equality of Opportunity

The University of Bath's Access and Participation Plan¹ identifies nine risks to equality of opportunity (Figure A). Equality of opportunity means “individuals are not hampered in accessing and succeeding in higher education as a result of their background or circumstances they cannot fairly influence” (The Office for Students, 2025).

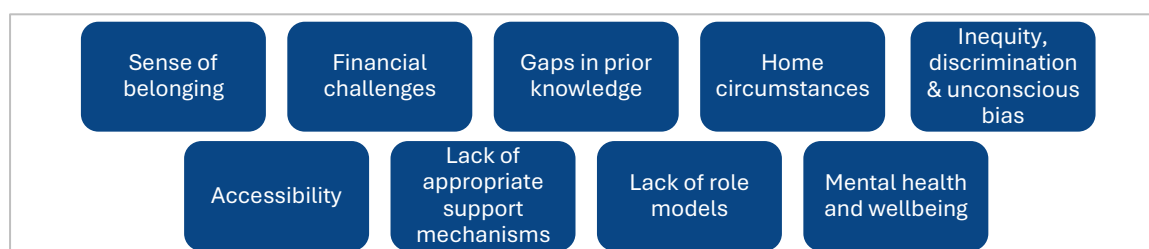


Figure A: University of Bath's nine key risks to equality of opportunity across the student lifecycle.

The associated risks that the SRS interventions are designed to address are:

- Sense of belonging
- Financial challenges
- Home circumstances
- Inequity, discrimination or unconscious bias
- Lack of appropriate support mechanisms
- Lack of role models
- Mental health and wellbeing

Appendix B: OfS' Equality of Opportunity Risk Registers (OfS, n.d) mapped to student characteristics

Risk	Student group(s)
1: Development of knowledge & skills required to be accepted onto HE courses that match expectations and ambitions	Care; YAC
2: Receive information & guidance that enables development of ambition & expectations to make informed choices about HE options	Care; Estranged; YAC
3: Perception of HE – not feeling able to apply to HE or certain providers despite being qualified	Care experienced
4: Application success rates – not be accepted to HE course or certain provider despite being qualified	Care experienced
5: Limited choice of course type & delivery mode	Care; YAC
6: Insufficient personalised academic support to achieve positive outcomes	Care; Estranged; YAC
7: Insufficient personalised non-academic support or insufficient access to extracurricular activities to achieve positive outcomes	Care; Estranged; YAC
8: Not experience an environment that is conducive to good mental health & wellbeing	Care; Estranged
9: Ongoing impacts of coronavirus	Care
10: Increased cost pressures may affect a student's ability to complete their course or obtain a good grade	Care; Estranged; YAC

¹ University of Bath Access and Participation Plan available from <https://www.bath.ac.uk/publications/access-and-participation-plan-2024-to-2028-and-fee-information/>

11: Insufficiently capacity, with unequal opportunity to access limited resource related to HE, including accommodation	Care; Estranged
12: Insufficient progression from HE that students consider to be a positive reflection of their HE experience	Care; Estranged; YAC

Care = care experienced, YAC = Young adult carer

Appendix C: SRS bursary values over time

Year	Change in value	Care, Estranged & Refugee bursary	YAC bursary
2017	-	£7,000	£2,500
2018	2.5%	£7,173	£2,562
2019	4.3%	£7,302	£2,608
2020	5.2%	£7,364	£2,630
2021	7.9%	£7,555	£2,698
2022	17.7%	£8,242	£2,944
2023	27.9%	£8,953	£3,198
2024	29.5%	£9,065	£3,238
2025	33.9%	£9,374	£3,348
2026	37.5%	£9,624	£3,437

Care = care leaver, YAC = Young adult carer

Access and Participation Evaluation



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