

Access and Participation Evaluation



UNIVERSITY OF
BATH

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

Summary Report

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Overview

The University of Bath provides targeted financial, pastoral, and community support for care experienced, estranged, young adult carer, and refugee/asylum seeker students throughout the undergraduate (UG) lifecycle. Delivered by a specialist team of 1.58 staff, the service supports a growing student population, increasing from 59 UG students in 2017/18 to 262 in 2025/26. The average annual growth is 20.5%, driven by increases in enrolled refugee and young adult carer students at Bath. Student Retention and Success (SRS) interventions address seven of the University's nine identified risks to equality of opportunity in the Access and Participation Plan (APP) (Figure 1).

SRS risks to equality of opportunity	
• 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

Figure 1: Bath's risks to equality of opportunity mapped to SRS interventions.

An Enhanced Theory of Change (eToC) was developed in 2025/26 to strengthen understanding of how SRS interventions contribute to student success. The eToC provides an evidence-informed framework for assessing how targeted support contributes to student outcomes and reduces risks to equality of opportunity. The evaluation sought to address two key questions:

- What contribution, if any, have SRS interventions made to students' continuation rates?
- What contribution, if any, have SRS interventions made to students' sense of belonging?

Enhanced Theory of Change (eToC) model

An eToC model was developed through participatory workshops with SRS staff, informed by institutional data, student surveys, and external evidence. It aimed to strengthen understanding of how interventions work, for whom, and under what conditions, rather than assess impact. The model identified five interconnected intervention pathways, with some shared outcomes (Figure 2). Recognising that students often experience intersecting barriers, SRS interventions provide a preventative, relationship-based, whole-institution approach to identifying and addressing risks before they escalate.

5 pathways	14 outcomes across the lifecycle	Impact statement
• Financial bursaries • Named contact support • University referral pathways • Communications • Social & community engagement	• Transition to, through, & beyond Bath • Stable in circumstances • Understand SRS support & build rapport with named contact • Understand, engage, & use support services • Build social networks & feel sense of belonging • Engage with studies without avoidable disruption • Develop skills & have improved confidence to navigate university life • Increased continuation, completion, & progression rates	Students are empowered through personalised guidance & sustained support to engage in their studies, succeed at university, achieve positive academic outcomes, & progress confidently beyond undergraduate study.

Figure 2: Summary of key components within the eToC model.

Beyond informing practice at the University of Bath, this eToC contributes to the wider sector by articulating how separate and interconnected activities contribute to outcomes for underrepresented students. While many Higher Education providers offer targeted support for care experienced, estranged, young adult carer, and refugee/asylum seeker students, there remains limited evidence explaining how different interventions work together to produce change. This eToC therefore provides an evidence-informed framework that can support programme design, evaluation planning, and institutional learning across the sector.

The model identified five ways in which intervention activities contribute to positive outcomes across the model. This included financial stability creating the capacity for engagement, trust-based relationships enabling early intervention, coordinated support reducing barriers, timely communications increasing awareness and access, and community engagement strengthening belonging.

Eighteen factors were identified that may influence whether an intervention achieves its intended outcomes. This included availability of sustainable funding and resources, staff capacity and expertise, students' willingness to engage, accessibility of wider student services, and effective partnership working. Wider external factors, such as housing, cost-of-living pressures, and personal circumstances, may be potential barriers to student participation.

Key results

- The eToC was coherent and largely aligned with both institutional evidence and wider sector literature. Evidence consistently highlighted the importance of financial stability, trusted relationships, coordinated support, and belonging as important contributors to student success.
- Rather than operating independently, the five pathways reinforce one another. For example, bursaries may reduce financial pressure, but their effectiveness can be strengthened through trusted relationships with named contacts, and effective referral pathways to ensure students continue to feel stable in their current circumstances.
- Many expected outcomes rely not only on SRS staff delivery, but the wider University ecosystem. Partnership working underpins the achievements of student engagement, stability, transition, and progression outcomes. This includes both academic and professional service departments.

Considerations

- The eToC was co-developed with staff and reflects operational and professional perspectives. While the model benefits from practitioner expertise, 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 further investigation in future evaluation outputs.
- 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.

Stakeholder Reflections

Nic Streatfield, Director of Student Support and Safeguarding said:

“It is reassuring that the Enhanced Theory of Change demonstrates that our approach aligns with both institutional evidence and sector evidence, as they have always informed our support for these cohorts. We highly value the guidance from expert groups such as NNECL, the former Stand Alone charity and Universities of Sanctuary in benchmarking our practice.

We are also pleased to see that the Enhanced Theory of Change recognises that the interventions have synergies between them. The basket of interventions are designed to positively reinforce each other. A suite of interventions also increases the chance of us finding a mechanism to build initial trust. For some students that may start with financial support, for others it may be through a named contact, social and community engagement opportunities, or other interventions. This is vitally important for a cohort who may have longstanding trauma and/or have cause to be sceptical about institutional support.

The findings also reflect what we hear from students and observe through our day-to-day work. Trusted relationships, a sense of belonging, coordinated support and effective referral pathways all play an important role in helping students navigate challenges and engage successfully with university life. The report also reinforces the importance of partnership working with other Student Support teams, academic departments and professional services across the University, recognising that positive student outcomes are often achieved through a whole-University approach.

We look forward to using the Enhanced Theory of Change to further strengthen our evaluation of our work with this cohort. We are continually refining our approach based on lived experience and student voice that is shared in our student appointments, events and regular engagement with students. However, we would welcome the insights from more structured qualitative research in this area. As part of the original ambition for this work, opportunities such as focus groups would help us develop a deeper understanding of students' experiences and further strengthen future evaluation and service development.”

Project Sponsor Reflection

Cassie Wilson, Pro-Vice Chancellor (Student Experience & Sport) said:

“This evaluation provides an important and timely contribution to our understanding of how targeted support enables students facing some of the most significant barriers to participation and success to thrive at Bath. The Enhanced Theory of Change offers a clear and evidence-informed framework that helps us articulate how our Student Retention and Success interventions contribute to continuation, belonging, and positive student outcomes.

As demand for support continues to grow, this work provides a strong foundation for future evaluation and service development. I am especially encouraged by the opportunities identified to strengthen student voice and further enhance our evidence base. Ultimately, this evaluation reflects our commitment to reducing inequalities in opportunity and ensuring that every student feels supported, valued, and able to achieve their full potential at the University of Bath.”

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