

Access and participation plan 2025-26 to 2028-29

Introduction and strategic aim

Durham University is committed to fostering an inclusive and diverse community, where everyone can excel and contribute to a vibrant intellectual culture. This Access and Participation Plan underscores our dedication to removing barriers to higher education for underrepresented groups. Through targeted outreach, enhanced support systems, and innovative teaching strategies, we will ensure equitable access, success, and progression for all students.

A diverse student body contributes significantly to the learning environment. When students interact with peers from different ethnicities, religions, socioeconomic backgrounds, and geographic origins, the classroom becomes a microcosm of the global society. These interactions provoke critical thinking, challenge preconceived notions, and encourage the development of empathy and cross-cultural communication skills. The exchange of diverse viewpoints in classroom discussions, group projects, and study teams leads to a more robust and nuanced understanding of the material, preparing students to navigate and contribute to an increasingly interconnected world. Similarly, a diverse academic faculty serve as a cornerstone for an enriching student experience. They bring varied teaching methodologies, research interests, and academic discourses to the table, broadening the intellectual horizons of students. Incorporating different cultural contexts into the curriculum, offers students the chance to engage with course material in a more complex and globally relevant manner. Having role models from various backgrounds can inspire underrepresented students to pursue their academic and professional goals with greater confidence. This diverse range of perspectives is indispensable in cultivating a community that values depth, complexity, and critical inquiry - qualities that are paramount for not only personal development but also for the advancement of knowledge and innovation.

In previous iterations of Durham University's Access and Participations Plans a target to reduce the ratio of POLAR4 quintiles 5 to 1 was made. In 2016/17 the ratio was 12.9:1, and this had reduced to 5:1 by 2021/22. This highlights Durham University's commitment to achieving the targets outlined in the APP. This success was achieved through a commitment to improving access via intervention activities and contextual offers. The use of contextual offers has enabled the University to improve access from under-represented groups. Around half of all contextual offer entrants had predicted and achieved A-level grades that were below the standard offer for their course, indicating that, for many of these students, a contextualised approach to admission was needed to enable an initial offer to be made and subsequently confirmed.

Context

Durham University is situated in the North East of England, operating in a region with unique challenges and opportunities in higher education. The North East has been identified as the lowest performing region in England for higher education entry rates, with an 18 year old entry rate of 30%, compared to 37% in England, highlighting the significant regional disparity in access to higher education. The North East is also the least ethnically diverse region in England and Wales. Only 7% of residents identified with Asian, black, mixed or 'other' ethnic groups, and a further 2.4% with white ethnic minorities. This causes a unique challenge in attracting a diverse applicant pool. Durham's portfolio also contributes to reduced diversity in its application pool: 41% of UK domicile students studying medicine and dentistry subjects were from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds compared to only 6% in the veterinary science and agriculture, food and related studies groups. As Durham does not have a Medical School, this compounding effect of region and subject mix makes it more difficult to attract students from minority ethnic backgrounds. Addressing these gaps involves improving educational attainment at the school level and ensuring schools are supported. Durham University's location places it in a strategic position to contribute to reducing these disparities through its access and participation initiatives. The North East Raising Aspiration Partnership (NERAP) of the five universities in the region (Durham, Newcastle, Northumbria, Sunderland and Teesside) collaborate extensively to address equality gaps in the region. The Partnership was established in 2014 and is fully funded by all five institutions. We collaborate on activity that creates economies of scale and impact to support our regions schools and specific targeted programmes for underrepresented groups to enhance their opportunity to access, succeed and progress in higher education. The collaboration facilitates a strategic, holistic approach to supporting students to address regional and national equality gaps. Since 2014, NERAP have delivered activity for over 200,000 beneficiaries in primary and secondary schools across the region, highlighting the significant regional disparity in access to higher education.

Mission

Our purpose is to enrich lives and change the world through the advancement of learning, and this purpose remains virtually unchanged since Durham University was founded in 1832. Therefore, our mission is to encourage and enable access to Durham University from a diverse body of students, particularly those who are underrepresented in higher education. Our access and participation plan sets out how we intend to achieve greater levels of access. We have created a vibrant, supportive, and enabling environment where students are encouraged to step out of their comfort zone. It aims to provide experiences and learning opportunities that prepare students to become future-ready graduates equipped for lifelong learning. The University values respect, inclusivity, innovation, curiosity, creativity, supportiveness, and resilience, embodying these principles in its educational approach to inspire students to explore without limits. These values guide the development of diverse learning opportunities, including cutting-edge research initiatives, a wide range of degree programmes, and numerous extracurricular activities. Durham is renowned for its distinctive collegiate system, world-class research, and commitment to social responsibility and inclusivity. Durham University's Wider Student Experience (WSE) Survey 2023 underscored the significant role that extracurricular activities play in enhancing the university experience for students. This year's findings provide compelling evidence of the positive effects of these activities on students' sense of belonging, educational outcomes, and mental wellbeing. As it looks to the future, Durham University is driven by an ambition to expand its global reach, enhance its research impact, and further diversify its community.

Strategic Aims

Durham University has adopted a set of Strategic Performance Indicators (SPIs). The SPIs were reviewed as part of the University's Strategy Refresh and this is our roadmap up until 2027. Performance against the SPIs is reported to University Executive Committee (UEC) and the University Council twice a year, as part of a wider report on progress against strategy aims and objectives. There are two SPIs that are directly related to the APP: OfS B3 Student Outcome Conditions and Access & Participation. The strategic aim of Durham University's Access and Participation Plan is to enhance equality of opportunity in higher education, particularly for those from underrepresented backgrounds. It aims to address the regional disparities in higher education entry rates by improving educational attainment at the school level and ensuring schools are supported. This involves targeted outreach, support initiatives, and collaboration with local communities to foster an inclusive environment where all students have the opportunity to succeed. To achieve this, we acknowledge a need to further develop the internal culture of Durham to facilitate change that will lead to better access and outcomes for target student groups. Our aim is to harness the power of diversity to reshape the educational landscape, making Durham University a beacon of pedagogical innovation and inclusivity. By nurturing a staff and student body that reflects the backgrounds of society as a whole, we aim to broaden the intellectual horizons of our students, offering them a globally relevant curriculum and inspiring underrepresented students to pursue their ambitions with confidence. Our goal is to create an academic community where diverse viewpoints thrive, fostering critical thinking, empathy, and cross-cultural communication skills. Through this, Durham University aspires to equip students with the nuanced understanding and adaptability needed to navigate and contribute to an interconnected world.

Risks to equality of opportunity

Durham's risks to equality of opportunity were identified using institutional and national level data and by engaging staff and students in a university-wide consultation to understand how different student groups are impacted across the student lifecycle. We also commissioned an independent review of the University's access and participation work. Full details about the methodology and analysis can be found in Annex A. The main risks to equality of opportunity for the University are:

- **Risk 1:** There is a lower proportion of applications from POLAR Q1 and Q2 and IMD Q1 and Q2 backgrounds. National data and our internal consultation indicate this is due to gaps in school attainment and information, advice and guidance. Furthermore, both staff and students who participated in the consultation highlighted that a significant risk to access for students from these target groups was negative perceptions of Durham University. This risk also came through strongly from the independent review.
- **Risk 2:** There are lower proportions of Black and Asian students accepting their offers relative to other student groups. These gaps have remained consistent since 2016. Based on the student consultation, perceptions of Durham University is a key risk for this target group.

- **Risk 3:** There is a lower continuation rate for disabled students compared to those without disabilities. Based on National Student Survey (NSS) scores and further analysis this appears to be due to a lower sense of belonging and lack of appropriate mental health support and academic support.
- **Risk 4:** There is a lower continuation rate for students from IMD Q1, compared to all other quintiles. Feedback from the consultation, along with the NSS scores and other analysis, suggests this is due to cost pressures, mental health challenges and a lack of sense of belonging. Furthermore, concerns around cost pressures were believed to be exacerbated by some aspects of the collegiate experience at Durham University. The impact of “hidden costs” on students can also be seen in the staff survey.
- **Risk 5:** There is a lower continuation and attainment rate for students coming from alternative entry routes, with a 3-percentage point gap in those achieving a 1st or 2:1. As this gap is significantly smaller for students who participate in WP programmes, it suggests this is due to pre-entry academic support and an improved sense of belonging from relationships formed during programme participation.
- **Risk 6:** There are lower continuation, completion, and attainment rates for mature students. NSS scores and comments suggest this is primarily due to insufficient academic support and cost pressures or working while studying.
- **Risk 7:** The completion rate and attainment of Black students is lower compared to their peers. Based on the NSS data and other analysis, sense of belonging and mental health challenges appear to be key factors. The completion rate is also lower for students from mixed ethnic backgrounds, with the NSS data again revealing mental health challenges as a key factor.
- **Risk 8:** Attainment for disabled students is lower than for those without reported disabilities. NSS scores and other analysis tell us this could be due to a poor sense of belonging, complex mental health support needs and lack of appropriate academic support.

We acknowledge that access rates for mature students are lower than the sector average. However, as Durham University’s student experience and college system is largely based around the 18-year-old full-time undergraduate, we have decided to not focus on increasing the proportion of mature students accessing Durham University within the APP. This decision was supported in consultations with local FE providers who also deliver HE programmes. In consultations, it was raised that this may simply move a small pool of mature students from one local provider to the next, potentially impacting the financial sustainability of FE providers and therefore damaging the local education ecosystem. Durham University is working with four local Further Education Colleges in an informal Durham Learning Alliance and it has secured partnership working towards establishing progression routes into work placements, apprenticeships, study and job opportunities at the University. A formal agreement to explore these and further opportunities within the Alliance is being developed. We do, however, plan to take action to improve access to Durham University for mature students as part of our Widening Access and Participation Strategy. It should also be noted that we have not identified any risks related to progression as Durham performs highly when compared to all comparators. However, we will continue to annually monitor progression rates of at-risk groups identified on the OfS Data Dashboard. Durham University delivers a Foundation Programme for academic preparation. It provides entry to a wide range of degree subjects for learners from under-represented groups in higher education, who need a year 0 course to be prepared for undergraduate studies. The courses are fully integrated elements of Durham University degree programmes and students are full members of the university. This means they become members of a college and enjoy full access to the extensive extracurricular opportunities within the university right from day one. Students who successfully reach the progression standard by the end of the foundation year automatically gain entry to year one of their registered degree course without the need for a further UCAS application. The majority of Foundation Programme students are from non-traditional university backgrounds. Many are from the North East of England, though all regions of the UK are usually represented. Foundation Programme staff are experts at teaching foundation level courses and are engaged in a wide range of scholarship activities, adding to the body of knowledge within their respective discipline areas and in the field of learning and teaching. The programme continues to experience a high success rate, both across the institution and within our Foundation cohort, with a success rate of over 80% of Foundation students able to pass and progress to the next level of study, indicating the effectiveness of our educational approach. The success of Foundation students can also be measured by the strong degree outcomes achieved by Foundation students, which continue to exceed all other WP entry routes to Durham, and in some degree subjects and faculties, exceed the outcomes of standard entry route students. Durham has high progression and

completion rates, and exceptional outcomes in terms of employment, with 90% POLAR Q1 students being in highly skilled work 15 months after graduating. High levels of progression into highly skilled jobs are also evidenced for students from minority ethnic backgrounds, students with disabilities, mature students and first-generation students. Similarly, although our overall rating was silver, in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), our Student Outcomes rating is gold, this means that student outcomes at Durham are typically outstanding. The TEF panel determined that all the features for student outcomes at Durham – the proportion of our students continuing in and completing their degrees and progressing to highly skilled employment or further study, were judged to be outstanding. Our approaches to supporting our students' educational gain were described to be highly effective and tailored to the mix of students and their different starting points, ensuring that all students can achieve educational gains, through both the curriculum and the co-curriculum. We are therefore focusing on increasing the proportions of Black and Asian students studying at Durham, addressing continuation and completion gaps for target groups, and reducing attainment disparities as reflected in our objectives. We acknowledge that there is a trend of those entering through non-standard entry route who are completing, attaining, and progressing at lower rates than standard entry students. We are committed to monitoring and rigorously tracking these students through the lifecycle. As these students overlap to a great extent with those who are targeted due to socio-economic criteria or ethnicity, our planned interventions will still be of benefit to many of the alternative entry students. We also acknowledge that tackling poor mental health should be more than simply responding to symptoms. We must continue to consider the cause of mental health difficulties for students, ensuring that we minimise unnecessary stress.

Objectives

Based on the risks to equality of opportunity identified, we are committing to the following seven objectives:

- **Objective one:** To increase the percentage of students studying at Durham University from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This includes reducing the ratio of TUNDRA Q5 to Q1 students to 2.7:1 and increasing the percentage of students eligible for Free School Meals to 10.5% by 2028/29.
- **Objective two:** To increase the percentage of students studying at Durham University from Black and Asian heritage backgrounds to 3.0% and 7.5%, respectively, by 2028/29.
- **Objective three:** To reduce the continuation and attainment gap between students with a reported disability and students with no reported disability to 1.8% for continuation and 1.5% for attainment by 2028/29.
- **Objective four:** To reduce the continuation gap between students from low socio-economic groups and their more advantaged peers to 4.2% by 2028/29. This would result in a 42% reduction in the continuation gap between students from the most deprived versus least deprived areas of the country, as measured by the Indices of Multiple Deprivation.
- **Objective five:** To reduce the continuation, completion, and attainment gap between mature students and non-mature students to 5.0%, 11.5% and 5.0% respectively by 2028/29.
- **Objective six:** To reduce the completion and attainment gap between students from Black heritage backgrounds and those from white heritage backgrounds to 4.0% and 15.0%, respectively, by 2028/29. For the attainment gap 15.0% would represent a significant reduction from the 2021/22 attainment gap of 29.0%.
- **Objective seven:** To limit the attainment gap between students reporting a mental health disability and those not reporting a disability from rising above 5.0%.

The below table outlines in further detail how these objectives will be achieved across the four-year Plan for specific target groups:

Lifecycle	Indicator	Type	2024/ 25	2025/2 6	2026/2 7	2027/ 28	2028/ 29
Access	TUNDRA (Q5:Q1)	Ratio	3.4	3.2	3.0	2.8	2.7
	Free School Meals (FSM)	%	9.4	9.7	10.0	10.3	10.5
	Ethnicity (Black)	%	2.0	2.1	2.3	2.6	3.0

	Ethnicity (Asian)	%	5.5	6.0	6.5	7.0	7.5
Continuation	Disability (reported vs. not reported)	% Gap	2.3	2.1	2.0	1.9	1.8
	IMD 2019 (Q5 vs. Q1)	% Gap	4.9	4.7	4.5	4.3	4.2
	Mature (21+ vs. <21)	% Gap	6.1	5.8	5.5	5.2	5.0
Completion	Mature (21+ vs. <21)	% Gap	14.0	13.0	12.5	12.0	11.5
	Ethnicity (Black vs. white)	% Gap	5.6	5.2	4.8	4.4	4.0
Attainment	Mature (21+ vs. <21)	% Gap	7.0	6.5	6	5.5	5.0
	Ethnicity (Black firsts vs. white)	% Gap	18.0	17.0	16.0	15.5	15.0
	Disability (reported vs. not reported)	% Gap	2.0	1.8	1.7	1.6	1.5
	Disability (mental health vs. no recorded disability)	% Gap	5.3	5.2	5.2	5.1	5.0

Intervention strategies and expected outcomes

Intervention strategy 1: Access and continuation for socio-economically disadvantaged students

- **Objectives:** To increase the proportion of students studying at Durham University from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, by both increasing their rates of access to the University and reducing year-on-year non-continuation rates.
- **Access Target One:** To reduce the ratio of TUNDRA Q5:Q1 students from 3.6 to 2.7 by 2028/29.
- **Access Target Two:** To increase enrolments of entrants eligible for Free School Meals from 9.1% to 10.5% of the UG student population by 2028/29.
- **Success Target One:** To reduce the gap in continuation rates between students from IMD Q5 postcodes and IMD Q1 postcodes from 7.2 to 4.2 by 2028/29.
- **Risks to equality of opportunity:** Intervention Strategy 1 aims to mitigate risks to equality of opportunity for students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds in accessing and thriving at Durham University by focusing on **attainment, perceptions of Durham University and university information, advice and guidance** in the Access phase, and **cost pressures, mental health and sense of belonging** in the continuation phase.

Activity	Description	Inputs	Outcomes	Cross intervention strategy
Pre-16 multi-intervention programme	(New activity) Design and deliver a pre-16 multi-intervention programme, focusing on raising attainment, boosting university preparedness, and building positive perceptions of HE and of Durham University, predominantly in the North East. The programme will launch with Y7 and Y10 pupils in 24/25 and scale up as Y8, Y9 and Y11 pupils are added from 25/26 onwards, to total 200 students per year group each year. The programme will target schools with high proportions of students from TUNDRA Q1 and/or eligibility for Free School Meals. The programme will include Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG), campus visits, academic skills development, and near-peer mentoring. Students will also take part in The Brilliant Club's <u>Scholars Programme</u> twice during the programme. The programme will act as feeder activity for the KS5/transition interventions.	<p>The intervention will be delivered by the Schools, Outreach and Widening Participation Team. The total FTE is 21.3.</p> <p>We have estimated the non-pay cost of the intervention to be £432k over a five-year period.</p>	Increased academic self-efficacy, knowledge of HE, HE expectations, and sense of belonging for students completing the programme. Improvements in attainment-related outcomes (e.g., cognitive, strategies, critical thinking). Improvements in attainment at KS4. Long term outcomes include increased applications to Access Programmes at Durham University, progression to Durham University and participation in HE in general.	IS2, IS3
Multi-intervention KS5 and transition programme	(New activity) Design and deliver a KS5 and transition programme to support students from Y12 through application, offer making and transition to Durham University. The programme will target students from TUNDRA Q1 and/or who have previously been eligible for Free School Meals and will engage 200 Y12 students per year. The pre-entry phase of the programme will include subject-related activity, a residential, near-peer mentoring, application support, academic skills development, and university preparation through The Brilliant Club's <u>Join the Dots</u> programme. The transition phase will include guaranteed contextual offers, financial support at Durham University, and guaranteed first year coaching through the Join the Dots programme.	<p>The intervention will be delivered by the Schools, Outreach and Widening Participation Team. The total FTE is 21.3.</p> <p>We have estimated the non-pay cost of the intervention to be £780k over a five-year period.</p>	Increased academic self-efficacy, knowledge of HE, HE expectations, and sense of belonging for students completing the programme. Improvements in attainment-related outcomes (e.g., cognitive strategies). Improvements in attainment at KS5. Long term outcomes include increased progression to Durham University and participation in HE in general.	IS2, IS3

Academic skills transition support	(New activity) With the Durham Centre for Academic Development, develop a training programme for academic departments to design and build pre- and in-session subject-specific transition support, focusing on general fundamental academic skills as well as department-specific skills, for all students entering via contextual pathways. This provision will scale over time, to eventually reach 800 undergraduate students per year.	We have estimated the pay cost of the intervention to be £259k over a five-year period. The project will be supplemented by management and steering from DCAD senior leadership, delivery support by DCAD Student Success staff. The total FTE is 13.	Increased academic self-efficacy, cognitive strategies, and meta-cognitive strategies for students completing the programme. Improved continuation, completion, and attainment rates at Durham University at the end of Year 1 of UG.	IS2, IS3
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Total cost of activities and evaluation for intervention strategy

Total investment in intervention strand is £1.471m, not including staff costs. Staff costs are included for delivery of the whole plan, with fractional inclusion of staff costs for support teams.

Summary of evidence base and rationale

There is a notable attainment gap between students from less advantaged backgrounds and their more advantaged peers in the UK. By the time students reach their GCSEs, this gap is approximately 18.8 months, with persistently disadvantaged students lagging by nearly 22.7 months. These disparities extend into higher education, where progression to competitive universities is significantly lower for the most disadvantaged students. This ongoing issue persists even after less advantaged students arrive at university, affecting their continuation rates and likelihood of achieving top grades. A summary of the underpinning evidence for this strategy is provided in Annex B.

Evaluation

Activity	Outcomes	Method(s) of evaluation	Summary of publication plan
Intervention strategy overall	Progression to Durham University	Tracking students' uptake of Access Programmes at Durham University (Type 1). Tracking students' applications to university and to Durham University specifically (Type 1).	Enhanced theories of change will be developed across all strategies and shared with sector via our website. The first theory of change models will be available from Summer 2026.
All internal activities	Increased cognitive and psychosocial outcomes, i.e.: academic self-efficacy, cognitive strategies, HE expectations, knowledge of HE, sense of belonging,	Enhanced theories of change , including literature reviews and testing mechanisms using evaluation findings (Type 1/ Type 2) (see Annex B). Pre-post comparison of survey data of students taking part in the activities using relevant scales from TASO's validated Access and Success Questionnaire (Type 2). Qualitative research (e.g., interviews / focus groups) with students and use of triangulation with pre-post surveys.	Findings will be available on our website from December 2026.

	meta-cognitive strategies		
All attainment raising activities	Increased attainment at KS4 and KS5.	Matched research design using KS4/KS5 attainment data from HEAT (Type 2) &/or dosage response for different levels of activities and association with outcomes (Type 2) depending on availability of matched control group.	Report will be published on our website by 2029 and shared with the sector/academic paper submitted if appropriate.
All transition support	Higher continuation rates and attainment in Year 1 of UG. Increased confidence of staff to support students.	Non-random control with pre and post-test/interrupted time-series design & multiple regression (quasi-experimental design) tracking students who took part in interventions across the whole student lifecycle and comparing them to non-participants, controlling for measurable differences. Includes attainment, completion, and sense of belonging as outcomes (Type 3 – see Annex B for more details). Qualitative/quantitative research (interviews/validated surveys) to measure and understand staff increased confidence to support students. (Type 2).	Multiple regression report (see Annex B). Reports will be published annually on our website annually from Summer 2027
The Scholars Programme (External Provider)	Increased academic self-efficacy, cognitive strategies, knowledge of HE, and sense of belonging. Increased attainment-related outcomes. Improved GCSE attainment.	Pre-post comparison of survey data of students taking part in the activities using relevant scales from TASO's validated Access and Success Questionnaire (Type 2). Pre-post comparison of programme assessment data of students taking part in the activities to measure attainment-related outcomes, e.g., subject knowledge, critical thinking, and written communication (Type 2). Matched research design using KS4/KS5 attainment data from HEAT (Type 2). Propensity Score Matching using UCAS university application data to examine the impact on progression to competitive universities (Type 3).	Impact is presented on The Brilliant Club's website annually (and updated).
Join the Dots (External Provider)	Increased academic self-efficacy and sense of belonging. Increased use of cognitive strategies and meta-cognitive strategies.	Tracking students' continuation and completion rates and attainment at Durham University (Type 1). Pre-post comparison of survey data of students taking part in the activities using relevant scales from TASO's validated Access and Success Questionnaire (Type 2). Exploring the use of a matched research design as part of the evaluation of the programme by 2028/29 (Type 2).	Impact is presented on The Brilliant Club's website annually (and updated).

Intervention strategy 2: Access for Asian-heritage students

- **Objective:** To increase the proportion of Asian heritage students studying at Durham University.
- **Access Target Three:** To increase enrolments of Asian heritage entrants from 6.2% to 7.5% of the UG student population by 2028/29.
- **Risks to equality of opportunity:** Intervention Strategy 2 aims to mitigate risks to equality of opportunity for students of Asian heritage in accessing Durham University by focusing on their **perceptions of Durham University**.

Activity	Description	Inputs	Outcomes	Cross intervention strategy
The Elephant Access Programme (External Provider)	<p>(Expanded activity) Expand Durham University's existing partnership with The Elephant Group to the Midlands and London hubs, which typically see high proportions of Asian student participation. Expansion will see engagement with 1,130 students per year – based on previous years' demographics, this will equate to engagement with an additional 300 students of Asian heritage each year.</p> <p>The Elephant Access programme is a multi-intervention programme that includes IAG, campus visits, and academic skill support.</p>	<p>The intervention will be part-delivered by the Schools, Outreach and Widening Participation Team. The total FTE is 21.3.</p> <p>We have estimated the non-pay cost of the intervention to be £76,000 over a five-year period.</p>	<p>Increased academic self-efficacy, knowledge of HE, HE expectations, and sense of belonging for students completing the programme. Improvements in attainment-related outcomes (e.g. cognitive, strategies, critical thinking). Improvements in attainment at KS5. Long term outcomes include increased progression to Durham University and participation in HE in general.</p>	IS1, IS3
Multi-intervention KS5 and transition programme	<p>(New activity) Design and deliver a KS5 and transition programme to support Asian heritage students from Y12 on through application, offer making and transition to Durham University, with a view to engage with 100 Y12 students per year. The pre-entry phase of the programme will include subject-specific activity, a residential, near-peer mentoring, application support, academic skills development, and university preparation activity. The transition phase will include guaranteed contextual offers, financial support at Durham University, and guaranteed first year coaching. However, the specific activity included within this intervention will be co-designed together with a panel of Asian heritage Durham University staff and students.</p>	<p>The intervention will be delivered by the Schools, Outreach and Widening Participation Team. The total FTE is 21.3.</p> <p>We have estimated the non-pay cost of the intervention to be £256,000 over a four-year period from 2025-26.</p>	<p>Increased academic self-efficacy, knowledge of HE, and sense of belonging for students completing the programme. Improvements in attainment-related outcomes (e.g. cognitive strategies, critical thinking) and attainment at KS5. Long term outcomes include increased progression to Durham University and participation in HE in general.</p>	IS1

Total cost of activities and evaluation for intervention strategy

Total investment in intervention strand is £332k, not including staff costs. Staff costs are included for delivery of the whole plan, with fractional inclusion of staff costs for support teams.

Summary of evidence base and rationale

The strategy is informed by the recognition that universal labels like 'BAME' can obscure the distinct identities and needs within diverse ethnic groups, prompting the university to focus on separate target groups. Although Asian students generally have a higher university access rate compared to some other

ethnic groups, their representation at Durham is significantly lower than at other leading universities. For instance, only 6.5% of Durham's undergraduate intake in 2021/22 were of Asian heritage, compared to much higher percentages at institutions like Oxford, Cambridge, UCL, and Warwick. To address this, Durham's programme will include robust, ongoing evaluations to build a strong evidence base for effectively increasing Asian student admissions. A summary of the underpinning evidence for this strategy is provided in Annex B.

Evaluation

Activity	Outcomes	Method(s) of evaluation	Summary of publication plan
The Elephant Group (External Provider)	Progression to highly selective universities. Increased attainment. Increased exam/revision techniques and psychosocial outcomes (e.g. knowledge of HE, increased self-efficacy).	Pre-post comparison through baseline, midpoint and end data collection (including validated TASO surveys and grade predictions) (Type 2). Qualitative research (focus groups) (Type 1).	Impact is presented on the Elephant Group website annually (and updated).
Intervention strategy overall	Progression to Durham University.	Tracking students' applications to university and to Durham specifically (Narrative – Type 1).	Enhanced theories of change will be developed across all strategies and shared with the sector via our website.
All internal activities	Increased cognitive and psychosocial outcomes, i.e.: academic self-efficacy, cognitive strategies, HE expectations, knowledge of HE, sense of belonging, meta-cognitive strategies.	Enhanced theories of change , including literature reviews and testing mechanisms using evaluation findings (Type 1/ Type 2). Pre-post comparison of survey data of students taking part in the activities using relevant scales from TASO's validated Access and Success Questionnaire (Type 2). Qualitative research (e.g., interviews / focus groups) with students and use of triangulation with pre-post surveys.	The first theory of change models will be available from Summer 2025. Findings will be available on our website from December 2026.
All attainment raising activities	Increased attainment at KS5.	Matched research design using KS4/KS5 attainment data from HEAT (Type 2) &/or dosage response for different levels of activities and association with outcomes depending on availability of matched control group (Type 2).	Report will be published on our website by 2029 and shared with the sector/academic paper submitted if appropriate.
All transition activity	Higher continuation rates and attainment in Year 1 of UG.	Non-random control with pre and post-test/interrupted time-series design & multiple regression (quasi-experimental design) tracking students who took part in interventions across the whole student lifecycle and comparing them to non-participants, controlling for measurable differences. Includes attainment, completion, and sense of belonging as outcomes (Type 3 – see Annex B for more details).	Multiple regression report (see Annex B for more information). Report on website/shared with sector (+ academic paper if appropriate)

Intervention strategy 3: Access, completion and degree outcomes for Black heritage students

- **Objectives:** To increase the proportion of Black students studying at Durham University, and improve their outcomes by increasing completion rates and reducing awarding gaps.
- **Access Target Four:** To increase enrolments of Black entrants from 1.8% to 3% of the UG student population by 2028/29.
- **Success Target Two:** To reduce the gap in completion rates between Black students and white students from 7.2% to 4% by 2028/29.
- **Success Target Three:** To reduce the awarding gap between Black and white students gaining a 1st from 21% to 15% by 2028/29.
- **Risks to equality of opportunity:** Intervention Strategy 3 aims to mitigate risks to equality of opportunity for Black students in accessing and thriving at Durham University by focusing on **perceptions of Durham University** in the Access phase, and **mental health** and **sense of belonging** in the Completion and Attainment phases.

Activity	Description	Inputs	Outcomes	Cross intervention strategy
Multi-intervention KS5 and transition programme	(Revised and expanded activity) Update, enhance and expand Durham University's KS5 programme to support Black heritage students from Y12 through application, offer making and transition to Durham University, with a view to engage with 150 Y12 students per year. The pre-entry phase of the programme will include subject-specific activity, a residential, near-peer mentoring, application support, academic skills development, and university preparation activity. The transition phase will include guaranteed contextual offers, financial support at Durham University, and guaranteed first year coaching. The specific activity included within this intervention will be co-designed together with a panel of Black heritage Durham University staff and students. Appropriate external partnerships will be sought to collaborate on the delivery of the programme.	The intervention will be delivered by the Schools, Outreach and Widening Participation Team. The total FTE is 21.3. We have estimated the non-pay cost of the intervention to be £510,000 over a five-year period.	Increased academic self-efficacy, knowledge of HE, HE expectations, and sense of belonging for students completing the programme. Improvements in attainment-related outcomes (e.g. cognitive, strategies, critical thinking) at KS5. Long term outcomes include increased progression to Durham University and participation in HE in general.	IS1
Investing in understanding	(New activity) By the end of 25/26, collate and review the recent body of staff- and student-generated evidence on the Black student experience at Durham, from which to draw a series of recommendations and create an action plan to address the ethnicity awarding gap over the remaining years of the plan. The specific activity included within this intervention will be co-designed with a panel of Black heritage Durham University staff and students. The group will re-run the intervention every two years and monitor the implementation of the delivery plan.	The intervention will be delivered by the Schools, Outreach and Widening Participation Team. The total FTE is 21.3.	Improve sense of belonging for Black heritage students. Reduce the ethnicity completion gap. Reduce the ethnicity awarding gap.	
Culturally sensitive Counselling	(Existing activity) Durham University partners with Nilaari, a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic led community-based charity, to provide access to culturally appropriate mental health support for students, free of charge. The aim of the intervention is to increase awareness of the service, both within the staff/student body and amongst prospective students.	Delivered by an external partner, under the supervision of the University's Counselling Service. The total FTE is 18.8.	Increased awareness of support available.	

Total cost of activities and evaluation for intervention strategy

Total investment in intervention strand is £510k, not including staff costs. Staff costs are included for delivery of the whole plan, with fractional inclusion of staff costs for support teams.

Summary of evidence base and rationale

Although 51% of Black 18-year-olds entered higher education in 2022, only 9% attended higher tariff institutions, the lowest rate among all ethnic groups. Moreover, Black students at Durham comprise only 1.6% of entrants, significantly below the sector average. Early intervention programmes like Target Oxbridge and Newcastle University's PARTNERS programme have shown promise but are limited in number. Financial support is also critical, as there is evidence that Black students greatly value bursaries but often lack awareness of available financial aids. Black students are more likely to drop out and less likely to achieve top degree classifications compared to their peers. A summary of the underpinning evidence for this strategy is provided in Annex B.

Evaluation

Activity	Outcomes	Method(s) of evaluation	Summary of publication plan
Intervention strategies overall	Progression to Durham University. Improved sense of belonging for black heritage students. Reduced ethnicity completion gap. Reduced ethnicity awarding gap.	Tracking students' applications to university and to Durham specifically; tracking completion and attainment gaps (Narrative – Type 1). Enhanced theories of change , including literature reviews and testing mechanisms using evaluation findings (Type 1/ Type 2). Non-random control with pre and post-test/interrupted time-series design & multiple regression (quasi-experimental design) tracking students who took part in interventions across the whole student lifecycle and comparing them to non-participants, controlling for measurable differences. Includes attainment, completion, and sense of belonging as outcomes (Type 3 – see Annex B for more details).	Enhanced theories of change will be developed across all strategies and shared with sector via our website. The first theory of change models will be available from Summer 2025. Findings will be available on our website from December 2026.
Multi-intervention KS5 and transition programme	Progression to Durham University, Increased cognitive and psychosocial outcomes, i.e.: academic self-efficacy, cognitive strategies, HE expectations, knowledge of HE, sense of belonging, meta-cognitive strategies.	Pre-post comparison of survey data of students taking part in the activities using relevant scales from TASO's validated Access and Success Questionnaire (Type 2). Qualitative research (e.g., interviews / focus groups) with students and use of triangulation with pre-post surveys.	Reports will be published on our website annually from Summer 2026.
All attainment raising activities	Increased attainment at KS5.	Matched research design using KS4/KS5 attainment data from HEAT (Type 2) &/or dosage response for different levels of activities and association with outcomes depending on availability of matched control group (Type 2).	Report will be published on our website by 2029 and shared with the sector/academic paper submitted if appropriate.
Investing in understanding	Improve sense of belonging for black heritage students. Reduce the ethnicity completion gap. Reduce the ethnicity awarding gap.	Qualitative research (e.g., interviews / focus groups) with students and use of triangulation with students, staff and surveys, meeting notes.	Report will be published on our website by Summer 2026.

Culturally sensitive counselling	Increased awareness of support available.	Tracking access using counselling service figures (Type 1), measure awareness as pre/post comparison surveys (Type 2).	Due to the sensitive nature of data, this will not be published.
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Intervention strategy 4: Continuation and degree outcomes for students with a reported disability

- **Objectives:** To decrease the continuation gaps between Durham University students with a reported disability and those without, and reduce awarding gaps for these students compared with those without a reported disability.
- **Success Target Four:** To reduce the gap in continuation rates between students with a reported disability and those without from 2.9% to 1.8% by 2028/29.
- **Success Target Five:** To reduce the awarding gap between students with a reported disability and those without from 1.6% to 1.5% by 2028/29.
- **Risks to equality of opportunity:** Intervention Strategy 4 aims to mitigate risks to equality of opportunity for students with a reported disability in thriving at Durham University by focusing on **academic support**, **mental health** and **sense of belonging**.

Activity	Description	Inputs	Outcomes	Cross intervention strategy
Enhanced Student Support Model	<p>(Expansion of existing activity) We are investing an additional £1.3 m (annually) in a new Student Support model. This includes dedicated support roles within our academic departments. Our new Student Support Officers provide support to ensure students engage effectively in their academic studies. They are also the Department Disability Representatives, working closely with our Disability Support Service, to ensure Disability Support Plans are implemented in our academic departments. We have undertaken an extensive review of the Implementation of Disability Support Plans (DSP) processes and have a robust process in place to ensure students with disabilities are effectively supported to succeed in their studies. This review included implementing a new data dashboard to ensure academic staff members are fully informed of students within the modules they teach that have a DSP in place and the reasonable adjustments that need to be implemented. We have also invested in a new Student Support Information Management System (SSIMS) which will ensure information relating to student support, including Disability Support Plans, is safely and appropriately shared across the student support network. Role specific training plans have been put in place for core student support roles to ensure all staff involved in student support have the right skills and knowledge to perform their role with confidence and that students receive consistent, high-quality support. This includes a bespoke Mental Health Awareness training module for Staff in Student Support roles along with bespoke training modules delivered by our Disability Support team. The Student Support Model is governed outside the APP and represents a significant investment in delivering wider university strategies. The outcomes align closely with and will contribute to the successful delivery of APP objectives.</p>	<p>A team has been created to provide strategic direction for student support, enhance collaboration and improve consistency in the student experience. It consists of the Head of Student Support & Wellbeing, Senior Manager for Student Support Information Management System (SSIMS), Learning & Development Manager, Process Manager and Administrator. The total FTE in this central team is 60.9.</p> <p>Financial approval for new Student people model: £1.3m annual investment.</p> <p>This includes the new FLT, additional staff capacity in Counselling, Mental Health and Disability Support with the addition of 2 Counsellors, 1 Mental Health Advisor, 1 Disability Support Advisor and 1 Administrator, 15.5 FTE in academic departments and 5.5 FTE in colleges. Total investment in staff = 31 new roles.</p>	<p>Increased confidence from staff who take part in the training about autism and mental health conditions.</p> <p>The aim is to help staff feel confident in how to respond to a student support concern, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what to do in an emergency • when to refer a student to other services • when to listen <p>Outcomes will include improved student satisfaction with academic support, mental health provision and an increased sense of belonging.</p>	IS1, IS2, IS3, IS5, IS6

Bespoke pre-arrival days	(New activity) Develop and deliver bespoke transition to Durham days for those who will benefit from support to develop routines/stability during studies and/or who might find socialising in a new environment challenging. This will expand upon DU's existing early arrival programme for autistic students, and will scale to reach relevant students, according to demand. These days will take place in September of each year.	Delivered by the University's Disability Support Service. The total FTE is 12.9.	Increased confidence and sense of belonging at Durham. Increased knowledge of where to seek support in the university.	IS5
Institutional approaches to inclusion	(Expanded activity) Deliver essential staff training on autism awareness and mental health conditions to all staff in formal student support roles as part of an annual refresher training plan. Required learning includes content on the Disability Support and Counselling & Mental Health services and their remits, how to listen well and respond appropriately to requests for support. Additionally, to ensure Durham University staff are trained in, and have access to, digital accessibility initiatives and integrated assistive technology, taking a Universal Design for Learning approach.		Increased confidence from staff who take part in the training about autism and mental health conditions.	IS5
Support Groups	(Expanded activity) Building on existing support groups currently offered by Durham University mental health services, establish further support groups for students with ADHD or autism (with or without a formal diagnosis).		Increased confidence and sense of belonging at Durham. Increased knowledge of where to seek support in the university.	IS5

Total cost of activities and evaluation for intervention strategy

Total investment in new activity as part of this intervention strand is £1.3m per year (combined with IS5), not including staff costs. Staff costs are included for delivery of the whole plan, with fractional inclusion of staff costs for support teams.

Summary of evidence base and rationale

The demand for student support and wellbeing services at universities is increasing due to greater numbers of students experiencing and reporting mental health concerns and changing stakeholder expectations. This shift, intensified by the Covid-19 pandemic, has led to more online service delivery and servicing more complex student needs due to the varied demographics and preferences. Durham University, experiencing a rise in student numbers and disclosures of mental health issues, faces challenges in meeting these demands without comprehensive data on service usage. This gap in data makes it difficult to optimise and tailor support services effectively, increasing risks to student wellbeing and academic success. A summary of the underpinning evidence for this strategy is provided in Annex B.

Evaluation

Activity	Outcomes	Method(s) of evaluation	Summary of publication plan
Bespoke pre-arrival days	Increased confidence and sense of belonging at Durham. Increased knowledge of where to seek support in the university.	Tracking students' engagement in bespoke pre-arrival days (Type 1). Pre-post comparison of survey data of students taking part in the activities to measure their confidence and knowledge of how to access support at Durham (Type 2). Pre-post comparison of survey data of students taking part using the sense of belonging survey (pre-entry) from TASO's validated Access and Success Questionnaire (Type 2). Qualitative research (e.g., interviews / focus groups) with students (Type 1).	Findings will be published on our website annually from Summer 2027
Institutional approaches to inclusive practice	Increased confidence from staff who take part in the training about autism and mental health conditions.	Pre-post comparison of survey data of staff taking part in the training (Type 2). Qualitative research (e.g., interviews / focus groups) with staff (Type 1).	
Intervention strategies overall	Increased sense of belonging. Reduced awarding gaps. Reduced continuation gaps.	Enhanced theories of change , including literature reviews and testing mechanisms using evaluation findings (Type 1/ Type 2). Non-random control with pre and post-test/interrupted time-series design & multiple regression (quasi-experimental design) tracking students who took part in interventions across the whole student lifecycle and comparing them to non-participants, controlling for measurable differences. Includes attainment, completion, and sense of belonging as outcomes (Type 3 – see Annex B for more details).	Multiple regression report /paper if appropriate Dec 2029 (see Annex B for more information). Enhanced theories of change: annual reports Dec (2026 - 2029) on website/shared with sector.
Support Groups	Increased sense of belonging.	Qualitative research (e.g., interviews / focus groups) with staff (Type 1).	Reports will be published on our website annually from Summer 2027.

Intervention strategy 5: Degree outcomes for students with a reported mental health disability

- **Objectives:** To reduce awarding gaps between Durham University students with a reported mental health disability and those without.
- **Success Target Six:** To reduce the awarding gap between students with a reported mental health disability and those without to below 5% by 2028/29.
- **Risks to equality of opportunity:** Intervention Strategy 5 aims to mitigate risks to equality of opportunity for students with a reported mental health disability in thriving at Durham University by focusing on **academic support, mental health** and **sense of belonging**

Activity	Description	Inputs	Outcomes	Cross intervention strategy
Enhanced Student Support Model	<p>(Expansion of existing activity) As explained in intervention 4, this investment aims to provide support throughout the University ecosystem for students who need additional support. The investment in roles enables each department to have a specific Disability Representative, and help students access other specialist support services. A role specific training plan will ensure all staff involved in student support have the right skills and knowledge to perform their role with confidence and that students receive consistent, high-quality support. This incorporates training for over 150 people across 11 teams on processes, systems, student communications and change support. A programme of process reviews will mean that staff and students have easy access to clear guidance, providing better consistency. <i>All</i> student-facing staff are now required to complete two e-learning modules on Student Support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student Support at Durham • Zero Suicide Alliance: Suicide Awareness. 	<p>Faculty Hubs – 1x Student Support Manager per faculty (4) and Student Support Officer. This capacity is allocated to achieve a Staff Student Ratio of approx. 1:1500.</p> <p>Colleges – Continuation of 1x Assistant Principal per college, plus 1x Assistant Student Support Officer (or 0.5x Assistant Student Support Officer).</p> <p>Additions: 2 x Counsellors, 1 x Mental Health Advisor, 1 x Disability Support Advisor and 1 x Administrator.</p> <p>Total investment in staff = 31 new roles.</p>	<p>Improved ratio of trained staff to support and guide students.</p> <p>Increased confidence from staff who take part in the training about autism and mental health conditions.</p> <p>The aim is to help staff feel confident in how to respond to a student support concern, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what to do in an emergency • when to refer a student to other services • when to listen <p>Improved student satisfaction with academic support, mental health provision and an increased sense of belonging.</p>	IS1, IS2, IS3, IS4, IS6

Supporting Mental Health through Partnership	<p>(Expanded activity) Links with NHS Services: The local NHS Eating Disorders Service. The University has jointly created guidance for students on safe management of restrictive eating disorders, and routinely shares management of cases where students' physical health may be at risk, to try to support them to continue safely with study.</p> <p>Links to the local NHS Access, Affective and EIP Teams and the NHS therapy service, Talking Changes. The University has in place two-way referral routes with Liaison Psychiatry (A&E).</p> <p>The University provides space on campus for NHS Mental Health Services to engage directly with students.</p> <p>The University is represented at the Primary Care Network on Student Mental Health and at our local Suicide Prevention Alliance.</p> <p>Rape and Sexual Abuse Counselling Centre. The University partners with the Darlington and County Durham Rape, Sexual Assault and Counselling Centre to provide student survivors who have experienced any form of sexual violence with direct access to specialist counselling and support. This support is provided both online and on campus. The University funds counselling provision directly to support the work of the Centre.</p>	<p>The new Functional Leadership Team will bring continuous review and improvement of the processes and systems underpinning Student Support at Durham.</p> <p>The Team consists of the Head of Student Support & Wellbeing, Senior Manager for SSIMS, Learning & Development Manager, Process Manager and Administrator.</p> <p>Total FTE in central team is 60.9.</p> <p>Financial approval for new Student Support IT system and people model: £1.3m annual investment.</p>	<p>Improved student satisfaction with academic support, mental health provision and an increased sense of belonging.</p>	<p>IS1, IS3, IS4, IS6</p>
Mental Health Support Website	<p>(Expanded activity) Designed for any student living with mental health difficulties, the website provides information and resources around university life, what support is available and information on how to manage mental health and wellbeing at university. As part of its expansion, the website will be supplemented by events for students with pre-existing mental health conditions. This will be an opportunity to provide information on transferring care, what support is available, and to hear students' stories and ask questions.</p>	<p>The Counselling Team will deliver this activity, with a total FTE of 18.8.</p>	<p>Improved student satisfaction with academic support, mental health provision and an increased sense of belonging.</p>	<p>IS1, IS3, IS4, IS6</p>

Mind Management Workshops	(New activity) In collaboration with students, and facilitated by mental health professionals, deliver an annual suite of mind management workshops based on CBT principles. Offered to all UG students, with each session running twice a year, sessions will help students to manage common student mental health and wellbeing difficulties such as panic, sleep and insomnia issues, imposter syndrome, perfectionism, procrastination, and social anxiety.	The Counselling Team will deliver this activity, with a total FTE of 18.8.	Improved student satisfaction with academic support, mental health provision and an increased sense of belonging.	IS1, IS3, IS4, IS6
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Total cost of activities and evaluation for intervention strategy

Total investment in new activity as part of this intervention strand is £1.3m per year (combined with IS4), not including staff costs. Staff costs are included for delivery of the whole plan, with fractional inclusion of staff costs for support teams.

Summary of evidence base and rationale

The incidence of mental health issues and other disabilities among students is rising, with 20% now registering a disability, predominantly mental health related. Consequently, the Disability Support service has shifted its focus towards long-term mental health disabilities. The complexity and risk associated with student mental health are increasing, evidenced by more students engaging in self-harm and a 140% rise in students diagnosed with Autistic Spectrum Conditions over the last five years. Currently, the university employs the equivalent of 12.65 full-time mental health professionals, resulting in a staff-to-student ratio of about 1:1750, although international standards suggest aiming for 1:1000 to 1:1500. A summary of the underpinning evidence for this strategy is provided in Annex B.

Evaluation

Activity	Outcomes	Method(s) of evaluation	Summary of publication plan
Intervention strategies overall	Reduce the reported mental health awarding gap.	Tracking access to services and students' attainment and awarding gaps (Narrative – Type 1). Enhanced theories of change , including literature reviews and testing mechanisms using evaluation findings (Type 1/ Type 2). Non-random control with pre and post-test/interrupted time-series design & multiple regression (quasi-experimental design) tracking students who took part in interventions across the whole student lifecycle and comparing them to non-participants, controlling for measurable differences. Includes attainment, completion, and sense of belonging as outcomes (Type 3 – see Annex B for more details).	Tracking reports will be published annually on our website from Summer 2026. Multiple regression report /paper if appropriate Dec 2029 (see Annex B for more information). Enhanced theories of change: annual reports Dec (2026 - 2029) on website/shared with sector.
Student Support Model	Increased Staff skills Awareness of support	Pre-post comparison Survey/Skills audit (Type 2). Qualitative research (e.g., interviews / focus groups) with students and staff (Narrative – Type 1).	Reports will be published on our website annually from Summer 2027.

Mental Health Support Website	Awareness of support	Qualitative research (e.g., interviews / focus groups) with students (Type 1).	Reports will be published on our website annually from Summer 2027.
Mind Management Workshops	Reduce the reported mental health awarding gap.	Qualitative research (e.g., interviews / focus groups) with staff (Type 1).	Reports will be published on our website annually from Summer 2027.

Intervention strategy 6: Continuation, completion and degree outcomes for mature students

- **Objectives:** To improve outcomes for mature students at Durham University, by decreasing the continuation gaps between mature students and young students, decreasing the completion rates gaps between mature students and young students, and reducing awarding gaps for mature students compared with young students.
- **Success Target Seven:** To reduce the gap in continuation rates between mature students and young students from 7.6% to 5% by 2028/29.
- **Success Target Eight:** To reduce the gap in completion rates between mature students and young students from 17.7% to 11.5% by 2028/29.
- **Success Target Nine:** To reduce the awarding gap between mature students and young students to below 5% by 2028/29.
- **Risks to equality of opportunity:** Intervention Strategy 6 aims to mitigate risks to equality of opportunity for mature students in thriving at Durham University by focusing on **academic support**, **cost pressures** and **sense of belonging**.

Activity	Description	Inputs	Outcomes	Cross intervention strategy
Dedicated Mature Learners coordinator	(New activity) Create a central support service for mature students, with at least one staff role to coordinate, advocate for and represent the support needed by mature students. This member of staff will deliver pastoral support, but also support students to navigate university structures and policies as their circumstances require, as well as signposting/referring to mental health or academic skills services as needed. This staff member will support all mature students at Durham, and advocate for their ongoing needs – including enhanced financial support and flexibility.	Faculty Hubs – 1x Student Support Manager per faculty (4) and Student Support Officer. This capacity is allocated to achieve a Staff Student Ratio of approx. 1:1500. Colleges – Continuation of 1x Assistant Principal per college, plus 1x Assistant Student Support Officer, plus 0.5x Assistant Student Support Officer, plus 2x Assistant Student	Increased sense of belonging. Increased confidence in students' study skills. Increased confidence that students' have the support needed to complete their studies successfully.	IS4, IS5
Support Network	(New activity) Create a supportive network of staff and peers for mature students; both a structural and physical space. The development of this network will be led by the Mature Learners co-ordinator, in collaboration with Durham University Mature Students' Association. This network will have a supportive function for mature students, as well as running regular events to foster belonging and build staff-student relationships.		Increased sense of belonging. Increased confidence in students' study skills. Increased confidence that students' have the support needed to complete their studies successfully.	IS7

Total cost of activities and evaluation for intervention strategy

Total investment in new activity as part of this intervention strand is £1.3m per year (combined with IS4 and IS5), not including staff costs. Staff costs are included for delivery of the whole plan, with fractional inclusion of staff costs for support teams.

Summary of evidence base and rationale

Students often encounter support issues within their academic departments, particularly those less engaged in traditional university life, such as postgraduate students in purpose-built accommodation and mature students. However, many departmental staff lack the training to properly guide these students, leading to inefficient and sometimes ineffective support. Support for academic progression varies across departments due to differing roles, resulting in inconsistent advice and a poorer student experience. A summary of the underpinning evidence for this strategy is provided in Annex B.

Evaluation

Activity	Outcomes	Method(s) of evaluation	Summary of publication plan
Dedicated "Mature Learners" co-ordinator	Increased sense of belonging.	Pre-post comparison of survey data of students taking part using the sense of belonging survey from TASO's validated Access and Success Questionnaire (Type 2). Qualitative research (e.g., interviews / focus groups) with students (Type 1).	Reports will be published on our website annually from Summer 2027.
Support Network	Increased sense of belonging. Increased confidence in students' study skills. Increased confidence that students' have the support needed to complete their studies successfully.	Pre-post comparison of survey data of students taking part using the sense of belonging survey and cognitive / meta-cognitive strategy scales from TASO's validated Access and Success Questionnaire (Type 2). Qualitative research (e.g., interviews / focus groups) with students (Type 1).	Reports will be published on our website annually from Summer 2027.
All interventions	Increased sense of belonging. Increased confidence in students' study skills. Increased confidence that students' have the support needed to complete their studies successfully.	Tracking access to services and students' attainment and awarding gaps (Narrative – Type 1). Enhanced theories of change , including literature reviews and testing mechanisms using evaluation findings (Type 1/ Type 2). Non-random control with pre and post-test/interrupted time-series design & multiple regression (quasi-experimental design) tracking students who took part in interventions across the whole student lifecycle and comparing them to non-participants, controlling for measurable differences. Includes attainment, completion, and sense of belonging as outcomes (Type 3 – see Annex B for more details).	Tracking - publish annually on website (September). Multiple regression report /paper if appropriate Dec 2029 (see Annex B for more information). Enhanced theories of change: annual reports Dec (2026 - 2029) on website/shared with sector.

Intervention strategy 7: Increasing belonging

- **Objective:** An overarching intervention strategy to increase sense of belonging for all Durham University's identified priority groups.
- **Targets:** This strategy will support the University to achieve all nine of its success targets, by supporting the objectives of all six preceding intervention strategies
- **Risks to equality of opportunity:** Intervention Strategy 7 aims to mitigate risks to equality of opportunity for all priority students by focusing on their sense of belonging.

Activity	Description	Inputs	Outcomes	Cross intervention strategy?
Innovation Funds for Sense of Belonging Projects	(New activity) Create college- and department-level innovation funds for student-led sense of belonging initiatives, which will be administered via a student-led panel within the Students' Union. Proposed projects must have increased belonging as a primary objective and must consider the needs of priority groups and have sign off from the relevant student association(s) and/or the Students' Union. All projects must be fully evaluated for impact, with support provided for this by the Schools, Outreach and Widening Participation Team. This intervention will be driven by students and was designed in consultation with the Students' Union Access and Participation Student Advisory Board (APPSAB).	This will be administered by the Schools, Outreach and Widening Participation Team. Total fund: £85,000 per year.	Students report an increase in sense of belonging at Durham and in HE in general.	IS4, IS5, IS6

Total cost of activities and evaluation for intervention strategy

Total investment in new activity as part of this intervention strand is £85k per year, not including staff costs. Staff costs are included for delivery of the whole plan, with fractional inclusion of staff costs for support teams.

Summary of evidence base and rationale

Creating a sense of belonging within the academic environment is crucial for the well-being and academic success of students. Studies have shown that students who feel a sense of belonging are more engaged, achieve higher academically, and have lower dropout rates. To nurture this sense of belonging, it is essential to develop interventions that are not only inclusive but also directly involve the student body in their creation and implementation. Student-led initiatives empower students by giving them a platform to address issues that directly affect their experiences and outcomes. These initiatives ensure that interventions are relevant and tailored to the actual needs and preferences of the student population. By involving students in the design and execution of projects, these initiatives also foster a greater sense of ownership and engagement with the campus community. A summary of the underpinning evidence for this strategy is provided in Annex B.

Evaluation

Activity	Outcomes	Method(s) of evaluation	Summary of publication plan
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Innovation Funds for Sense of Belonging Projects	Increased sense of belonging.	<p>Track uptake of Innovation Fund across different student demographics (Type 1).</p> <p>Enhanced theories of change, including literature reviews and testing mechanisms using evaluation findings (Type 1/ Type 2)</p> <p>Pre-post comparison of survey data of students taking part in the activities using relevant scales from TASO's validated Access and Success Questionnaire (Empirical – Type 2) and Durham's newly created/validated sense of belonging scale.</p> <p>Qualitative research (e.g., interviews / focus groups) with students and use of triangulation with pre-post surveys (Narrative – Type 1).</p> <p>Non-random control with pre and post-test/interrupted time-series design & multiple regression (quasi-experimental design) tracking students who took part in interventions across the whole student lifecycle and comparing them to non-participants, controlling for measurable differences. Includes attainment, completion, and sense of belonging as outcomes (Type 3 – see Annex B for more details).</p>	<p>Tracking and evaluation reports will be published on our website annually from Summer 2027.</p> <p>Multiple regression report /paper if appropriate Dec 2029 (see Annex B for more information).</p> <p>Enhanced theories of change: annual reports Dec (2026 - 2029) on website/shared with sector.</p> <p>Reports will be shared via Students' Union dissemination networks</p>
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Whole provider approach

To implement a comprehensive Access and Participation Plan (APP) at Durham University, we are committed to a detailed strategy encompassing governance, strategic and operational structures, community development, and the integration of access and participation across the institution.

University Strategy

Our refreshed University Strategy is made up of 13 strategic areas and is our roadmap to 2027. It includes three academic core strategies, four transversal strategies and six enabling strategies. The APP is specifically mentioned in objective EDI2.1: Increase the diversity of our student body at all levels (linked to Global – strategic aim 1: To attract the brightest and best international students from a diverse range of countries and into a diverse range of programmes). It is also mentioned in EDI2.4, which is linked to the Education Strategy objective 4 (to maximise the learning gain for all students regardless of background or level study). This is described as “Monitor, and where necessary take action to respond to, differences in outcomes and gaps in attainment for students from under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g., black students, alternative entry types, mature students, IMD, and international students)”.

Governance and Oversight

The development and implementation of the APP is led by the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Education. The PVC for Education is a member of the University Executive Committee, which has overall responsibility for agreeing the content of our APP. The Vice-Chancellor personally oversaw the first phase of redevelopment of the APP for 18 months, and there is a dedicated Associate Pro Vice-Chancellor role to connect this to Colleges. The APP has been developed in conjunction with the EDI Strategy, which is monitored by the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (PVC EDI), and the Education Strategy, which is monitored by the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Education (PVC Education). Our APP requires approval from our accountable officer, the Vice Chancellor, and the University Executive Committee (UEC). The APP is signed-off by the Chair of University Council, on behalf of the University Council. University Council, the University Executive Committee (UEC) and Senate all regularly consider progress towards APP targets and commitments and are kept abreast of regulatory changes in this area. A dedicated oversight group will meet quarterly to further ensure alignment with the university's strategic objectives. This group will co-ordinate with various university boards and committees, incorporating student and staff representation to ensure broad oversight and engagement. Those included on the oversight group include the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, the Academic Registrar, a College Principal, the Deputy Academic Registrar (Access, Recruitment and Admissions), the Deputy Head of Student Recruitment (Widening Access and Participation), an Academic Department representative, and a Students' Union representative. There is also a further student-led group called the Student Advisory Board, which will monitor the effectiveness of the APP, always providing the student voice and making suggestions for improvements. The overall monitoring of the APP will be the responsibility of the Education Committee, which is a sub-committee of Senate, and meets six times per year (twice per term). Detailed discussion on student access, success and outcomes will take place at the Student Access, Success, and Outcomes Committee (SASOC), which is a sub-committee of Education Committee, and meets quarterly.

Strategic operational structures

To operationalise the Access and Participation Plan (APP), we propose a comprehensive, cross-departmental framework that integrates access and participation goals across all university operations. By implementing these strategies, Durham University will ensure that access and participation are not just policy goals but are embedded into the fabric of university operations, contributing to a more inclusive and equitable educational environment. This will involve:

- **Collaborative Planning:** Academic departments, professional services, and student support teams will collaboratively develop and implement strategies aligned with APP objectives. This includes joint initiatives on curriculum development, student engagement, outreach and support services.
- **Integrated Operations:** Embed access and participation objectives into the core operations of each department, ensuring that these goals are central to recruitment, admissions, teaching, student support, and career services. This requires regular training and awareness programmes to foster a culture of inclusivity and participation.
- **Data-Driven Decision Making:** Utilise data reporting and insights to inform and refine operational strategies. This includes tracking progress against APP targets, identifying areas for improvement, and adjusting approaches based on evidence and outcomes.

- **Accountability Structures:** Establish clear lines of responsibility and accountability for delivering APP objectives within and across departments. This will involve setting specific, measurable goals for each area, with regular reporting and review mechanisms to ensure progress is being made.
- **Community Development:** Foster a supportive university community through the establishment of Community of Practice Groups, advisory groups, and partnerships with external organisations. These groups will facilitate the sharing of best practices, provide professional development opportunities, and engage in dialogue on the challenges and opportunities.
- **External Partnerships:** We will continue to forge partnerships with external organisations, including local schools, NGOs, and industry partners, to extend the reach and impact of access and participation efforts. These collaborations can bring additional resources, expertise, and opportunities for students and help the university stay aligned with community needs.

Institution-wide Integration

To ensure institution-wide integration of access and participation priorities at Durham University, these priorities will be deeply embedded into all key strategic documents and policies. This approach aligns with the university's overarching goals related to equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI), student wellbeing, and academic excellence, ensuring a coherent and unified strategy across all areas of university life. This is exemplified by the targets identified in the APP also being included in the EDI Strategy. This comprehensive approach will foster a culture at Durham University where access and participation are recognised as key components of excellence, shaping a more inclusive, equitable, and vibrant university community. It will involve:

- **Policy Integration:** Policies across the university, from admissions to curriculum design, student support services, and HR practices, will reflect access and participation priorities. This ensures that these priorities are not siloed but are considered integral to the functioning of the university.
- **Performance Indicators:** The success of institutional strategies will be measured not only by traditional academic outcomes but also by metrics that reflect progress in access and participation, such as the diversification of the student body, retention rates among underrepresented groups, and success in closing attainment gaps.
- **EDI and Wellbeing Strategies:** Access and participation initiatives will be closely coordinated with strategies aimed at promoting EDI and student wellbeing, recognising that these areas are interdependent and critical to ensuring an inclusive and supportive educational environment.

Consultation and Engagement

In 2022, Durham University commissioned The Brilliant Club to undertake an independent review of our university access and participation work. The consultation sought to understand Durham's current access and success provision, including opportunities for development. They conducted a desk-based review and interviewed ten stakeholders between July and September 2022. Eight of the stakeholders were directly involved in delivering access and participation work or were senior members of staff at the University responsible for strategic oversight. In addition, one Durham University student was interviewed and one external stakeholder from an organisation that delivered local outreach activities. In total, 23 recommendations were identified from the review and focused on areas such as targeting and evaluation, external partnerships, attainment, system improvement, student transition, and communities. These recommendations are now being used to inform Durham's new Access and Participation Plan.

The consultation process for Durham University's new Access and Participation Plan, as detailed in the "Assessment of Performance" document, involved a structured, multi-phase approach to gather insights and feedback from a broad range of stakeholders. This included engaging with students, academic staff, professional service teams, and external partners to identify barriers to access and participation and to develop targeted strategies. The process was designed to ensure that the plan is informed by diverse perspectives and that it addresses the specific needs and challenges faced by underrepresented groups within the university community. This inclusive approach to consultation underpins the development and implementation of effective, evidence-based interventions aimed at enhancing access, participation, and student success.

Staff and students from departments and services across Durham University were engaged to discuss how students are supported to access, succeed in and progress from their time with us. The process involved us setting the context of the development of the APP, in addition to a more comprehensive Widening Access and Participation Strategy. In total, 174 attendees registered for the in-person events

with 24 students, 142 staff and 8 'other contributors'. For those who were unable to attend, we ran a follow-up session online. Further sessions were arranged with local FE providers, where we presented the findings of our initial analysis – and this was attended by 7 external partners. For any internal stakeholders who could not attend any of the consultations, a survey was distributed and 111 staff completed this, in addition to 9 students. In total, 33 students, 253 staff and 15 'other contributors' were consulted as part of the process. To ensure further student consultation, the Students' Union set up a Student Advisory Board, including the following members:

Durham People of Colour Association Exec	Durham Working Class Association Exec
Durham Mature Students Association Exec	Durham Estranged and Care Experienced Association Exec
Durham Students with Disabilities Exec	First Generation Scholars Network

Development of Equality of Opportunity Risk Register and Interventions

Having completed the initial consultations, we completed our Assessment of Performance (Annex A) to identify quantitative evidence for use in developing the equality of opportunity risk register (EORR). To increase the robustness of our approach to developing our APP, we have entered a partnership with The Brilliant Club. The objective was to validate the target groups already identified by Durham, interrogate any gaps, and make recommendations that would further strengthen the selection. Following the review, they agreed with Durham University's assessment of our performance across the five phases of the student lifecycle, which identified the access phase as that which contains the greatest number of risks for students. However, the analysis highlighted some opportunities to enhance the selection to cover a wider range of target groups, demonstrating further Durham's commitment to and ambition for access and participation. By adopting this comprehensive approach, Durham University aims to enhance access, participation, and success for under-represented and disadvantaged groups, creating a more inclusive and equitable university environment.

Continuing commitment

Durham University remains committed to fulfilling the activities outlined in its existing Access and Participation Plan (APP), ensuring sustained progress towards inclusivity and diversity. This commitment involves the continued implementation of strategic initiatives aimed at enhancing access, supporting student success, and ensuring progression for underrepresented and disadvantaged groups. This has prompted the development of a complementary strategy for Widening Access and Participation. Through collaborative efforts led by the Science Outreach team, the Library and Museums Culture Learning Team, Experience Durham (student volunteering), and various Colleges, the University offers an array of activities and educational resources tailored for local schools. Senior managers have visited local schools' trusts serving least advantaged communities, meeting with their staff and their students to encourage connection with the university but also to inspire local young people to visit a local higher education institution and to consider higher education as a part of their education journey. These initiatives are carefully designed to cater to specific target groups, equipping students with the essential skills, social, and cultural capital necessary for accessing and thriving in higher education. Leveraging the recently adopted Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT), Durham University tracks the progression of students who engage with these programmes from an early age, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of their impact on educational outcomes. Our goal is to widen participation and to reduce inequalities in educational attainment. Both the APP and the WAP Strategy will involve the development of a framework for monitoring and evaluation of interventions.

- **Durham Mathematics School:** The Durham Mathematics School (DMS) is currently being developed in partnership between Durham University and Durham Sixth Form Centre. DMS will benefit talented 16-18 year old mathematicians from local regions, targeting students in schools where there is limited local mathematics provision. The DMS will also deliver professional development opportunities for teachers and outreach activities within schools.
- **Cultural engagement initiatives** aimed at engaging with schools and communities locally, nationally, and globally. The University has made significant strides in reaching out to primary schools in County Durham, ensuring broad access to educational resources and opportunities.
- **Science-based outreach** extends beyond primary school-aged children, through initiatives like the Durham University Schools' Science Festival, tailored towards 13 to 15-year-olds across the region. This longstanding festival, running for over 25 years, immerses pupils in hands-on workshops led by university staff and students, igniting and deepening their passion for science.

Financial Support

At Durham University, we're committed to ensuring all our students thrive, regardless of financial background. Our Durham Grant Scheme (DGS) has been notably enhanced to support families in the "squeezed middle", reflecting our understanding of the financial pressures due to living costs in Durham. Scholarship applications are reviewed by the Student Immigration and Funding team. Where multiple students meet the strict criteria, we look for factors which the donor/university has identified as being supportive of students who are looking to improve their education and have shown personal initiative and support of the wider community.

Financial Support	Eligibility Criteria	Amount	How often
Durham Grant Scheme	From the academic year 2024/25, eligibility will expand to include students with household incomes up to £62,342, as assessed by Student Finance England (or equivalent).	Household income less than £30,000: £2,670 Household income between £30,000 and £47,200: Between £835 and £2,669 (on a sliding scale) Household income between £47,201 and £62,342: £700	33% in the Michaelmas term (e.g., 27th October 2023) 33% in the Easter term (e.g., 19th January 2024)
Durham Inspired North East Scholarships x 3	Applicants from the North East of England with a household income below £42,875. Eligible postcode regions: CA, DH, DL, NE, SR or TS.	£4,000 per academic year.	34% in the Epiphany term (e.g., 3rd May 2024)
Glaister Northern Scholarships x 2	Applicants from the North East of England and Cumbria with a household income below £42,875. Eligible postcode regions: CA, DH, DL, LA, NE, SR, TS.	£2,500 scholarship paid directly towards tuition or residential costs. £1,500 scholarship paid directly to recipient to cover costs associated with wider student experience.	
St Nicholas Scholarships x 1	Applicants who are resident in one of the 26 wards of Newcastle City Council with a household income below £42,875	£2,500 per academic year	

Understanding the additional financial burdens our students face, we've also expanded our support network. This includes:

- Hardship Funds: Specifically designed to assist those in urgent need.
- Activity Funds: To ensure that all students can partake in extracurricular activities without financial strain.

Furthermore, our ongoing initiatives like the Cost of Living Hub and partnerships with local entities aim to improve the overall living and learning environment for our students.

Equality and Education Objectives

The University has defined [equality objectives](#) that include:

- Embedding a culture of inclusion and inclusive leadership across the organisation
- Enhancing the diversity of, and equality of opportunity for staff and student communities
- Enhance belonging and a sense of community as experienced by all our staff and students
- Implementing a continuous improvement approach to embed and evolve EDI across the University.

The [EDI Strategy](#) is monitored by the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (PVC EDI), and the [Education Strategy](#) is monitored by the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Education (PVC Education).

Race Equality

Durham University signed up to the [Race Equality Charter](#) (REC) in March 2019. The University's REC application for a Bronze Award was submitted to Advance HE at the end of May 2022; and an award has been conferred in July 2022. Following a critical analysis of data gathered from our REC survey and focus group sessions along with an evaluation of staff and student data, we have co-developed an institutional [REC Action Plan](#) to address the identified racial disparities and issues.

Evaluation of the plan

Durham University's Education Department not only excels in research but also plays a critical role in shaping educational policy and practice through its extensive network of collaborative relationships and its comprehensive and innovative academic offerings. The department's formidable research evaluation capabilities are evident in its impressive performance in the 2021 REF, where a significant percentage of its research was rated as world-leading or internationally excellent, confirming its status as a top research institution in the UK. The department contributes extensively to the understanding of educational inequalities and the effectiveness of policies intended to mitigate these disparities, providing valuable insights that influence educational policy and practice both within the UK and internationally. Professor Vikki Boliver is a prominent sociologist at Durham University with a strong focus on social inequalities in higher education access. Her research critically examines the admission processes to UK's prestigious universities and explores social mobility across generations. She has developed a significant body of work on the effectiveness of contextual admissions practices, aiming to foster fairer access to higher education. Her involvement in various projects includes working with datasets from UCAS, the National Pupil Database (NPD), and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) to analyse patterns in university applications and admissions. Professor Stephen Gorard has a vested interest in the methodologies of educational research, particularly in evaluating education policies and their impacts on social equality. His work frequently addresses the complexities of education data and aims to improve the robustness and applicability of research findings in this field. Durham University generates evidence and policy insights on a range of university access and success topics, including research on contextualised offers (Boliver, Banerjee, Gorard, & Powell, 2021; Boliver, Crawford, Powell, & Craige, 2017) and most recently, research on sense of belonging in higher education (manuscript in preparation). Through Durham's School of Education, we will continue to prioritise these areas of research and contribute to understanding across the sector.

We have invested in a Senior Monitoring and Evaluation Manager role to lead this area of work. This role will establish and implement an evaluation strategy that is aligned to the evaluation framework outlined in this plan, to ensure it covers all the University's student access and success activities, not just those listed in the APP. This role has already worked to develop Theories of Change for each of the intervention strands, as well as ensuring systems are in place to collect data consistently across the different areas of activity. The evaluation methodologies employed will include narrative, empirical and causal levels of evidence. Specifically, to understand the differential impact of activities, and where sample sizes allow, we will run multiple regressions (quasi experimental design) to track students who take part in interventions across the whole student lifecycle and comparing them to non-participants. Furthermore, a key priority is to understand how sense of belonging influences student outcomes. Building on the research conducted by academics at the University, we will embed a survey measure in our access and participation work that has been tested and validated with Durham students. This will help us to identify the student groups who are at risk of experiencing exclusion. Finally, by partnering with external organisations, such as The Brilliant Club and The Elephant Group, we will be able to contribute to nation-wide evaluation activities that generate causal evidence.

Provision of information to students

We recognise the difficulty students may face in understanding information about tuition fees and financial support, and we are committed to making our information clear and accessible. Clear guidance on fees, bursaries and scholarships will continue to be provided for students. We will publish relevant information on our website in a timely fashion and will disseminate information to prospective and current students, based on where they are in their student journey. This will include providing advice and guidance through our pre- and post-application open days, integrated messages within our widening access and outreach provision, and tailored communications to applicants via our CRM system. Our central student financial support service works closely with staff in the University's constituent colleges to ensure that all existing students have access to the financial support they need. The University will publish the approved APP on the University website. This will take the form of information on the University website which includes eligibility criteria, and on specific course webpages. An up-to-date list of undergraduate scholarships is available on Durham's website, in addition to scholarships available via a student's chosen College. We will also ensure information is provided to UCAS and SFE, so they can ensure their applicant facing web services are up to date.

Annex A: Further information and analysis relating to the identification and prioritisation of key risks to equality of opportunity

Our Assessment of Performance (AoP) was carried out from October 2023 to February 2024. The analysis was primarily conducted using the OfS dashboard, comparing Durham University to the sector. Supplementary analysis was conducted using the dashboard comparing Durham University to its closest competitors (other high tariff universities), in addition to comparisons with other regional universities in the North East of England for indicators related to ethnicity. This dashboard analysis was supplemented by internal data analysis, in particular data presented in the TEF submission, and the Wider Student Experience Survey.

We applied an iterative approach to our assessment and worked through several versions of our Risk Register, which was based on insight derived from our consultations in addition to analysis of the data. This allowed us to pose questions to the over-arching APP Development Group and the Student Advisory Board in advance of taking decisions about an appropriate course of action.

Further analysis was undertaken to finalise our list of target groups. Specifically, we analysed:

- NSS data from 2016 onward
- Raw data from surveys of students who do not accept an offer from Durham
- Raw data from internal PowerBI dashboards
- Data on demographics for non-standard entry students
- Data on the completion and progression of non-standard entry students
- Information on Care Leavers, students who are estranged from their families and Gypsy Traveller Roma Showmen Boater (GTRSB) communities.

Consultation

Staff and students from departments and services across Durham University were engaged to discuss how students are supported to access, succeed in and progress from their time with us. We ran four in-person sessions, each lasting 3 hours. The consultations took place on 20th November (9.00-12.00 and 13.00-16.00) and 27th November (9.00-12.00 and 13.00-16.00).

The process involved us setting the context of the development of the APP, in addition to a more comprehensive Widening Access and Participation Strategy. In total, 174 attendees registered for the in-person events – with 24 students, 142 staff and 8 ‘other contributors’. For those who were unable to attend, we ran a follow-up session on MS Teams on 6th December. Further sessions were arranged with local FE providers on 11th and 13th December, where we presented the findings of our initial analysis – this was attended by 7 external partners. For any internal stakeholders who could not attend any of the consultations, a survey was distributed and 111 staff completed this, in addition to 9 students.

In total, 33 students, 253 staff and 15 ‘other contributors’ were consulted as part of the process. To ensure further student consultation, the Students’ Union set up a Student Advisory Board, including the following members:

- Member of Durham People of Colour Association Exec
- Member of Durham Working Class Association Exec
- Member of Durham Mature Students Association Exec
- Member of Durham Estranged and Care Experienced Association Exec
- Member of Durham Students with Disabilities Exec
- Member of the First Generation Scholars Network

Findings of the Wider Student Experience Survey

Durham University's Wider Student Experience (WSE) Survey 2023 underscored the significant role that extracurricular activities play in enhancing the university experience for students. This year's findings provide compelling evidence of the positive effects of these activities on students' sense of belonging, educational outcomes, and mental wellbeing.

Elevated Participation and Engagement:

Students at Durham University continue to participate in extracurricular activities at rates significantly higher than the national average, with 88% of respondents engaging in at least one hour of extracurricular activity per week, reflecting a vibrant campus life that promotes active and diverse engagements.

Strengthened Sense of Belonging:

The survey revealed a strong correlation between participation in extracurricular activities and an enhanced sense of belonging. Students report feeling more connected to their college and the wider university community, which is crucial for fostering inclusive educational environments.

Boosted Educational Outcomes:

Beyond the social aspects, engagement in various extracurricular domains - including sports, arts, and intellectual pursuits - strongly correlated with higher skills gain. This relationship is particularly pronounced among students from underrepresented backgrounds, indicating that extracurricular involvement is a powerful lever for educational equity.

Improved Mental Wellbeing:

Participating in extracurricular activities had a demonstrable positive impact on students' mental health. The average wellbeing score among participants is encouraging, especially when compared to national data, underscoring the importance of a holistic approach to student health.

Inclusive and Supportive Community:

Feedback from the survey highlights the central role of college life and communities in enriching students' university experiences. Such environments are pivotal in supporting students' academic and personal growth.

Durham University remains committed to building on these positive outcomes by continually enhancing the accessibility and quality of its Wider Student Experience. In 2024/25, we intend to spend £21m on the wider student experience (WSE). These efforts aim to ensure that all students, regardless of their background, have equal opportunities to thrive and succeed during their time at the university.

Perceptions raised during the consultation

During the consultation some key themes began to emerge, and we have grouped the feedback in this way to make it easier to understand.

Colleges:

In general, there was a mixed view of colleges, highlighting both benefits and challenges. While colleges were praised for their contribution to social and cultural capital, allowing more personal interactions, and promoting better support and community feel, there are concerns about exclusivity and lack of engagement, especially for those living out. There was a perception of elitism, and lack of representation in the Junior Common Rooms (JCRs). Additionally, there is a call for more variety and information to help students make informed decisions about their college preferences. Financial constraints, particularly regarding hidden costs like fees and formals, are seen as barriers for students from widening access (WA) backgrounds. However, these comments were also intertwined with incredibly positive experiences in colleges, highlighting the vital roles that colleges play in the wider student experience, particularly in relation to student support. Durham has recruited an increasingly diverse and highly committed group of college leaders who

have a clear sense of mission: to foster inclusion and belonging in the small, face-to-face and welfare supported college communities. During the consultation it was perceived that students feel a much greater sense of belonging in these small communities than they would in vast, anonymous halls of residence. Durham spends vastly more on creating small, participatory communities than non-collegiate universities, and evidence suggests that this increases participation in all aspects of university life. Clearly, there is still more work to do and some aspects of college life feel exclusionary to some. However, we can be confident in our investment in this area and an expectation of progress in the years to come. The Vice-Chancellor, Pro Vice-Chancellor Colleges (PVC Colleges) and PVC Education work very closely with the JCR Presidents, meeting with them regularly to enhance and modernise the inclusivity of colleges. This continuing dialogue highlights that whilst inconsistencies still remain around some themes, such as hidden costs, the issue is under continuous discussion.

Reason for Low Uptake of Offers from Widening Access Students:

It was discussed that the uptake of offers by WA students is low for several reasons. Durham's reputation can be a significant barrier. It was felt that the perception that Durham does not attract many local students and the perceived culture within colleges are potentially deterrents. Clearly these perceptions act as a barrier to access and will require a concerted effort to address. The admission process was also critiqued for being late and less supportive for WA students than other universities. A feeling was expressed that WA students don't feel like they would fit in at the point of receiving their offer, due to a perception of a culture that caters to an elite demographic. It was also felt that the curriculum is too rigid and not attractive to those who are less represented in HE. Furthermore, vocational courses that lead to careers are less available at Durham, affecting the appeal to WA students.

Contextual Offers:

Contextual offers are seen as controversial, with questions raised about their transparency and effectiveness. There was a call for more visibility and understanding of these offers, with suggestions to broaden eligibility criteria and concerns about setting students up to fail. The use of predicted grades and UCAS points as measures for contextual offers was debated, with some suggesting they are too crude and may lead to inequalities. Despite these perceptions, the use of contextual admissions at Durham University has been effective in widening access to education for underrepresented groups without lowering academic standards, thus supporting a more equitable higher education system. A review was undertaken by Professor Vikki Boliver and Karen Jones, into Durham's use of contextual offers and how they may be utilised better in future recruitment cycles. Contextual offers increased the socioeconomic diversity of Durham's undergraduate population. Students receiving these offers were significantly more likely to come from lower POLAR quintiles and attended state schools more frequently than their peers. Although contextually admitted students had slightly lower pass rates and average marks compared to standard offer students, their absolute performance was strong. Most maintained pass rates over 90% and average marks above 60 across all study years. This comprehensive review underscored the importance of contextual offers in promoting social mobility and inclusivity in education, suggesting a positive impact on the educational landscape without compromising the quality of outcomes.

Widening Access Resourcing and Support:

There was a strong call for more resources to support WA students. This includes financial, academic, and infrastructural support. The need for more inclusive resourcing in departments is highlighted, alongside the benefits of recruiting local students for tutoring and application support. The Foundation Programme, although beneficial, was criticised for adding financial strain due to the additional year of living expenses.

Other Comments:

The perceptions highlighted suggest a need for changes at the university level, including a call for a top-down directive to reinforce the commitment to diversity and support for WA students. There

was a critique of the reduction in careers advice and guidance, and bursaries were a focal point, with a suggestion that removing access bursaries has impacted WA students. There was also an emphasis on ensuring the culture within the university is inclusive, challenging stereotypes, and ensuring that the university buildings and offerings are accessible and relevant to the wider community. Additionally, there was a push for better marketing strategies and a more comprehensive support package visible to all demographic groups. It was strongly articulated that Durham's reputation is aspirational and long-standing, but that it can also be off-putting to some student groups.

A sense of belonging

Members of the Anthropology First Generation Scholars (FGS) Group undertook a piece of research to investigate feelings of exclusion at Durham University, and they theorised that this was associated with working-class backgrounds and/or having a "Northern" accent (Hampshire *et al.*, 2023). They wanted to find out how widespread these experiences were across the University and to establish an evidence base to underpin meaningful change. Supported by a small grant from the University's EDI Fund, they conducted a large-scale survey of Durham University students, asking mostly quantitative questions about their experiences across different aspects of their lives at Durham University, accompanied by a series of focus group discussions. The survey achieved a high response rate (N=2052), providing a robust evidence base of experiences of inclusion and exclusion across seven domains: overall sense of belonging at Durham University, social inclusion, Department inclusion, college inclusion, college support, inclusion in Durham's "Wider Student Experience" (WSE), and financial inclusion. Free-text responses and FGDs enabled a deeper exploration of these issues, and how they impacted on experiences and participation at the University.

The findings suggested that across all but one domain (college support), home students from less-advantaged backgrounds felt greater levels of exclusion than those from more-advantaged backgrounds or international students. The effect sizes were large and held after controlling for other variables (gender, sexuality, religious faith, ethnic background, age, disability, and year of study). Students from Northern England, and especially those from the North East, also perceived significantly greater levels of exclusion across four domains, even after accounting for the strong association between socioeconomic background and (UK) region of origin. Several protected characteristics were associated with experiences of exclusion, most notably female gender, LGBTQ+ identity, and having a disability.

"Working-class" and "Northern" students are not the only ones who reported feelings of exclusion at Durham University; the findings also identified ongoing challenges faced by female students, LGBTQ+ students, and those with a disability. However, while there has been awareness for some time of the importance of addressing barriers to inclusion for groups with protected characteristics, neither social class nor home region are protected characteristics, and therefore often go unnoticed as potential drivers of exclusion.

When combining the findings of the study with the Wider Student Experience Survey, which can be benchmarked against the UK Engagement Survey sector-level results produced by Advance HE, it highlighted a disparity in the experiences of some students. It also reaffirmed that the Wider Student Experience has a fundamentally positive impact on skills gain, sense of belonging, and mental wellbeing for those who take part. Durham has the highest participation rates in the country, and an ever-broadening range of facilitated and financially supported student activities, including e-sports, women's sports, and disabled sport. This level of activity is not only targeted at elite-level participation, but also at a participatory and inclusive college scale. Furthermore, there is huge student engagement with volunteering and entrepreneurship. In conclusion, it was agreed that it is Durham University's responsibility to continue its efforts to be inclusive to all groups, ensuring that students can take the maximum benefit from the time with the University.

The “belonging” theme is important, but risks excessively downplaying the massive institutional investment and commitment to the WSE (highest participation rates in the country an ever-broadening range of facilitated and financially supported student activities including e-sports, women’s and disabled sport etc, not only at the elite end but at a participatory and inclusive college scale, huge student engagement with volunteering and entrepreneurship). Durham is a university where nearly all students take part, and there is no evidence that students from less privileged backgrounds participate in WSE activities at a lower rate than others.

Student consultation

The student consultation process for the Access and Participation Plan (APP) is deeply integrated into the strategic and operational framework. Engaging students at every level, from governance to detailed plan monitoring, Durham ensures student voices are central. This includes seats for Student Leaders on the University Council and Senate, and active participation in the APP Student Advisory Board. This collaborative approach highlights Durham's commitment to making access and participation a shared responsibility with its students. However, it is worth noting that there is a prevailing sense of frustration from the various student bodies toward the University administration, partly due to a perceived lack of action in relation to issues that are important to students. This frustration permeates further into the student body, creating tension between students and the various student associations and formal student bodies, such as Junior Common Rooms (JCRs) and the Students’ Union. This makes it difficult to find representative student voices who can agree and work with the University to develop action plans. This will be an ongoing challenge but is one that requires consistent effort from the University administration. The university engages students in the shaping of their educational journey and broader university life in several ways:

Student Surveys: Durham University conducts the annual Common Awards Student Survey, providing students with a platform to offer feedback on their academic experiences, including aspects of learning and teaching, study support, and student voice. This survey, initiated in 2017, is part of a continuous effort to gather comparative data for enhancing educational provisions. The survey’s development and review involve consultation with both Teaching and Educational Institutions (TEIs) and students, ensuring that the survey remains relevant and reflective of the student body's needs and experiences.

Junior Common Room (JCR): At Durham University, the Junior Common Room (JCR) serves as a cornerstone of student life and governance across the various colleges. Each college at Durham has its own JCR, and while they share common goals of representing and supporting their members, they often vary slightly in structure and tradition, reflecting the unique character of each college.

Each JCR is typically led by an Executive Committee, elected by the members of the JCR, which includes roles such as President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Welfare Officer, and other specific roles tailored to the needs of the college community. These roles are critical in shaping the experience of students within their respective colleges. JCRs at Durham are not just student bodies, they are deeply integrated into the fabric of college life, influencing everything from dining hall affairs to mentoring programmes for first-year students. They also manage a variety of college-specific funds to support student projects and initiatives.

JCRs are pivotal in organising a diverse array of events that highlight the vibrant cultural life at Durham. This includes formal balls, informal socials, cultural showcases, and inter-college competitions that foster a strong sense of community among students. Each JCR has dedicated welfare officers who provide peer support and run awareness campaigns on important issues such as mental health, inclusivity, and safety. They work closely with university support services to ensure students have access to professional help when needed.

JCRs actively participate in university-wide committees and forums, representing the undergraduate community in discussions that affect student welfare and academic policies. They ensure that the student voice is heard at the highest levels of university governance, including the Senate and various strategic planning groups. Financial independence is a key aspect of JCR

operations. They manage their own budgets, derived from student fees, which fund the multitude of activities and services they offer. This autonomy empowers students to make decisions that directly impact their college experience. JCRs also play a significant role in community engagement, organising volunteering opportunities and charity events that connect Durham University students with the broader local community. These activities help to build a bridge between students and local residents.

The activities and initiatives of JCRs are aligned with Durham University's broader strategic goals, particularly in promoting diversity and inclusivity. By involving students from different backgrounds and disciplines, JCRs contribute to a holistic educational environment that prepares students for global citizenship.

Data review

We have completed an assessment of our own performance for the Access and Participation Plan (APP). The main analysis compares Durham University to the sector, but we have also benchmarked against a comparator group and other universities in the North East. A summary of the results is presented in the below table.

The assessment is based on the OfS data dashboard, where possible, and looks at the listed student groups who may be at risk from lack of equality of opportunity. Certain disaggregated groups have been considered (e.g. splitting ethnicity and disability into further subgroups) as well as intersections (i.e. being in multiple groups such as high deprivation and having a disability). The whole student lifecycle has been considered, encompassing the five student lifecycle stages: access, continuation, completion, attainment, and progression).

We have also compared Durham to other high tariff universities, specifically our main competitors (Bristol, Exeter, Manchester, Warwick, UCL, Oxford and Cambridge). This highlights the difference between Durham when compared to the sector and when compared to similar universities. For example, Durham performs well compared to our competitors for POLAR4 ratio of quintile 5 to 1. This illustrates the effectiveness of actions taken to improve performance against this target, especially by using contextual offers. However, access and completion rates for mature students are behind the sector, even when compared to other high tariff institutions. Similarly, when comparing with similar institutions, access is behind the sector for Black and Asian students and intersectional groups involving non-white students.

Ethnicity was analysed further by comparing our access proportions to other institutions in the northeast of England. All have low proportions of Black and Asian students (apart from Sunderland, but this is due to their campus in London). Further analysis of why BAME students decline offers include the reason "I didn't feel I'd fit in".

We used the results to propose what "at risk" groups to focus on and set targets for improvements.

Focus Areas: Access

- Socio-Economic Deprivation (POLAR4/TUNDRA/IMD/FSM)
- Ethnicity (Black and Asian students)
- Deprivation x Ethnicity (POLAR4/TUNDRA/IMD/FSM x Ethnicity)
- Age (mature students)

Focus Areas: Continuation

- Disability
- Socio-Economic Deprivation (IMD Q1)
- Age (mature students)
- Alternative entry types (students on foundation years/with guaranteed contextual offers)

Focus Areas: Completion

- Age (mature students)
- Ethnicity (Black and mixed-ethnicity students)

Focus Areas: Attainment

- Ethnicity (Black students achieving firsts)
- Disability
- Disability type (mental health)
- Alternative entry types (students on foundation years/with guaranteed contextual offers)

Partnership with The Brilliant Club

To increase the robustness of our approach to developing our APP, we have entered a partnership with The Brilliant Club. They were well-positioned to provide strategic support within the project timeframe, given their pre-existing understanding and knowledge of Durham University's context, personnel, programmes, and challenges.

The team undertook a review of the internal data provided by Durham University, triangulating this review with both sector level data and the Wave One Access and Participation Plans already published on the OfS website. The objective was to validate the target groups already identified by Durham, interrogate any gaps, and make recommendations that would further strengthen the selection.

Following the review, they agreed with Durham University's assessment of our performance across the five phases of the student lifecycle (access – continuation – completion – attainment – progression), which identified the access phase as that which contains the greatest number of risks for students. However, the analysis highlighted some opportunities to enhance the selection to cover a wider range of target groups, demonstrating further Durham's commitment to and ambition for access and participation.

Although Durham University's current performance through the "on course" phases of the student lifecycle (continuation, completion and attainment) is comparatively strong, The Brilliant Club advised that success strategies be devised alongside interventions to increase access for identified groups. Otherwise, the University would risk seeing increased gaps in the "on course" phases, as access targets are met, and the student body becomes more diverse. This approach would be particularly relevant for students from target groups based on socio-economic deprivation and ethnicity, where there is already evidence of gaps showing in the data (e.g. IMD Q1 students' continuation rates; Black and Mixed students' completion rates). Including a focus on socio-economic deprivation, age, ethnicity, disability, and entry type across multiple phases of the student lifecycle will also demonstrate that Durham is committed to looking holistically at the student experience, not just at addressing access gaps.

Access

We have decided to use TUNDRA and free school meals (FSM) as our measures for low participation, replacing our previous use of POLAR and IMD 2019. This approach considers the forthcoming obsolescence of POLAR, and the balance between postcode and individualised targeting. We acknowledge Durham's performance in social mobility indexes due to the high proportion of students from independent schools. By focusing on schools using TUNDRA, we can ensure that we're specifically focusing on those from low participation neighbourhoods who are studying at state-funded schools. Although our internal data (e.g. applications data) is not currently broken down by FSM or TUNDRA. Due to the broad match of POLAR/TUNDRA, we can still make surface level conclusions from POLAR data and continue to use the OfS dashboards to track progress over time. FSM is a highly usable measure for schools, so we think this is a helpful compromise.

Sector	Similar 15 unis	Indicator	Target type	Actual							Target								Error + or -
				16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24	24/25	25/26	26/27	27/28	28/29			
		1. Mature students (21+)	%	5.7	3.3	4.4	4.0	3.0	2.5	2.4	2.3	2.2	2.1	2.0	1.9	1.8	0.6		
		2. TUNDRA (Q5:Q1)	Ratio	8.5	6.8	7.3	5.4	4.3	3.6	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5	2.5			
										3.9	3.8	3.7	3.6	3.5	3.4	3.3	N/A		
										3.8	3.6	3.4	3.2	3.0	2.8	2.7			
		3. IMD (2019) (Q5:Q1)	Ratio	5.7	5.5	6.7	5.4	4.0	4.0	4.0	5.0	4.7	4.5	4.3	4.2	4.1	N/A		
										4.0	5.0	4.5	4.1	3.6	3.3	3.1	N/A		
		4. POLAR 4 (Q5:Q1)	Ratio	12.9	9.2	9.7	7.2	6	5	4.2	5.2	4.9	4.7	4.6	4.5	4.4	N/A		
										4.2	5.2	4.8	4.4	4.2	4.1	4.0			
		6. FSM	%	6.4	7.2	6.9	7.4	8.3	9.1	9.4	9.7	9.4	9.7	10.0	10.3	10.5	N/A		
										9.7	10.3	9.7	10.3	10.9	11.6	12.2			
		6. Ethnicity (Black)	%	1.6	1.2	1.2	1.3	1.6	1.8	2.0	1.9	2.0	1.9	2.0	2.1	2.2	0.4		
										2.0	1.9	2.0	2.1	2.3	2.6	3.0			
		7. Ethnicity (Asian)	%	5.2	5.5	5.5	5.1	5.7	6.2	5.2	6.0	5.9	6.0	6.1	6.2	6.3	0.7		
										5.2	6.0	5.5	6.0	6.5	7.0	7.5			

Key

	95% confidence interval from OfS dashboard (+/-1 this figure)
	Statistically significantly better than the group mean (either sector or comparison group)
	No statistically significant gap
	Statistically significantly worse than the group mean (either sector or comparison group)
	Target
	Stretch target
N/A	Not available
	Selected target

Mature students (21+): Access

The proportion of mature students at Durham and at our comparison group institutions have been dropping, so sustaining our proportion of mature students may prove to be a challenge.

Additionally, research shows we should expect a sudden drop in the proportion of mature students entering the sector, due to the increasing entry rate of 18-year-olds depleting future cohorts of mature students. Sustaining our current proportions could arguably be a stretch target. However, it may be possible to increase the volume of mature students via Durham's planned investment in online learning and degree apprenticeships. Although it should be noted that the Open University has reported a decline in enrolments. Similarly, the uptake of the Lifelong Learning Entitlement has been very low.

Figure 1: Mature student (21+) enrolments at Durham compared to the comparator group

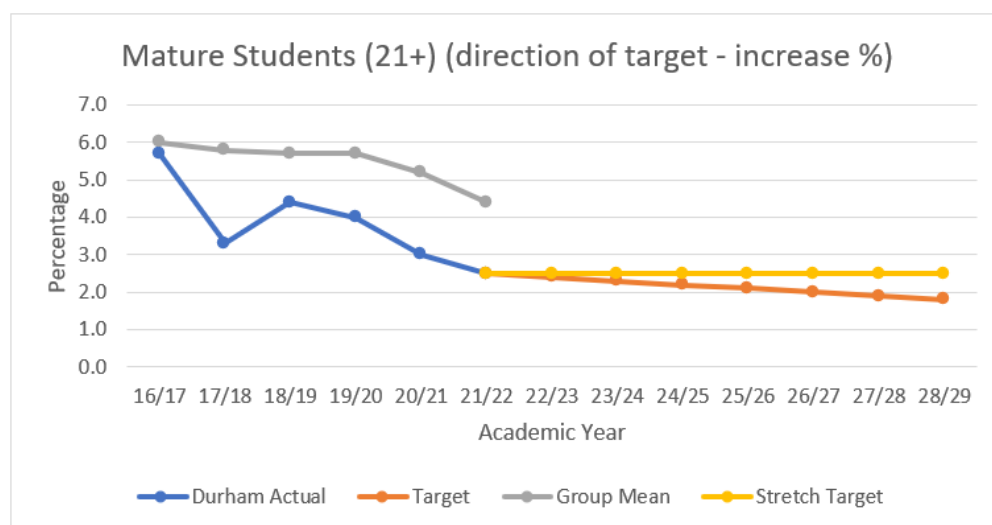
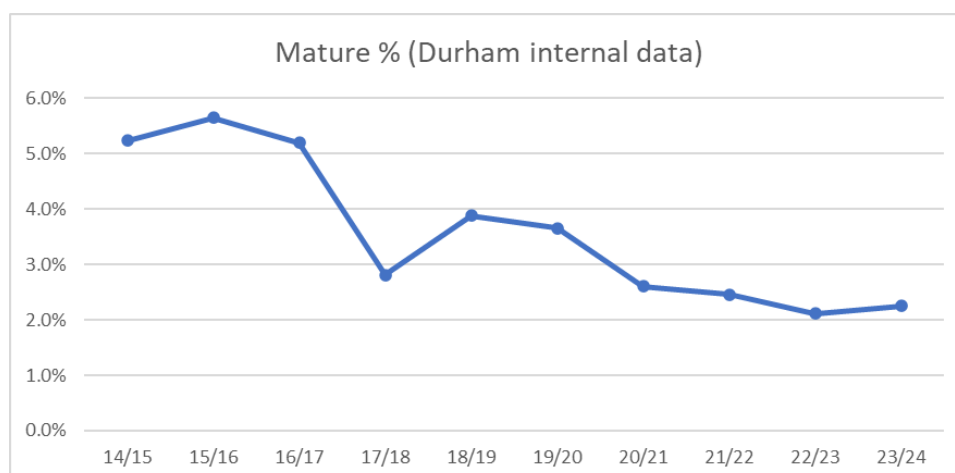


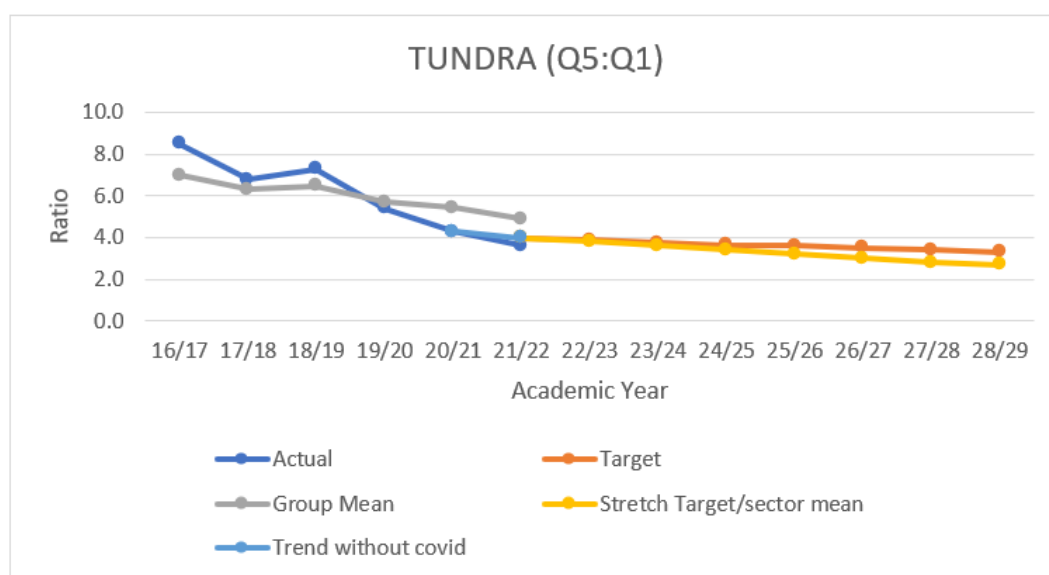
Figure 2: Mature student (21+) enrolments at Durham



TUNDRA: Access

The graph below (figure 3) shows the trend for the ratio of students from low participation areas, as defined by TUNDRA, enrolling at Durham University in the previous six years. The data shows that although significant progress has been made, more focus is needed to consistently be ahead group mean. Over the last 4 years Durham has seen significant improvement in the ratio. When compared to similar high-tariff competitors, Durham is performing comparatively well. Despite this, our analysis suggests that through continued efforts we could make further improvements to access from low participation groups. For TUNDRA, we did not have updated internal data, so we have set the targets cautiously. We are conscious that as the years progress, the gap reduces more slowly as it becomes harder to reduce the ratio.

Figure 3: TUNDRA Q1:Q5 ratio of enrolments at Durham compared to the comparator group



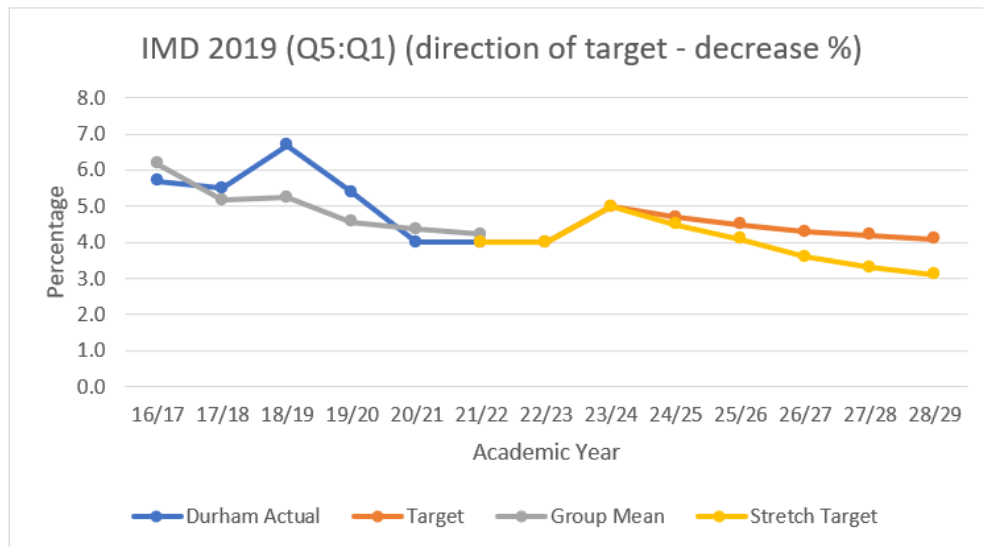
IMD 2019: Access

The graph below (figure 4) shows the trend for the ratio of students from low participation areas, as defined by IMD 2019, enrolling at Durham University in the previous six years. The data shows that although progress has been made, Durham is still above the sector average. Over the last 4 years Durham has seen significant improvement in the ratio. However, when compared to similar high-tariff competitors, Durham is performing slightly better than average. Despite this, our analysis suggests that through continued efforts we could make further improvements to access from low participation groups.

We have tried to model the Covid effect by looking at our more recent internal data. There is a dip which is due to the Covid effect and then the data returns to a higher point in 2023/24. When

considering targets, we wanted to eliminate the Covid effect and then extrapolate from there. However, we found that this wasn't possible with any degree of certainty. It should be noted that as the years progress, the gap reduces more slowly as it becomes harder to reduce the ratio.

Figure 4: IMD Q1:Q5 ratio of enrolments at Durham compared to the comparator group

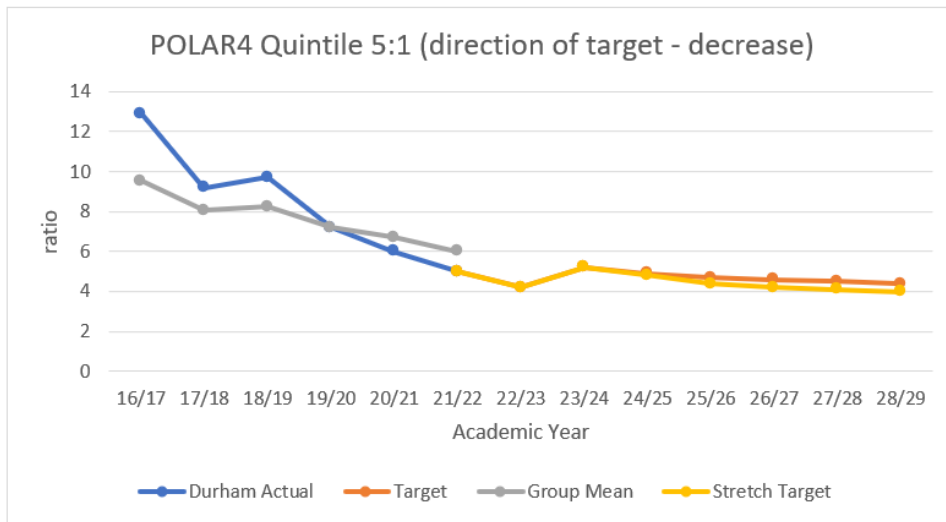


POLAR4: Access

The below graph (figure 5) shows the trend for the ratio of students from low participation areas, as defined by POLAR4, enrolling at Durham University in the previous six years. The data shows that although progress has been made, Durham is still above the sector average. Over the last 4 years Durham has seen significant improvement in the ratio. When compared to similar high-tariff competitors, Durham is performing better than most. Despite this, our analysis suggests that through continued efforts we could make further improvements to access from low participation groups.

As with IMD 2019, we have tried to model the Covid effect by looking at our actual, more recent internal data. There is a dip in access due to the Covid effect and then the data returns to a higher point in 2023/24. It should be noted that as the years progress, the gap reduces more slowly as it becomes harder to reduce the ratio. To achieve a reduction in the ratio we have two options: increasing the proportional volume of Q1 places and/or reducing the proportional volume of Q5 places. To do so, we would need to consider increasing capacity in courses with higher volumes of Q1 applicants. This target will become particularly problematic if the UCAS journey to a million comes to fruition, as it may lead to increased competition for places amongst applicants.

Figure 5: POLAR4 Q1:Q5 ratio of enrolments at Durham compared to the comparator group

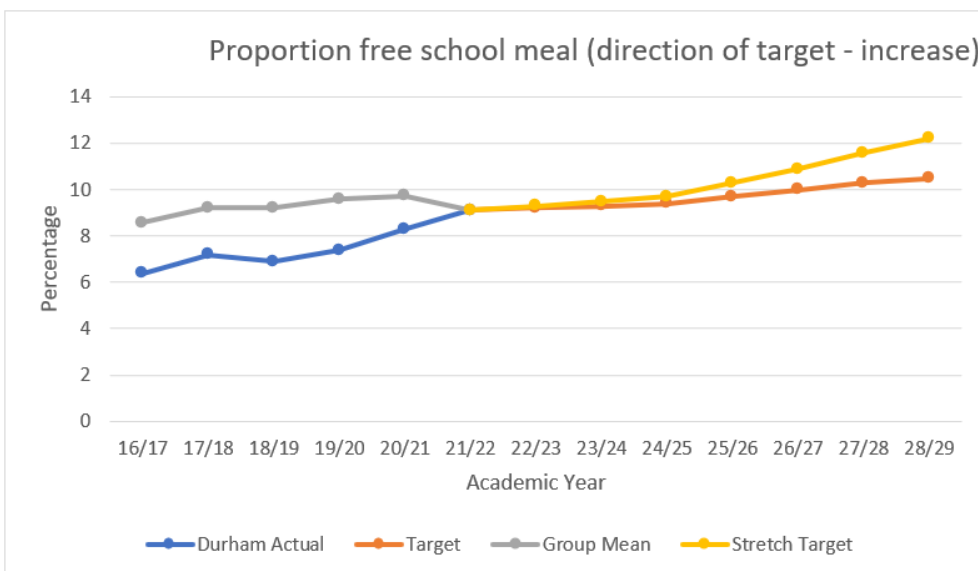


Free School Meals: Access

The graph below (figure 6) shows the trend for the percentage of students from low participation areas, as defined by free school meals (FSM), enrolling at Durham University in the previous six years. The data shows that although progress has been made, Durham is still above the sector average. Over the last 4 years Durham has seen significant improvement in the ratio. However, when compared to similar high-tariff competitors, Durham is performing slightly worse than average. Our analysis suggests that through continued efforts we could make further improvements to access from low participation groups.

With free school meals, we do not readily have access to wider internal data taking us beyond Covid, so the targets have been set using OfS data up to 2021/22 academic year. It is likely the steady increase we see in the Covid years are a false gain (due to the Covid effect), as argued with POLAR4 and IMD 2019 (particularly as FSM is correlated with these other indicators of deprivation). Targets have therefore been set to follow a cautious steady increase.

Figure 6: FSM proportion of enrolments at Durham compared to the comparator group

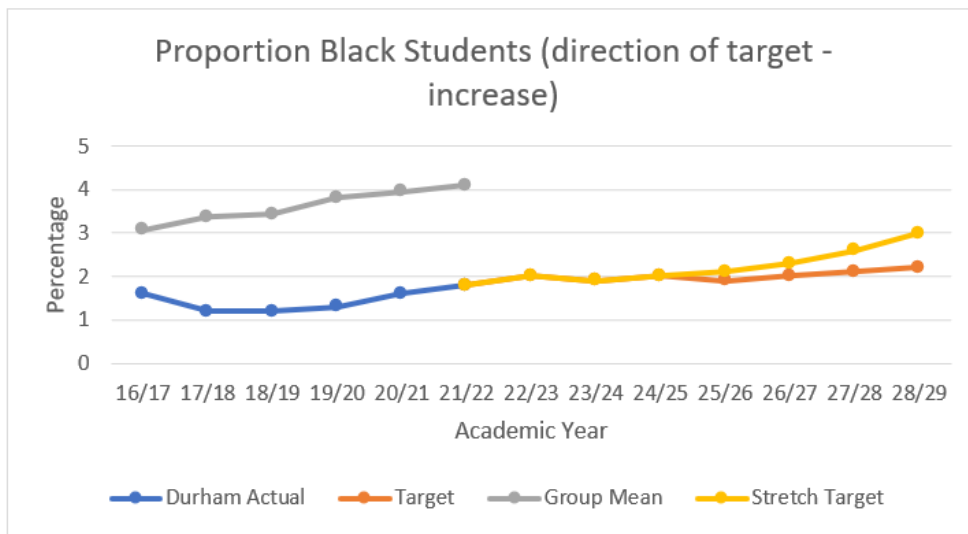


Ethnicity (Black): Access

The graph below (figure 7) shows the trend for the percentage of students from Black heritage backgrounds enrolling at Durham University in the previous six years. The data shows that although progress has been made, Durham is still performing worse than the sector and comparator average. As location is shown to be a significant factor in the reason for declining

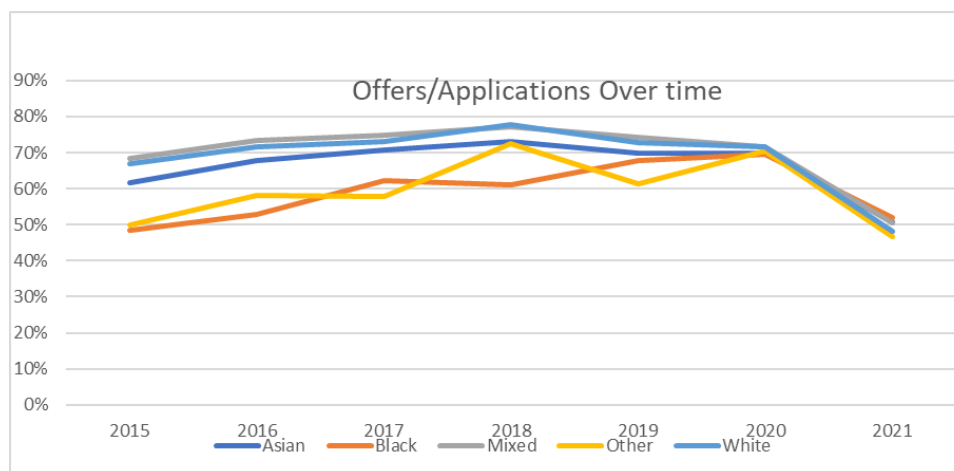
offers from minority ethnic applicants, it is felt that comparing ourselves to other North East universities is appropriate. Our analysis suggests that through continued efforts we could make further improvements to access from Black heritage backgrounds.

Figure 7: Proportion of enrolments (Black heritage) at Durham compared to the comparator group



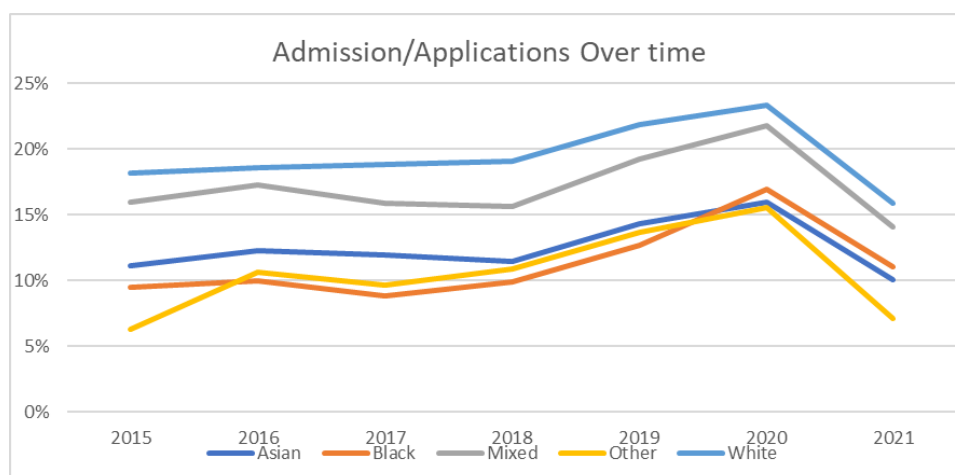
The graph below (figure 8) shows how the percentage of offers given out to applications for each ethnicity cohort has changed over time. We can see that the gap between Black/Other ethnicities and White ethnicity, which was substantial in 2015, has closed significantly.

Figure 8: Percentage of offers as a proportion of applications (by ethnicity)



The graph below (figure 9) shows how the percentage of enrolments compared to applications for each ethnicity cohort has changed over time. We can see that this gap has remained over the whole time series. This implies that while ethnic minority students are now being given offers at an equal rate to white students, they are still accepting them at a lower rate. This gap is largest for Asian and Other ethnicities but is still significant for Black applicants.

Figure 9: Percentage of enrolled students as a proportion of applications (by ethnicity)



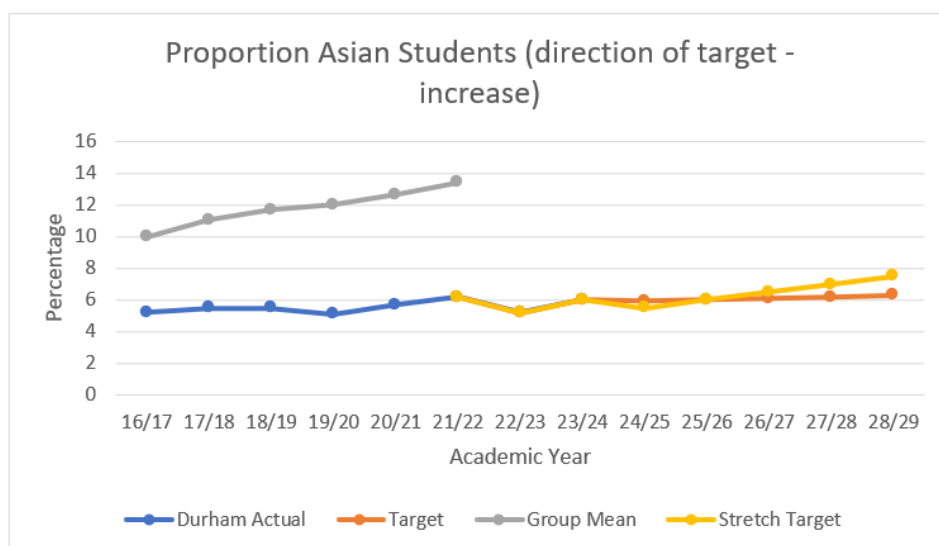
The growth in the proportion of Black students at Durham has not been consistent, with several large dips, making forecasting difficult. These dips have been considered when setting realistic targets going forward. We are limited in our ability to use Admissions processes to improve the chances of Black students securing a place at Durham, because we are not aware of ethnicity at the point of offer. The only exception to this is when an applicant has taken part in a closed outreach programme, such as Space to Explore Potential (STEP); as it is only available to students of Black heritage. STEP has shown signs of progress, with more participants now applying to Durham compared to previous years. We should consider whether programmes like STEP can be expanded, and the impact of being less selective when recruiting to the programme. Other internal data suggests that Black students raise issues with the location of Durham, which cannot be easily rectified. Similarly, Black students reporting feeling like they wouldn't 'fit in' at Durham. We may need to work with specialist organisations that are well connected in communities to help us design and deliver interventions to overcome this. We may also need to create information, advice and guidance that is specific to target groups.

Ethnicity (Asian): Access

The graph below (figure 10) shows the trend for the percentage of students from Asian backgrounds enrolling at Durham University in the previous six years. The data shows that although progress has been made, Durham is still performing worse than the sector average. As location is shown to be a significant factor in the reason for declining offers from minority ethnic applicants, it is felt that comparing ourselves to other North East universities is appropriate. Our analysis suggests that through continued efforts we could make further improvements to access from Asian heritage backgrounds.

The growth in the proportion of Asian students at Durham has not been consistent, with several large dips, making forecasting difficult. These dips have been considered when setting realistic targets going forward.

Figure 10: Proportion of enrolments (Asian heritage) at Durham compared to the comparator group



The subject mix offered by a university can impact its ability to recruit students from diverse ethnicities. This is because the range of subjects available may align differently with the varying interests, career goals, and educational backgrounds of a diverse student body.

Some subjects might have cultural significance for certain ethnic groups, which may increase their interest in those courses. For example, courses that focus on specific regional histories, languages, or societal issues may attract students with a personal or cultural connection to those topics. Similarly, students from different backgrounds may have distinct career aspirations influenced by community values, economic opportunities, and role models. Universities that offer courses aligned with these aspirations are likely to be more attractive to those students.

If a university's subject offerings are perceived as being more accessible and inclusive, with representation of diverse cultures and perspectives in the curriculum, it can appeal to a broader range of students. Students from various ethnic backgrounds may come from school systems with different strengths or focal subjects. A university that offers a wider range of courses may be more appealing to students who have been exposed to different educational experiences.

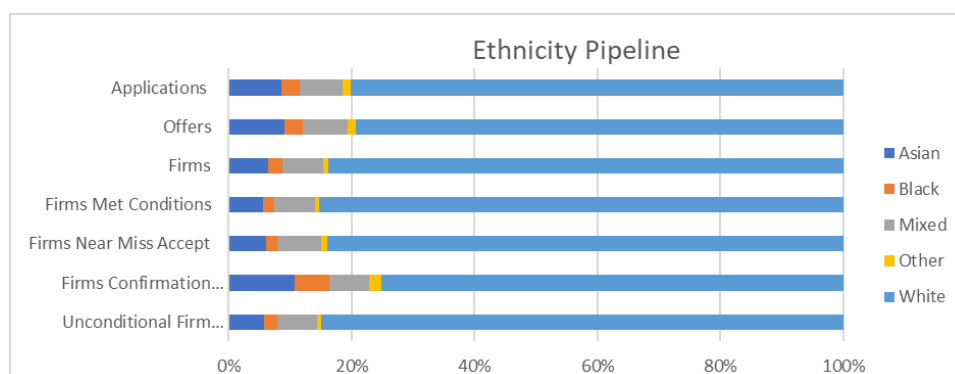
Furthermore, some subjects may lead directly to higher-paying careers, which can be an important consideration for students from backgrounds where financial advancement is a priority. Ethnic minority students may be encouraged to apply to a university that actively challenges stereotypes by promoting diversity in traditionally less diverse fields, like STEM subjects.

The chart below (figure 11) shows the percentage each ethnicity makes up at each stage of the admissions pipeline. For example, we can see that 8.6% of applicants are Asian, compared to 80.1% being White.

Using this, we can see how the ethnic makeup changes as we go through the admissions pipeline. Most notably we can see a significant drop off for non-white students between offers and firms, and then another drop off between firms and "firms near miss accept". There is also a significantly higher rate of non-white students being rejected after firming Durham.

From this we can infer that non-white students are less likely to firm an offer from Durham than White students, and that non-white students are less likely to meet their offer conditions. They are also less likely to be accepted on a "near miss" basis within the confirmation process.

Figure 11: Ethnicity proportions across Durham admissions pipeline stages



Continuation

Sector	Similar 15 unis	Indicator	Target type	Actual						Target								Error + or -
				16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24	24/25	25/26	26/27	27/28	28/29		
		1. Mature (21+ vs <21)	% Gap	15.5	11.8	12.6	7.6	5.9	7.6	6.7	6.4	6.1	5.8	5.5	5.2	5.0	4.9	
		2. IMD (2019) (Q5 vs Q1)	% Gap	7.3	8.3	4.8	5.6	4.4	7.2	5.4	5.3	5.2	5.1	5.0	4.9	4.8	3	
		3. Disability (reported vs not)	% Gap	2.5	0.8	2.7	4.0	1.6	2.9	2.9	2.9	2.9	2.9	2.9	2.9	2.9	2.3	
										2.7	2.5	2.3	2.1	2.0	1.9	1.8		

Key

	95% confidence interval from OfS dashboard (+/-1 this figure)
	Statistically significantly better than the group mean (either sector or comparison group)
	No statistically significant gap
	Statistically significantly worse than the group mean (either sector or comparison group)
	Target
	Stretch target
N/A	Not available
	Selected target

Mature students (21+): Continuation

The percentage of mature students who continue with their studies at Durham is better than the sector, which is significant progress from 2016/17. However, the percentage of mature students who do not continue their studies is still significantly higher than for young students (figure 12). The gaps between mature students and young students have recently grown wider and therefore Durham needs to intervene to close the gap.

Although it is possible to focus on Durham's performance against the sector, it is felt that our principle should be to create equal outcomes for students at Durham in this first instance. Therefore, all continuation targets are set based on closing gaps that exist between groups. We are aware that mature students can have more complex lives, particularly those with caring responsibilities, and this may make it more difficult for them to fully partake in the wider student experience. Durham may consider whether its programmes and timetable are conducive to achieving high continuation for different target groups, such as mature students.

Figure 12: Percentage continuation gap – mature vs young

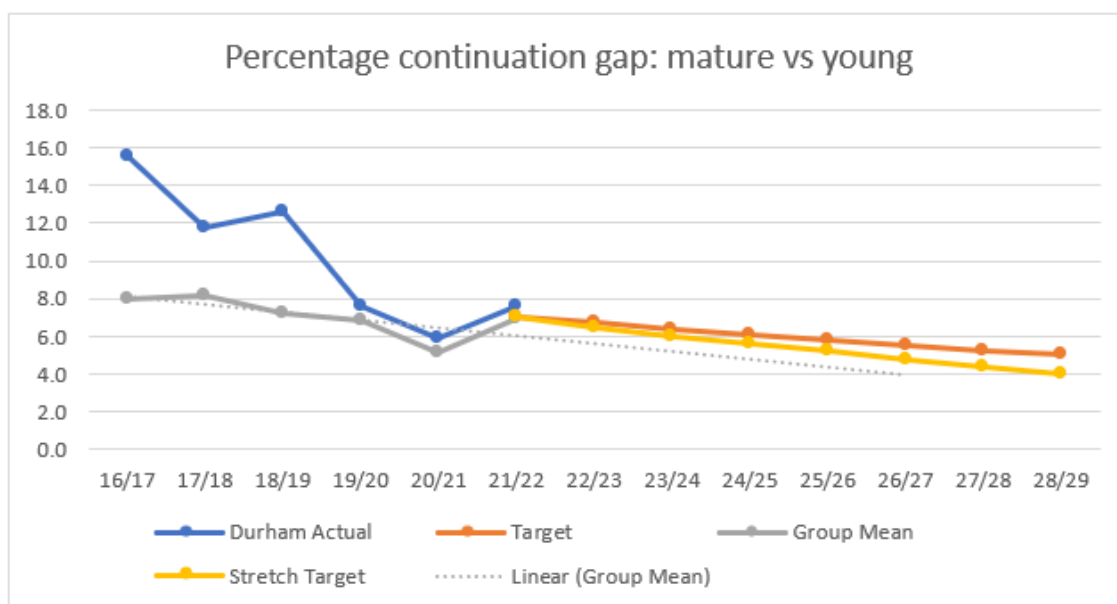
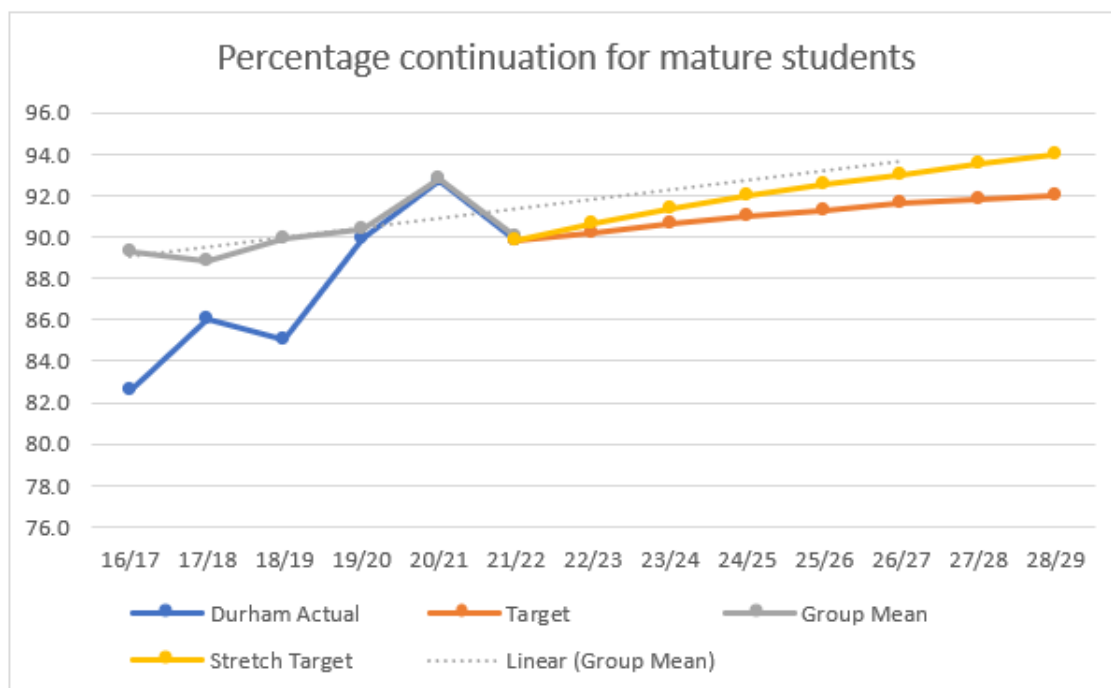


Figure 13: Percentage continuation – mature vs young



Socio-Economic Deprivation (IMD Q1): Continuation

The below graphs (figure 14 and figure 15) show the percentage of students from IMD Quintile 1 who continue with their studies at Durham University compared to those from quintile 5, compared to our comparator group. The data shows that Durham performs worse than the comparator group and the gap has widened recently. Therefore, more focus is needed to close the gap.

It is felt that our principle should be to create equal outcomes for students at Durham. All continuation targets are set based on closing gaps that exist between groups. Students from low participation neighbourhoods may struggle with the cost of living, and internal analysis suggests that they are more likely to support their studies with part-time work. This may make it more difficult for them to fully partake in the wider student experience and they may also have less time to dedicate to their studies. Durham should consider whether its programmes, teaching and assessment approaches, and timetable are conducive to achieving high continuation for different

target groups. Where group sizes are small and the measures are variable, with values changing considerably year on year, we have set targets based on the trend line.

Figure 14: Percentage continuation gap – IMD Q1:Q5

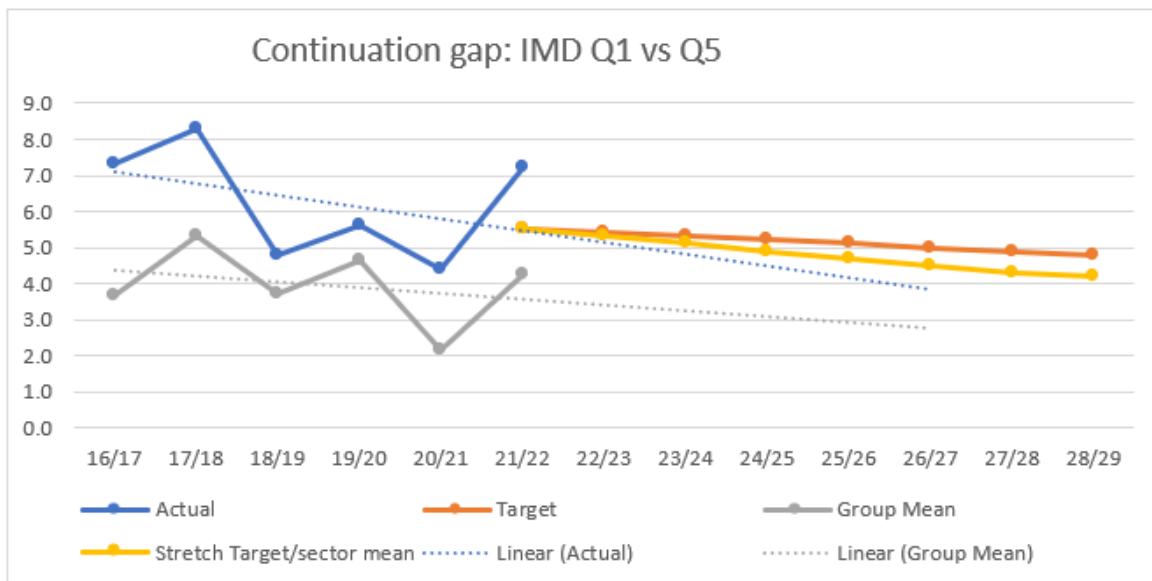
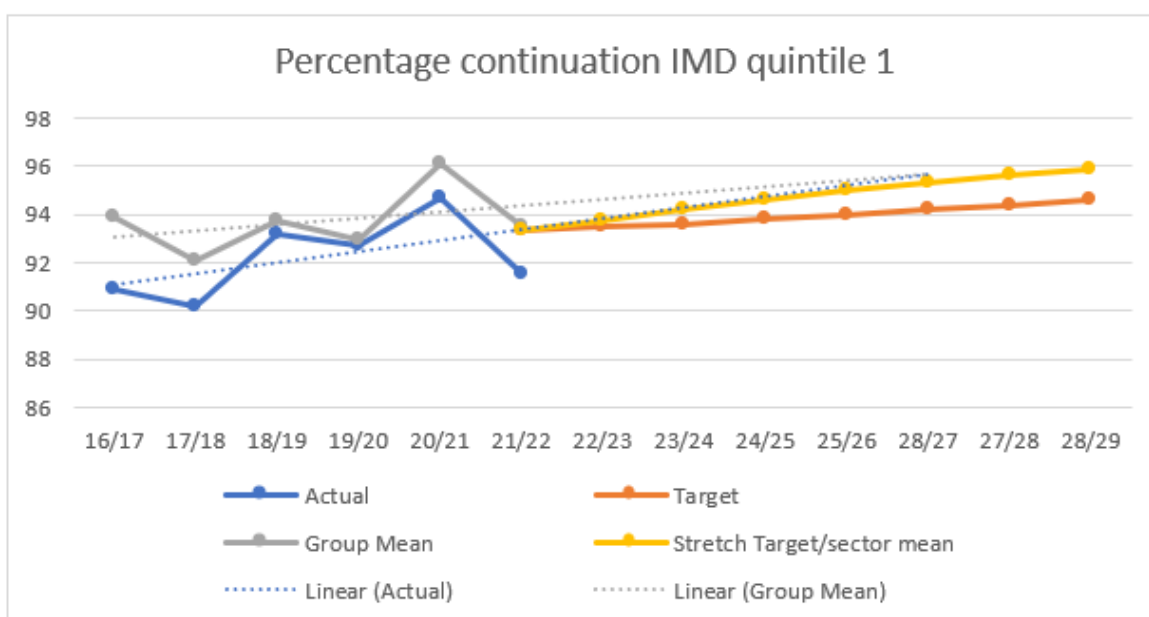


Figure 15: Percentage continuation – IMD Q1:Q5



Disability: Continuation

The graphs below (figure 16 and figure 17) show the percentage of students with a recorded disability, who continue with their studies at Durham University compared to the comparator group. The data shows that although Durham performs slightly better than the group average, and significantly better than the sector average, progress is stagnant and therefore more focus is needed to close the gap. The gaps between disability reported and not reported have been volatile in recent years due to small numbers.

Although it is possible to focus on Durham's performance against the sector, it is felt that our principle should be to create equal outcomes for students at Durham in this first instance. All continuation targets are set based on closing gaps that exist between groups. Students with disabilities may struggle with elements of the academic experience, specifically due to the intensity of the timetable at Durham and the scale of the campus. It may make it more difficult for them to

fully partake in the wider student experience. Durham needs to consider whether its programmes and timetable are conducive to achieving high continuation for different target groups.

Figure 16: Percentage continuation gap – Disability reported vs no disability reported

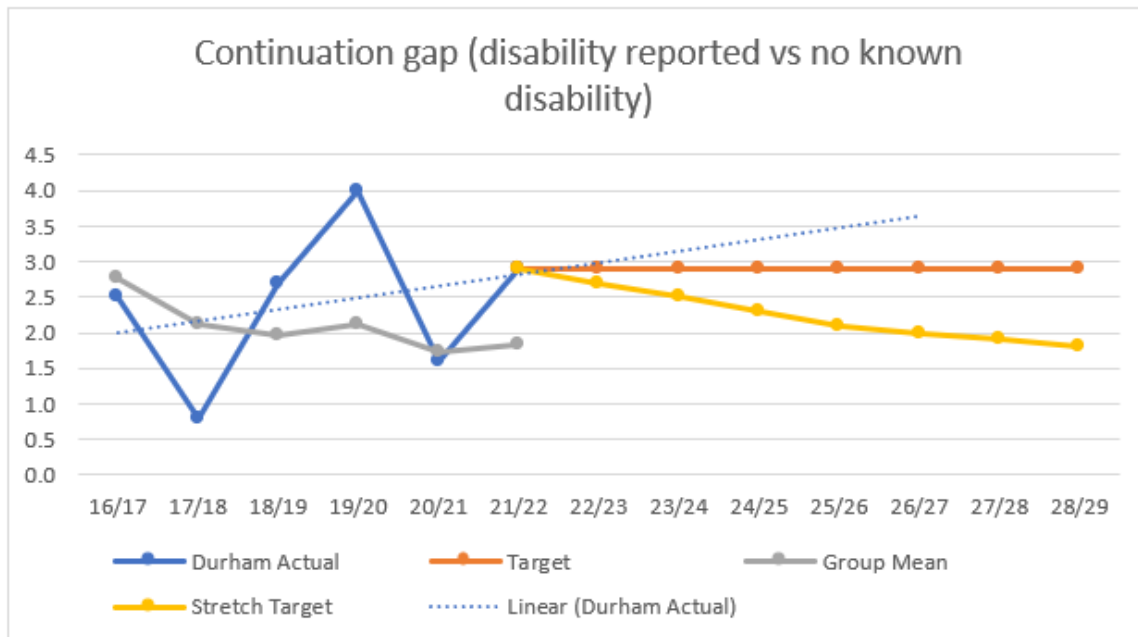
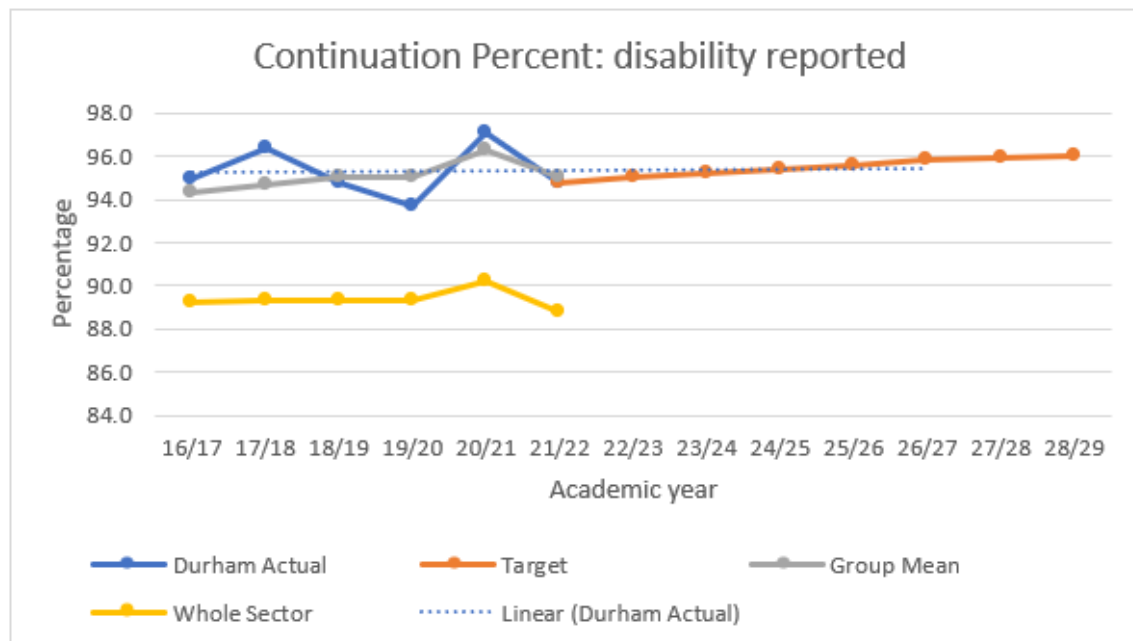


Figure 17: Percentage continuation – Disability reported vs no disability reported



Alternative entry types: Continuation

The graph below (figure 18) compares students with a standard offer (SO) and those who narrowly missed their entry requirements (NM), year one pass rates were only slightly lower for students with a guaranteed contextual offer (GCO). Pass rates were 91% for GCO, 94% for Widening Participation Contextual Offer (WPCO), 95% for SO and 96% for NM entrants.

Year one pass rates, as indicated by an average weighted mark of 40 or above, were high for students entering via all offer types, ranging from 91% to 96%. Figure 19 shows that those for whom A-level grades were recorded (77.1% of all cases), year one pass rates exceeded 95% for all WPCO, NM and SO applicants irrespective of how their achieved A-level grades compared to

the standard offer for their course. For GCO entrants, pass rates were also 95% or above for those who entered with one grade below the standard offer, but were slightly lower if entering with two or more grades below the standard offer (93%).

Among those with a year one mark of zero or above, average weighted year one marks were slightly lower on average for GCO (63), WPCO (64) and NM (64) entrants compared to SO (67) entrants.

Further multivariate analysis is needed to control statistically for a range of relevant factors including degree subject and A-level grades on entry, and further research is needed to understand how best to support contextually admitted students to succeed at Durham on a par with their standard offer peers.

Figure 18: Percentage continuation – entry route comparison

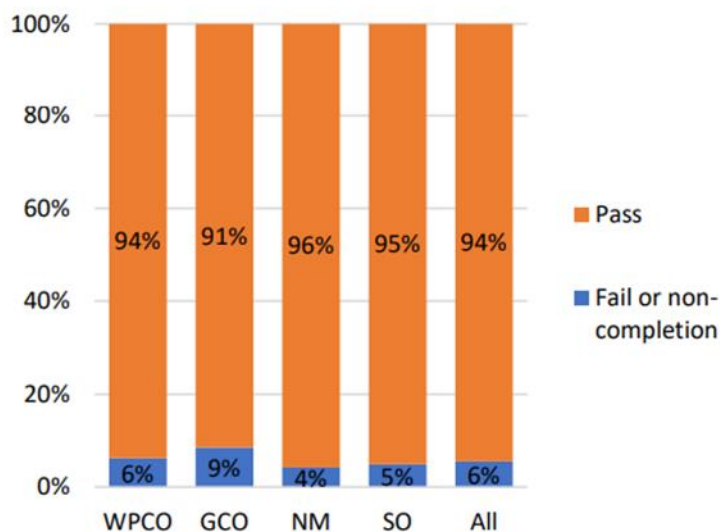
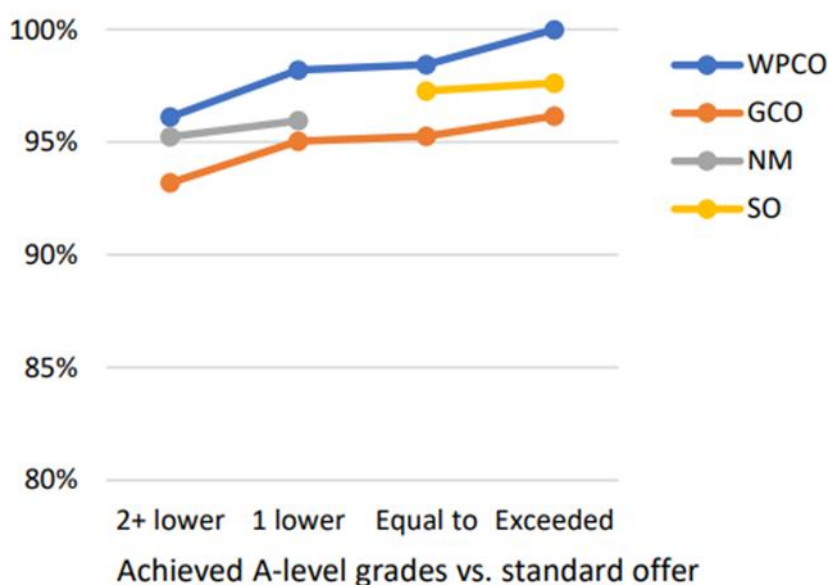


Figure 19: Percentage pass rates by entry route comparison based on A-level attainment



Completion

Sector	Similar 15 units	Indicator	Target type	Actual							Target								Error + or -
				16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24	24/25	25/26	26/27	27/28	28/29			
		1. Mature (21+ vs <21)	% Gap	17.8	22.4	19.6	13.5	15.7	17.7		14.8	14.2	13.6			13.0		5.2	
		2. Ethnicity (Black vs White)	% Gap	12.5					7.2	6.8	6.5	6.2	5.9	5.6	5.3	5.0		3.4	
										6.8	6.2	5.6	5.2	4.8	4.4	4.0			

Key	95% confidence interval from OfS dashboard (+/-1 this figure)
	Statistically significantly better than the group mean (either sector or comparison group)
	No statistically significant gap
	Statistically significantly worse than the group mean (either sector or comparison group)
	Target
	Stretch target
	N/A Not available
	Selected target

Completion: Age (mature students)

The graphs below (figure 21 and figure 22) show the percentage of mature students who complete their studies at Durham University compared to the comparator group. The data shows that Durham performs marginally better than the sector, but worse than the comparator group average. The percentage of mature students who do not complete their studies is still significantly higher than for young students. The gaps between mature students and young students has recently grown wider and therefore Durham needs to intervene to close the gap.

Although it is possible to focus on Durham's performance against the sector, it is felt that our principle should be to create equal outcomes for students at Durham in this first instance. All completion targets are set based on closing gaps that exist between groups. We are aware that mature students can have more complex lives, particularly those with caring responsibilities, and this may make it more difficult for them to fully partake in the wider student experience. Durham needs to consider whether its programmes and timetable are conducive to achieving high completion rates for different target groups, such as mature students.

Figure 20: Percentage completion gap - mature students compared to young students

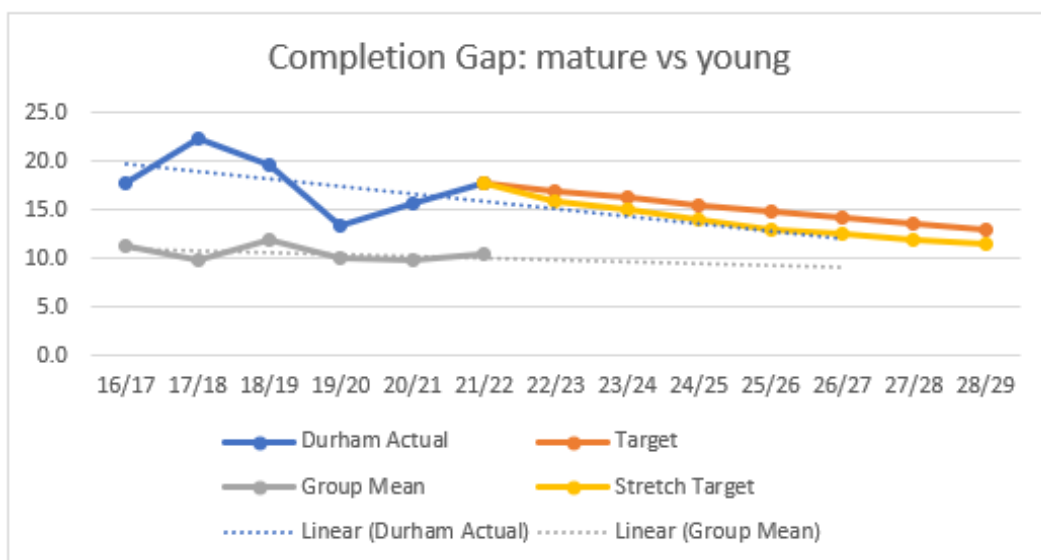
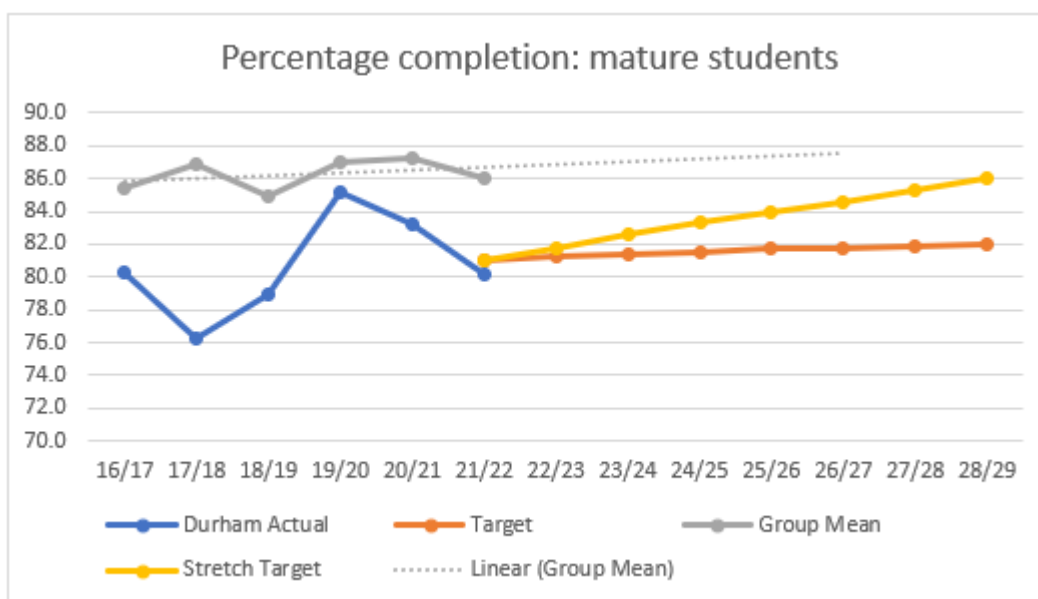


Figure 21: Percentage completion - mature students compared to young students



Ethnicity (Black students): Completion

The graphs below (figure 22 and figure 23) shows the percentage gap between Black students and white students who complete their studies at Durham University compared to the sector and our comparator group. The underlying data shows that Durham performs significantly better than the sector, and slightly better than the comparator group for completion in general. However, the percentage of Black students who do not complete their studies is still significantly higher than for white students at Durham. The gap between Black students and white students has reduced but we feel it is necessary to narrow the gap further. Students from Black heritage backgrounds report a lower sense of belonging at Durham, and this may make it more difficult for them to fully partake in the wider student experience.

Figure 22: Percentage completion gap - Black students compared to white students

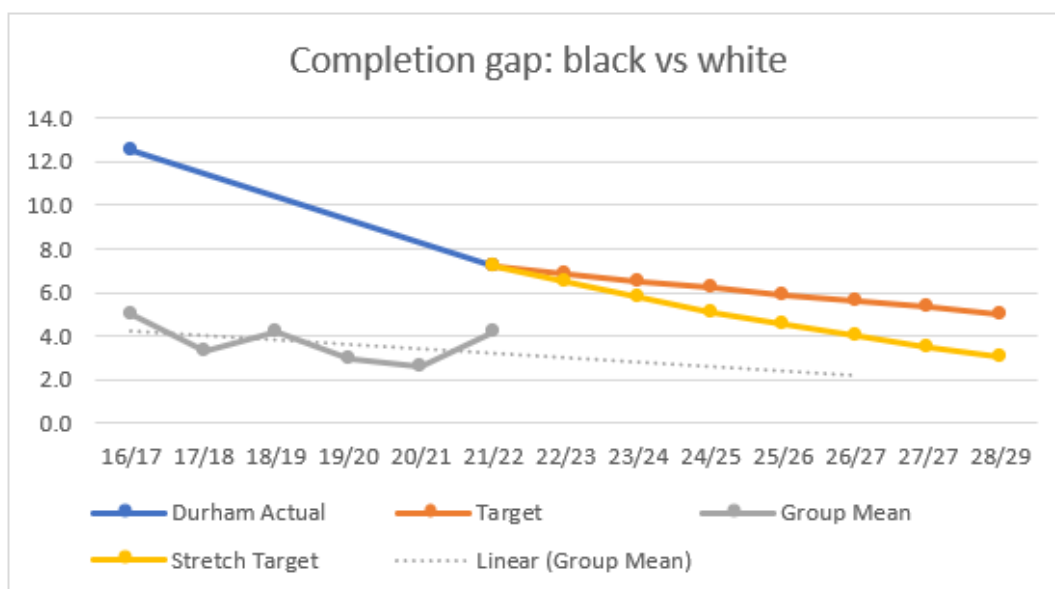
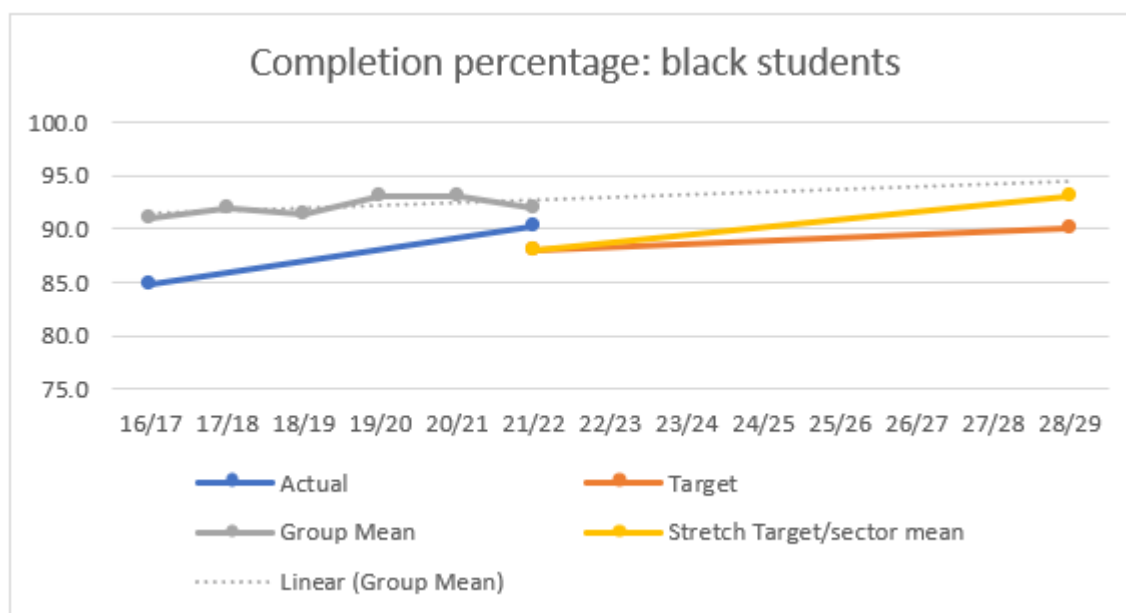


Figure 23: Percentage completion - Black students compared to white students



Attainment

Sector	Similar 15 unis	Indicator (% firsts & 2:1s unless specified)	Target type	Actual						Target								Error + or -
				16/17	17/18	18/19	19/20	20/21	21/22	22/23	23/24	24/25	25/26	26/27	27/28	28/29		
N/A	N/A	1. Ethnicity (black firsts vs white)	% Gap	22	14	25	17	21	20.5	20.0	19.5	19.0	18.5	18.0	17.5	10.0		
		2. Disability (reported vs not)	% Gap	1.6	4	3.8	1.9	3.7	1.6	2.6	2.5	2.4	2.3	2.2	2.1	2.0	1	
		3. Disability (mental health vs no dis)	% Gap	3.6	2.4	5.6	3.4	6.8	4.7	5.8	6.0	6.4	6.4	6.6	6.8	7.0	1.9	
		4. Mature (21+ vs <21)	% Gap	3.3	20.7	21.3	12.7	11.2	4.2	9.5	9.0	8.5	8.0			7.5	7.5	
										9.0	8.0	7.0	6.0			5.0		

Key		95% confidence interval from OfS dashboard (+/-1 this figure)
		Statistically significantly better than the group mean (either sector or comparison group)
		No statistically significant gap
		Statistically significantly worse than the group mean (either sector or comparison group)
		Target
		Stretch target
	N/A	Not available
		Selected target

Ethnicity (Black students achieving firsts): Attainment

The graphs below (figure 24 and figure 25) show the percentage of Black students compared to white who attain a first in their studies at Durham University, compared to the sector and our comparator group. The data shows that Durham performs significantly better than the sector for all ethnicities. However, the percentage of Black students who attain a 1st or 2:1 is lower than for white students (figure 24). The largest gap is between Black students and white students, but there is also a significant gap between Black students and all other ethnicities. We feel it is necessary to narrow the gap.

As the cohorts of Black students at Durham are small, the confidence intervals are wide and the actual percentage gap between the proportion of first-class degrees from Black students and the university average vary considerably year on year. When considering attainment of firsts and 2:1, we also have a small sample size. This makes it difficult to propose realistic and reliable targets. The gap across the years is variable, so a trend line has been fitted. However, we can cautiously

aim to move the trend in a downwards direction as indicated on the charts. The targets have been set to reduce the upward trend in gaps to almost zero.

Figure 24: Percentage attainment gap (firsts) - Black students compared to white students

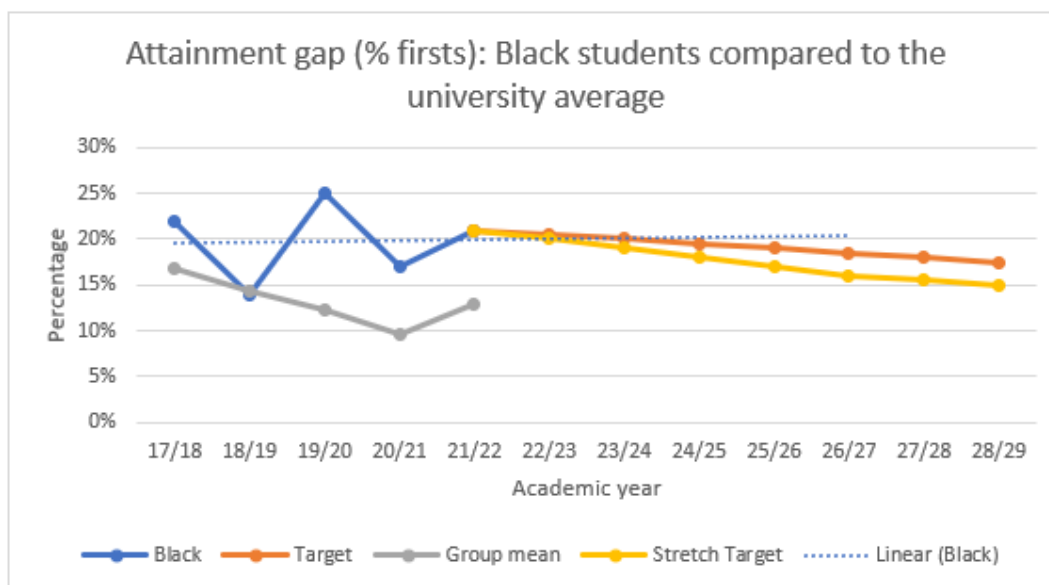
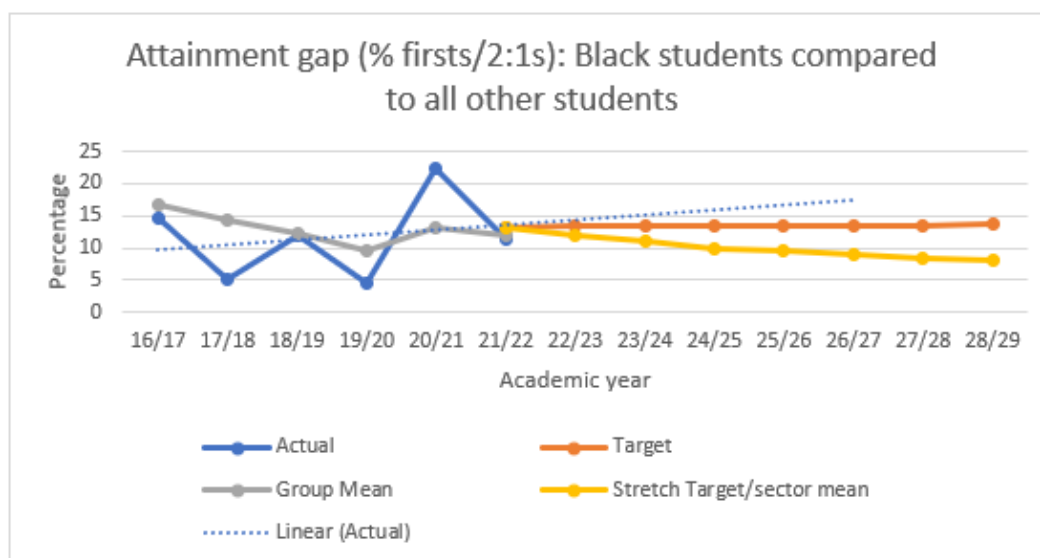


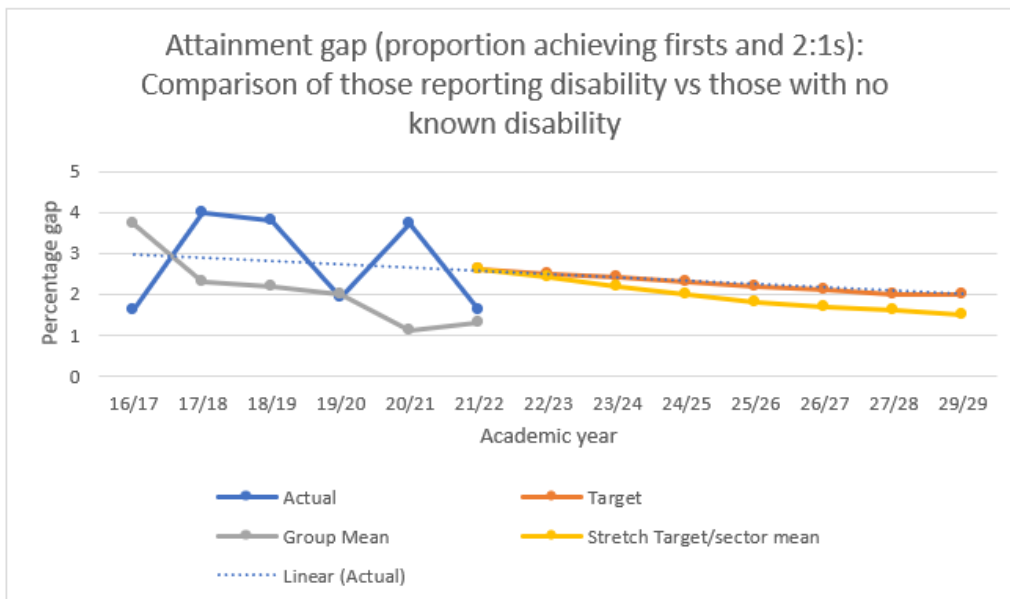
Figure 25: Percentage attainment gap (firsts) - Black students compared to white students



Disability: Attainment

The graph below (figure 26) shows the percentage gap of students with a recorded disability compared to those with no recorded disability who attain a 1st or 2:1 in their studies at Durham University, compared to the sector and our comparator group. The data shows that Durham performs significantly better than the sector and better than our comparator group. However, the percentage of students with a recorded disability who attain a first or 2:1 is lower than for students without a recorded disability. We feel it is necessary to narrow the gap. The attainment gap fluctuates considerably between years, making target setting difficult. Therefore, a cautious downward trend has been suggested.

Figure 26: Percentage attainment gap - disabled students compared to students without recorded disability



Disability type (mental health): Attainment

The graph below (figure 27) shows the attainment percentage of students with a recorded mental health disability compared to those with no recorded disability, compared to the sector and our comparator group. The data shows that Durham performs significantly better than the sector and slightly better than our comparator group. However, when comparing Durham's performance to similar high tariff competitors, it is evident that Durham should aim to close the attainment gap further. At Durham, the percentage of students with a recorded mental health disability who attain a 1st or 2:1 is lower than for students with other recorded disabilities (figure 28). However, when doing the same comparison at a sector level it is evident that the proportion of students with a recorded mental health disability who attain a 1st or 2:1 is higher than students with other recorded disabilities (figure 29). It is incumbent on us to investigate and understand why this is the case at Durham.

The focus here is on closing attainment gaps. Durham students with a reported mental health disability get better outcomes compared to the sector and Durham performs better than our comparator group average. The attainment gap fluctuates considerably each year, and this makes setting targets difficult. There appears to be an upward trend and slowing down this trend could be the target, with a stretch target of reducing the gap.

Figure 27: Percentage attainment gap - disabled students (mental health) compared to students without recorded disability

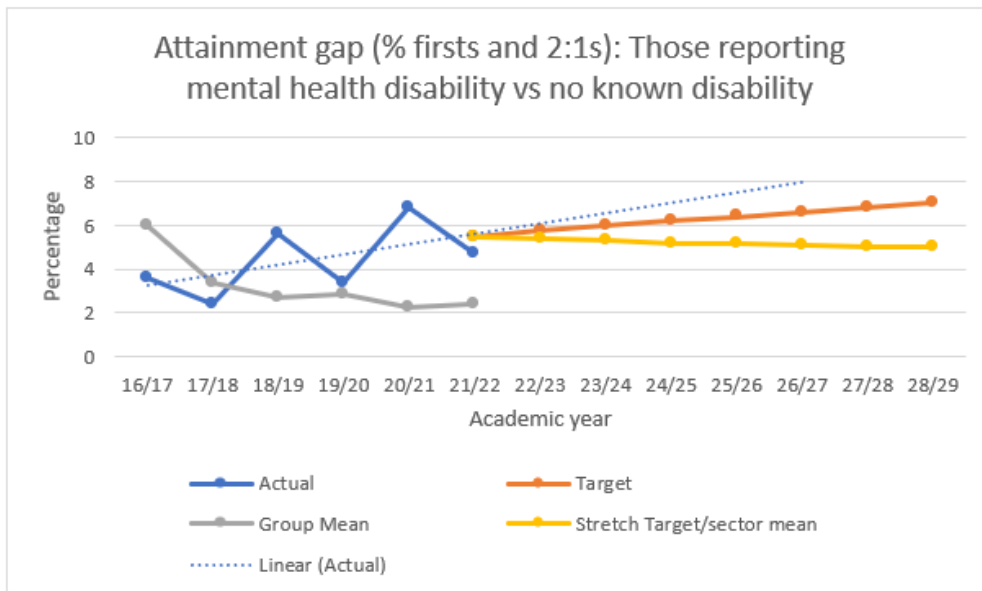


Figure 28: Durham - attainment % for students with recorded disability (disaggregated)

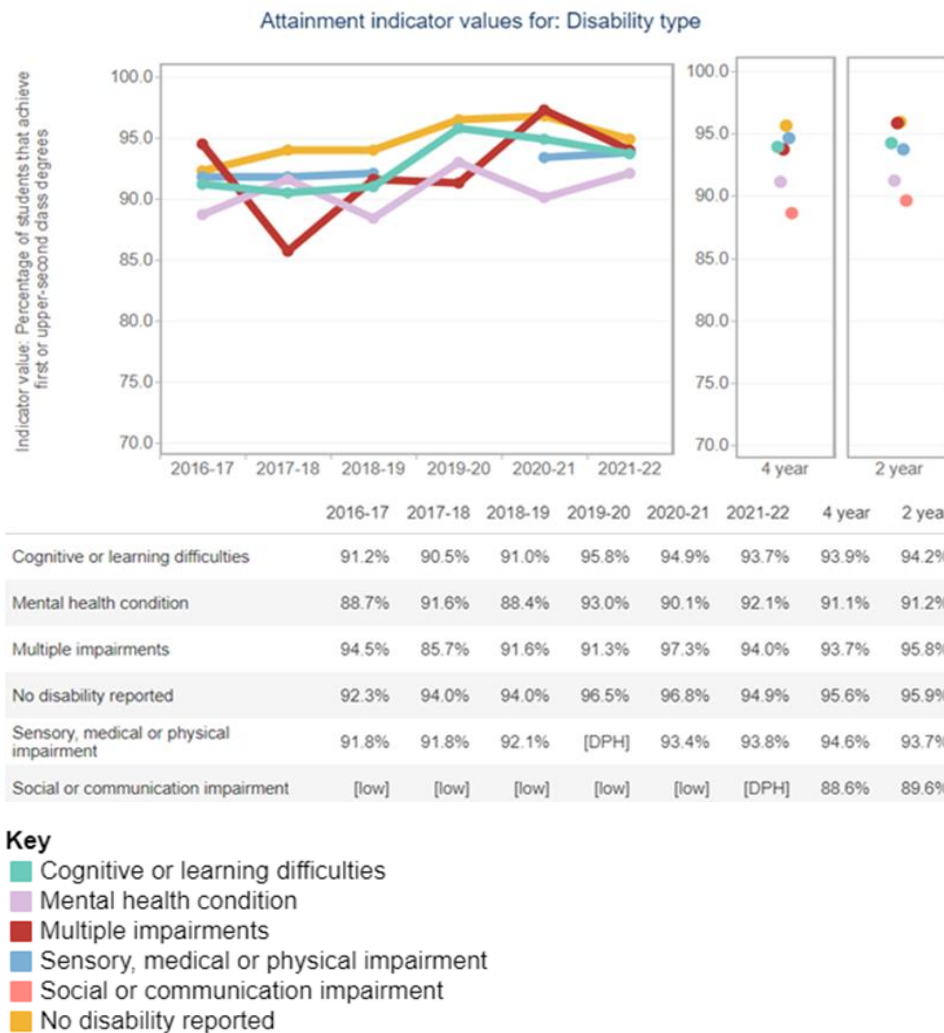
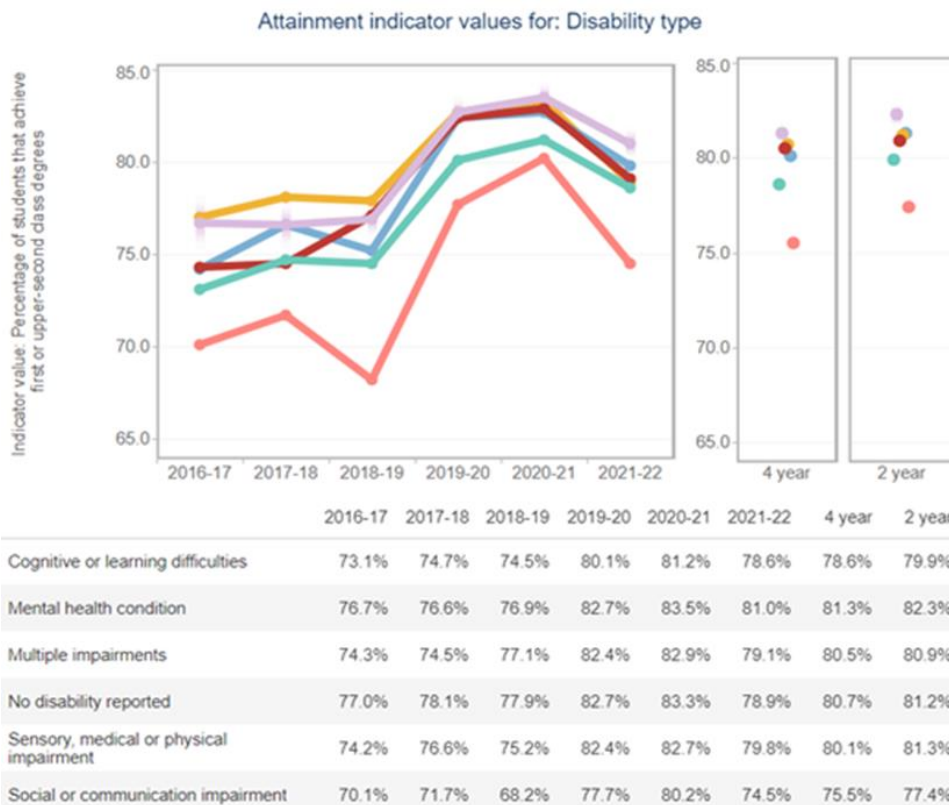


Figure 29: Sector - attainment % for students with recorded disability (disaggregated)

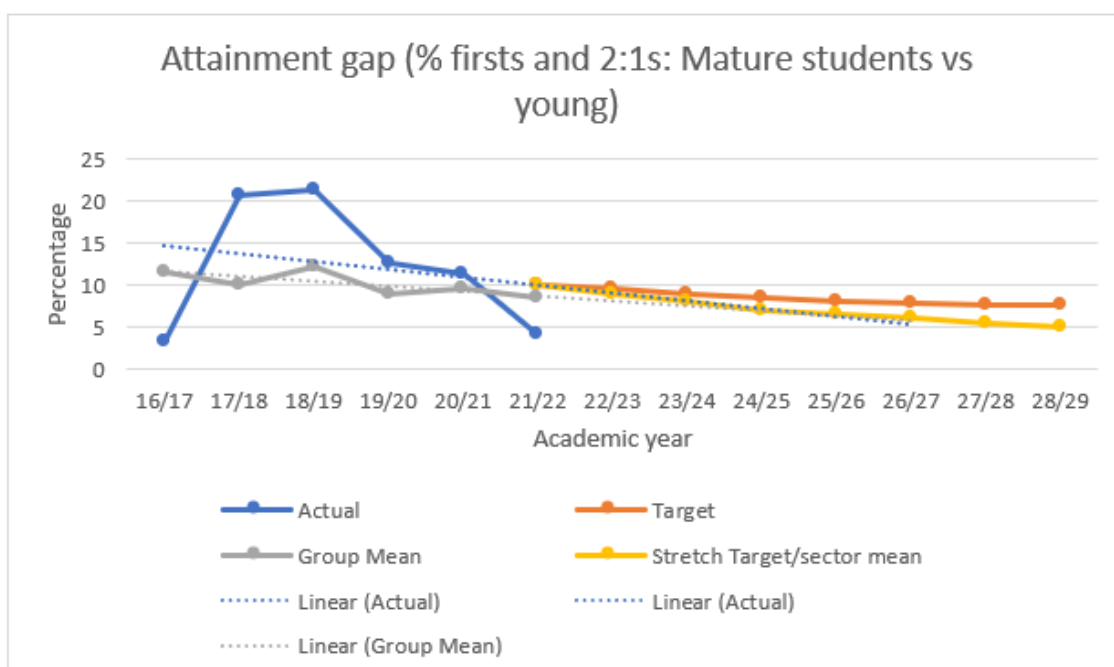


Mature: Attainment

The graph below (figure 30) shows the attainment percentage of mature students compared to those younger students, compared to the sector and our comparator group. When comparing Durham's performance to similar high tariff competitors, it is evident that Durham should aim to consistently close the attainment gap.

The focus here is on closing attainment gaps. Mature students at Durham get better outcomes compared to the sector and Durham performs better than our comparator group average. The attainment gap fluctuates considerably each year, and this makes setting targets difficult. There appears to be a downward trend and accelerating this trend could be the target.

Figure 30: Percentage attainment gap – Mature students compared to younger students



Alternative entry types: Attainment

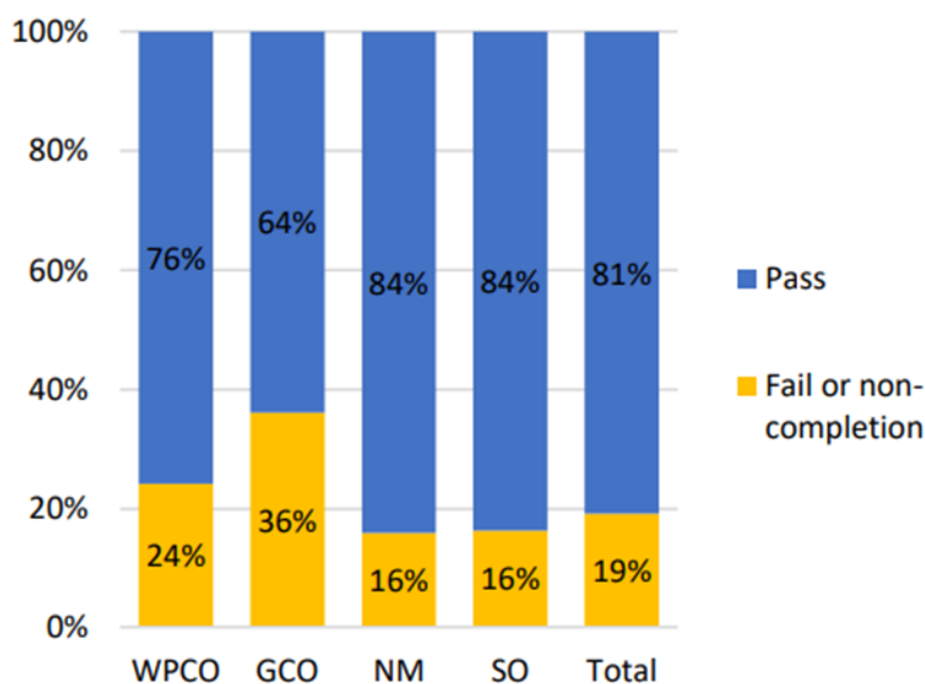
Restricting the sample to those who entered three-year degree programmes in 2018 (N=2,859), the rates at which entrants to three-year degree programmes in 2018 completed year three of their programme with at least a pass mark (40+) was moderately lower for WPCO entrants (76%) and substantially lower for GCO entrants (64%) than for SO and NM entrants (84%).

Recorded reasons for leaving the university at some point between initial entry and the end of year three also differ substantially for GCO entrants, but only modestly for WPCO entrants, as compared to SO and NM entrants. For GCO entrants in particular, rates of leaving the university due to academic failure (9%) or withdrawal (9%) are comparatively high.

Correspondingly, looking at final exit awards, GCO entrants are less likely to leave with a first-class degree than SO entrants (18% vs. 40%), and more likely to exit with less than an upper second-class degree (14% vs. 3%) or no award data recorded (33% vs. 22%). WPCO fare better, with 25% exiting with first-class degrees and 66% exiting with a first or two-one compared to 69% of NM entrants and 74% of SO entrants.

Among those for whom a final degree classification mark of zero or above was recorded, the average weighted final mark was slightly higher overall for SO entrants (68) than for NM (65), WPCO (64) and GCO (62) entrants. Among the sub-set for whom A-level grades were recorded, WPCO and GCO entrants on average achieved 1-6 marks less than SO and NM entrants with comparable A-level grades relative to the standard offer for their course.

Figure 31: Percentage attainment – entry route comparison



Equality of Opportunity Risk Register

Durham's risks to equality of opportunity were identified using institutional and national level datasets and by engaging staff and students in a university-wide consultation to understand how different student groups are impacted across the student lifecycle. The datasets that we analysed included:

1. The Office for Students' (OfS) Equality of Risk Register (EORR). We considered the relevance of the EORR risks to our institutional context and created comparator groups of institutions to benchmark our performance against.
2. Durham's internal datasets to understand performance at different stages of the student lifecycle. The datasets included:
 - a. Data on applications, offers, rejections, and admissions, broken down by age, POLAR4, IMD and Ethnicity.
 - b. National Student Survey PowerBI dashboard, showing both survey responses and comments, with ethnicity, age, disability, IMD, POLAR4, sex, and parental education background breakdowns.
 - c. PowerBI dashboard showing outcomes for graduating students, average salary, progression to work or study, and job titles broken down by Ethnicity, gender, age, POLAR4, and disability
3. Publicly available national datasets:
 - a. The OfS Access and Participation PowerBI dashboard, and
 - b. The underlying complete OfS APP dataset, analysed using PowerQuery and Excel
4. Internal staff and student consultation:
5. Findings from an independent review conducted by The Brilliant Club in November 2022 was used to understand Durham's current performance in relation to university access and success and where the potential gaps were in provision. The review included both staff and student interviews alongside a desk-based review.

The analysis identified seven key risks to equality of opportunity that students may encounter at Durham across access, success and progression:

1. Attainment
 2. Information, advice and guidance
 3. Perceptions of Durham
 4. Cost pressures
 5. Insufficient academic support
 6. Mental health
 7. Sense of belonging
- **Risk 1:** There is a lower proportion of applications from POLAR Q1 and Q2 and IMD Q1 and Q2 backgrounds. National data and our internal consultation indicate this is due to gaps in attainment and information, advice and guidance. Furthermore, both staff and students who participated in the consultation highlighted that the biggest risk to access for students from these target groups was negative perceptions of Durham University. This risk also came through strongly from the independent review.
 - **Risk 2:** There are lower proportions of Black and Asian students accepting their offers relative to other student groups. These gaps have remained consistent since 2016. Based on the student consultation, perceptions of Durham University is a key risk for this target group.
 - **Risk 3:** There is a lower continuation rate for disabled students compared to those without disabilities. Based on National Student Survey (NSS) scores this appears to be due to a lower sense of belonging and lack of appropriate mental health support and academic support.
 - **Risk 4:** There is a lower continuation rate for students from IMD Q1, compared to all other quintiles. Feedback from the consultation, along with the NSS scores, suggests this is due to cost pressures, mental health challenges and a lack of sense of belonging. Furthermore, concerns around cost pressures were believed to be exacerbated by some aspects of the collegiate experience at Durham University. The impact of "hidden costs" on students can also be seen in the staff survey.
 - **Risk 5:** There is a lower continuation and attainment rate for students coming from alternative entry routes, as well as a lower rate of achieving a 1st or 2:1. As this gap is significantly smaller for students who participate in WP programmes, it suggests this is due to pre-entry academic

support and an improved sense of belonging from relationships formed during programme participation.

- **Risk 6:** There are lower continuation, completion, and attainment rates for mature students. NSS scores and comments suggest this is primarily due to insufficient academic support and cost pressures or working while studying.
- **Risk 7:** The completion rate and attainment of Black students is lower compared to their peers. Based on the NSS data, mental health challenges appear to be a key factor. The completion rate is also lower for students from mixed ethnic backgrounds, with the NSS data again revealing mental health challenges as a key factor.
- **Risk 8:** Attainment for disabled students is lower than for those without reported disabilities. NSS scores tell us this could be due to a poor sense of belonging, complex mental health support needs and lack of appropriate academic support.

Annex B: Further information that sets out the rationale, assumptions and evidence base for each intervention strategy that is included in the access and participation plan.

Intervention strategy 1: Access and continuation for socio-economically disadvantaged students

This intervention strategy will leverage external partnerships with a rigorous evidence base alongside internal expertise to ensure increased attainment, access, and continuation. Pre-16 interventions are increasingly important for closing the attainment gap, and sector evidence indicates that multi-intervention programmes have a positive effect on perceptions of higher education. Similarly, the literature suggests that transition support is particularly important for less advantaged students, and that academic and study skills training are vital, especially in the first months of university study.

Evidence-base and rationale:

There are significant gaps in attainment between students from less advantaged backgrounds and their more advantaged peers. At present, the attainment gap between the least and most advantaged students stands at 18.8 months by the time that students take their GCSEs (EPI). The gap is now at its largest since 2012. For persistently disadvantaged students, meaning students that are eligible for free school meals for 80 per cent or more of their school lives, the gap is 22.7 months. This means that students from low-income families are almost a whole two years behind their peers.

As well as and connected to this, there are significant access gaps in progression to Higher Education. In England, 28 in 100 of the most advantaged 18-year-olds enter the most competitive universities compared to only 2 in 100 of the most disadvantaged (UCAS Multiple Equality Measure; UCAS undergraduate end of cycle resources 2022). This means that less advantaged students are nearly 14 times more likely to miss out on high tariff university study.

This gap between less advantaged students and their peers does not disappear when a student arrives on campus: students from less advantaged backgrounds are also less likely to continue their studies and are less likely to gain a 2:1 or a first than students from a more advantaged background (OfS, 2023).

Our interventions:

This intervention strategy contains three different interventions: a pre-16 multi-intervention programme, a multi-intervention Key Stage 5 and transition programme, and a project to develop academic transition activity. These three interventions will work together to ensure increased attainment, access, and continuation for socio-economically disadvantaged students.

i. Pre-16 multi-intervention programme

The pre-16 multi-intervention programme at Durham University combines information, advice and guidance, campus visits, academic skills development, and near-peer mentoring. Students will also take part in The Brilliant Club's Scholars Programme twice during the programme, as an overt attainment-raising activity. The programme is targeted at students from ages 11 to 16 (Year 7 to Year 11), and has the aim of increasing attainment, challenging students' perceptions of Higher Education and of Durham University, and providing students with the knowledge and skills they may need to pursue their post-16 ambitions.

Early intervention and attainment - Pre-16 interventions are increasingly important for closing the attainment gap. A recent study by the Universities of York and Leeds, for example, finds that GCSE results have a significant impact on many elements of life at 23 years old. In particular, GCSE scores are a strong predictor of whether a less advantaged student goes on to attend

university, earn a good income, or secure a prestigious job (Starr, Haider and Stumm, 2024). We also know that the attainment gap starts early in life—at the end of primary school, for example, students from the least advantaged backgrounds are already 10.3 months behind their peers (EPI, 2023).

Multi-intervention programmes - The sector evidence shows that multi-intervention programmes have a positive effect on the perception of Higher Education: an evidence review commissioned by TASO shows that multi-intervention outreach programmes are associated with students having positive aspirations and attitudes towards Higher Education (TASO, 2023). Evaluations of multi-intervention outreach and mentoring (MIOM) programmes, for example UniConnect and The Access Project, have found that participation was associated with a greater likelihood of students progressing to Higher Education compared to demographically matched groups.

Mentoring - According to the EEF, the impact of mentoring varies but, on average, it is likely to have a small positive impact on attainment (equivalent to about 2 months of additional progress) (TASO, 2023). The report also states that there is evidence to suggest that mentoring is associated with positive effects on students' attitudes/aspirations relating to Higher Education. In particular, TASO note that mentoring interventions have a better chance of success when they include relatable role models, who come from a similar background to the mentees. There are several mentoring providers that partner with universities across the UK, and whose work has been proven to be effective for university access. Project Access, who match disadvantaged young people with a mentor who studies their dream degree and provides support for university applications, for example, found that the mentorship was useful for 93% of students who participated in their programme.

Information, advice and guidance - There is evidence to show that multi-interventions that include university-related Information, advice and guidance also have a positive but small impact on attitudes/aspirations and later university participation. A report developed by TASO states that it is likely that receiving IAG is most impactful for students who were already at the margin of applying to Higher Education and is most effective when it is tailored to individual students, starts early, and is integrated into other forms of support such as career advice and guidance (TASO, 2023).

The Scholars Programme – The Brilliant Club's The Scholars Programme supports attainment for students aged 8-18 who are eligible for pupil premium, live in the most deprived areas (IDACI quintiles 1 and 2), and have no parental experience of higher education. Through completing a series of university-style group tutorials, delivered by a trained PhD tutor, and attending a university campus visit, pupils develop subject knowledge, critical thinking and written communication, which are strongly associated with improvements in attainment outcomes. HEAT data shows a clear positive relationship between participation in The Scholars Programme and improved GCSE attainment. The Theory of Change can be found here.

Overall, there is limited evidence on what it is about a multi-intervention programme that is effective for access to and participation in Higher Education. According to TASO, the sector as a whole needs to build a bank of evidence to understand the specific parts of a multi-intervention programme that lead to their success. As such, we will undertake evaluations of each element of the project, as well as overarching evaluation of the entire programme, to contribute to the sector-wide evidence base.

ii. Multi-intervention Key Stage 5 and transition programme

Wider evidence from the Higher Education sector shows that Key Stage 5 programmes are particularly effective for increasing university access. HE+, for example, is a year-long initiative run by the University of Cambridge which runs from the autumn or spring term of Year 12 through to the autumn term of Year 13. The programme includes access to super-curricular activities, IAG, and study skills sessions. Evaluations from the programme suggest that HE+ programme participants have a much greater likelihood of making a successful application to a high tariff

university: 60% of HE+ participants were accepted to Russell Group universities, compared with 20% of students from the control groups.

The pre-entry phase of Durham University's multi-intervention Key Stage 5 and transition programme will include subject-related activity, a residential, near-peer mentoring, application support, academic skills development, and university preparation through The Brilliant Club's [Join the Dots](#) programme. Its design is informed by the evidence base explored above, and will take the same approach to the evaluation of the programme.

Transition support - The Key Stage 5 intervention will also include transition support, which sector evidence has shown should be an important element of widening participation interventions for less advantaged students. The literature on the university transition shows that feeling like you 'belong' at university is associated with lower drop-out rates and increased student success. (Brady et al., 2020; Murphy et al., 2020; Thomas, 2012). Effective induction is central to an effective transition into Higher Education, and subsequent retention and success (Crosling et al 2008 and Harvey and Drew, 2006). Programmes that involve mentorship are particularly effective: participation in a peer mentoring programme is positively correlated with improved student outcomes (e.g. higher grades, lower module failure rates, and successful progression) (Kerrigan and Manktelow, 2021). To ensure that our students are supported in the transition period, Durham University will invest in Join the Dots, a transition programme which is run by The Brilliant Club. Join the Dots will bring schools and colleges together with Durham University so that we can co-create networks of support for students during the transition to university. It is targeted at students who are most likely to face barriers in making a successful transition to university, supporting them from Results Day and through their first six months of university by connecting them with a coach who will support them through this transition.

Financial support – The transition phase of this intervention includes financial support once students have enrolled at Durham University. Sector evidence suggests that for those who have the grades, and want to go to university, cost is increasingly becoming a barrier. For example, 27% of pupils from working class families, and 39% of those who have used food banks in the last year, say they do not intend to apply to university because they can't afford to go, compared to 19% of students with professional/managerial parents (COSMO Study, 2023). Low-income students have been found to experience considerable financial stress prior to and during university study (Halliday-Wynes & Nguyen, 2014), having to ask family or friends to help out financially or, in a large number of cases, having to save up prior to entering Higher Education and/or continue to undertake part-time employment alongside their studies (Hordosy & Clark, 2018). Though evidence in this area is limited in the UK, bursaries have been generally shown to have a positive impact on the progression to and continuation of university study for less advantaged students -- A 2016 study, for example, suggests that the receipt of financial support is associated with a significantly higher likelihood of attaining a 'good' degree result (Murphy and Wyness, 2016). Another study finds that bursaries of £500–£3,000 in value had a positive effect on continuation and did so principally for students from modest and (especially) lower income households (Moores and Burgess, 2022).

iii. **Project to develop academic transition activity**

The development of a training programme for academic departments to design and build pre- and in-session subject-specific transition activity, will offer all students entering via contextual pathways access to further academic skills training before they formally begin their course, and as they progress through their studies. The provision will focus on general fundamental academic skills as well as department-specific skills. Durham University have already piloted a History bridging programme, which has shown some evidence of potential for first-year students, and the plan is to build on this model to expand this to multiple departments.

The evidence on the impact and effectiveness of academic transition activity is lacking, as subject-specific transition activity is rare in the Higher Education sector. We know, however, that academic

and study skills training is important, especially in the first months of university study. According to a 2009 study, most first-year students lack necessary basic academic skills such as reading, because academic reading differs greatly from the reading that is undertaken in Secondary Education (Hermida, 2009).

According to TASO, there is some evidence that students who undertake study skills support programmes achieve higher grades than those who do not access this support (Dagley et al, 2016; Grier-Reed, 2016; Cho et al., 2012). TASO suggest, however, that we do not have enough evidence at present to claim that better retention and performance was actively caused by these programmes of support. There is, however, a study from the USA that shows that the students who were enrolled onto a student support programme were more likely to graduate at the end of their course than those from a similar background who were not enrolled on the course (Scrivener et al, 2015).

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Intervention strategy 2: Access for Asian-heritage students

This intervention strategy aims to increase the proportion of Asian-heritage students by developing bespoke, impactful programmes and growing the Asian applicant pool through partnerships and targeted school engagement.

This intervention strategy, as well as Intervention strategy 3, focuses on targeted intervention for a specific ethnic group at Durham University. According to the Education Endowment Foundation, targeted interventions have positive overall effects, especially among secondary-aged pupils in schools (EEF, 2021). At Durham University, we are making the choice to disaggregate our minority ethnic students into separate target groups, and, as such, avoid using the term 'BAME'. This is because we have received feedback from students that this term flattens identity and homogenises groups which are incredibly diverse and have differing needs.

Evidence-base and rationale:

Asian students have typically higher than average rates of access to university: in 2022, for example, 53.9% of Asian students progressed to Higher Education, compared to 70.7% of Chinese students, 50.6% of Black students, and 32.2% of White students. However, this is not mirrored in Durham University's admission rates – In 2021/22, 6.5% of students admitted to undergraduate study were of Asian heritage, compared to 84.9% White entrants. This also compares to 11.1% at the University of Oxford, 17% at Cambridge, 38.6% at University College London, and 25.6% at the University of Warwick (UCAS, 2023).

There is a limited evidence base on what widening participation initiatives work for increasing access for Asian students. The University of Oxford have recently launched a new outreach programme, BeUNIQ, which is specifically aimed at students from Bangladeshi and Pakistani backgrounds in schools and colleges across Birmingham, Bradford, and Oldham. As this is a new programme, there is no impact data or findings which might inform our own intervention.

Our interventions:

i. The Elephant Access Programme

Intervention strategy 2 will first see the expansion of Durham University's existing partnership with The Elephant Group, on the Elephant Access Programme, which includes information, advice and guidance, campus visits and academic skills support to school students. We will grow our partnership to include The Elephant Group's Midlands and London hubs, which typically see high proportions of Asian student participation. Expansion will see engagement with 1,130 students per year – based on previous years' demographics, this will equate to engagement with an additional 300 students of Asian heritage each year.

ii. Multi-intervention KS5 and transition programme

Building on the evidence base for multi-intervention programmes, KS5 programmes and transition support provided in Intervention strategy 1, we will also create a new, bespoke KS5 and university transition programme, specifically targeted at Asian-heritage students. The programme will support students of Asian heritage from Year 12 and on through application, offer making, and transition to Durham University. This will be a multi-intervention programme that will incorporate subject-specific activity, a residential, near-peer mentoring, application support, academic skills development, and university preparation activity. The transition phase will include guaranteed contextual offers, financial support at Durham University, and guaranteed first year coaching. However, the specific activity included within this intervention will be co-designed together with a panel of Asian-heritage Durham University staff and students.

We are initiating this programme in part to lay the research and evidence groundwork for future programmes aimed towards Asian-heritage students. In the first years of the programme, we will undertake robust and frequent evaluations to understand the programme's effectiveness and will also keep an eye on learnings in the wider sector to inform any future developments to the programme.

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Intervention strategy 3: Access, completion and degree outcomes for Black heritage students

Evidence base and rationale:

Access: While 51% of Black 18-year-olds entered Higher Education in 2022, only 9% progressed to a higher tariff institution. This was the lowest rate of any ethnic group (House of Commons Library, 2023). While proportionally more Black students attend university than white or Asian students, they are more likely to study at low- and middle-tariff universities than their peers from other ethnic groups. At Durham, 1.6% of entrants are Black, which is much less than the sector average (8%).

There are limited examples of bespoke access interventions with Black students in the Higher Education sector. An example of a Key Stage 5 programme is the University of Bristol's 'Next Step Bristol', a series of virtual events that provide students from Black or Asian backgrounds with the opportunity to experience university life. This might include academic taster sessions, a student panel, and help with UCAS and student finance applications. Completing the Next Step programme guarantees students a contextual offer to the university. As well as this, the PARTNERS supported entry programme at Newcastle University offers Black and other minority ethnic students a 'headstart' in Higher Education, inviting them to an academic summer school, and supporting them through the application process. There isn't much evidence on whether access programmes like these have a good impact on university access, with much more research on attainment and progression to work or further study.

Financial support may be an effective way to encourage Black students to apply to and attend Higher Education, as there is evidence to suggest that ethnic minority learners value bursaries as an access measure to a greater degree than white students (Davies, P et al, 2008). However, one of the largest problems in their access to financial support is lack of awareness and understanding that such financial incentives exist. A 2019 study found that students from the poorest backgrounds, Black students, and students attending post-1992 universities were the least likely to feel confident in their knowledge of any potential financial support either before or after they enrolled to university study.

Continuation: Black students are more likely to drop out from Higher Education than other ethnic groups and least likely to achieve a first or upper second-class degree (House of Commons Library, 2023). At Durham University, Black students have the lowest rates of continuation at 91.2%, though continuation rates are high across the board.

There is evidence from the US that support during the early stages of the university experience has a positive and long-lasting effect on Black students and their outcomes (Brady et al, 2020). Years after graduation, Black students who had received early mentorship in their college careers reported more satisfaction, success, well-being, and health than control group respondents. There are a few programmes that specifically provide mentoring for Black students in the Higher Education and third sector—the Catalyst Collective, for example, matches professional Black women with Black girls at secondary school and university for a year-long mentoring relationship. This programme has good outcomes: all participants said that the programme helped them progress their career goals, social skills, and confidence (Catalyst Collective, 2022)

Degree outcomes: There is a significant gap between Black and white undergraduate students in the UK in degree attainment: as of 2022, the gap between Black and white students who were awarded either a 1st or a 2:1 in their studies stands at 18.2pp – which is up from 17.9pp in 19-20 and 16pp in 18-19. The attainment gap at university level is worsening for these students, in particular, though the overall gap between minority ethnic and white students has been narrowing over the years, for Black students it has only been getting bigger (OfS, 2023). Though there are several, complex reasons why this attainment gap might exist, some studies show that Black students feel less connected to their campuses and university communities than their peers, which may, in turn, impact their studies. Bunce et al. (2021) suggests that when students feel fulfilled by their 'psychological needs, relatedness, competence, and autonomy', they are more likely to achieve their full potential.

However, there is limited evidence on 'what works' to reduce awarding gaps (Mountford-Zimdars et al., 2015). TASO have commissioned causal evaluations on the impact of curriculum reform at two different UK universities, where reforms included increasing the diversity of authorship in reading lists and providing toolkits to support staff in increasing the cultural sensitivity of their teaching, learning and assessment resources. However, TASO found limited causal evidence on the impact of the programmes at improving outcomes for minority ethnic students in general, though some students did report an increase of the feeling of belonging in Higher Education. TASO recommend that institutions take a 'top-down' or 'bottom-up' approach to curriculum reform or adopt a more shared and distributed approach to leadership (TASO, 2023).

Our interventions:

i. Multi-intervention KS5 and transition programme

Durham University's intervention strategy for Black students spans across school and university life: the first step of this intervention strategy is to enhance and expand our multi-intervention KS5 and transition programme, which addresses access to Durham for Black Year 12 and 13 students, as well supporting first-year undergraduates to success in their students. The intervention expands on the existing Space to Explore Potential (STEP) programme, offering enhanced support and financial incentives to encourage Black students to apply to and succeed at Durham University. It builds on the evidence base for multi-intervention programmes, KS5 programmes and transition support provided in Intervention strategy 1.

STEP currently consists of a summer residential, along with online information and guidance throughout Year 12. Going forward, Durham University will expand provision to support Black heritage students through application, offer making and transition to Durham University. As there is limited sector evidence on what multi-intervention programmes should include to benefit Black heritage students in the UK context, we will monitor and evaluate impact of this intervention to understand its effectiveness, and share our findings with the sector.

We will also seek appropriate external partnerships, particularly for any mentoring/coaching elements to the multi-intervention programme. Though there is limited causal evidence on student belonging leading to better outcomes for Black students in the UK, we know from the wider literature that Black students often experience lack of trust and feelings of alienation on campus. It can be difficult for Black students to find role models on university campuses: less than 1 per cent of the UK's 22,855 professors are Black, according to Higher Education Statistics Agency figures (HESA, 2023).

ii. Investing in understanding

We will also work with our student population to learn about and tackle this issue in the years to come. First, we will collate and review the recent body of staff- and student- generated evidence on the Black student experience at Durham University, so that we fully understand effective interventions to build belonging on campus and address the ethnicity awarding gap. From this, we will draw a series of recommendations and create an action plan to address the ethnicity awarding gap over the remaining years of the plan.

As with the multi-intervention programme in Intervention strategy 2, this intervention will be co-designed together with a panel of Black heritage Durham University staff and students. Across the literature, there is a consensus that an intervention for improving the experience of Black students should be informed by the students themselves and should work in some form of co-design or creation (UUK & NUS, 2019). Institutions are also recommended to create opportunities for students and staff to engage in meaningful conversations about race and its implications in Higher Education.

iii. Culturally sensitive counselling

Sector evidence shows that students who report a mental health condition have some of the lowest continuation and attainment rates, with an OfS report from 2019 showing that the degree attainment gap between Black and white students with a mental health condition was, at that time, at 26.8 percentage points (OfS, 2019). A meta-analysis from 2022, which looked at the experiences that affect the mental health of Black students, found that Black students may experience cultural isolation and separation while at university, racism, and academic pressures from their wider community (Stoll, Yalipende, & Byrom et al, 2022). As such, the OfS calls for any support programmes aimed at Black students to be delivered in a culturally competent manner (OfS, 2019). At Durham, we will continue to work with Nilaari, a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic

lead community-based charity, to provide access to culturally appropriate mental health support for students.

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Intervention strategy 4: Continuation and degree outcomes for students with a reported disability

This intervention strategy aims to reduce the continuation and attainment gap for students with a reported disability, compared to those with no reported disability. This requires the development of pre-arrival and/or transition support programmes. We will develop and deliver bespoke transition to Durham days for those who will benefit from support to develop routines/stability during studies and/or who might find socialising challenging in a new environment. This will expand upon DU's existing early arrival programme for autistic students. This is one of three key areas highlighted by TASO as being effective for reducing equality gaps for disabled students. There is evidence that transitions support can be effective for enabling disability inclusion.

Evidence base and rationale:

Though the last decade has seen a significant growth in the disabled student population in secondary-aged population, disabled students remain under-represented in university access and are often less satisfied with their Higher Education experiences (DSUK, 2022; OfS, 2020). Students with disabilities are also more likely to drop out of university study, have lower grades and degree outcomes, and are proven to have worse employment outcomes than their peers who do not have disabilities (OfS, 2020; Hubble & Bolton, 2021; Barkas et al., 2020).

The context in which universities provide student support and wellbeing services is rapidly changing. Concerns about the mental health of students have risen sharply up the higher education agenda. Office for National Statistics data in 2021 presented a dramatic rise in mental health conditions of students. Universities are experiencing increasing expectations on duty of

care, with enhanced expectations amongst external stakeholders (UK Government, OfS, parents, media) in terms of how, and the extent to which, universities should support students. The Covid 19 Pandemic has also driven a need for flexibility in delivery. The shift to online rather than in person appointments has proved popular but also blurred boundaries between term and vacation time requests for support. The core drivers for Durham to change its student support and wellbeing services include:

- Increasing demand from students (and their key influencers) due to the growth in student numbers, rising from 17,500 in 2015/16 to over 22,000 in 2021/22; increasing disclosure by students of mental health and disabilities; and increased expectation of external stakeholders including parents, government and media.
- Increasing complexity of need amongst those students presenting for support due to higher incidence of mental health problems and disabilities; increased diversity in student demographics; a greater mix of students on and off campus and in different time zones; and diversity in student preferences in how, when and where they engage with the university.
- Increasing level of risk as a result of increased demand and complexity. This includes risks to individual students from impaired academic progress to physical and mental ill health, and in some circumstances self-harm and/or suicide. There is also the risk to groups, the impact of severe cases on student peer groups or staff, potentially leading to stress and sickness absence.

Lack of consistent and comprehensive student support data to drive the development and delivery of the support services. There was limited data currently available on waiting times and demand for the services and there was no student relationship management system where this could be easily accessed and evaluated. This made it very difficult to ensure services are fit for purpose.

Students with a disability perform well at Durham University compared to the overall sector – 95% of disabled students continue with their studies, compared to 90% across the sector (OfS. 2023). However, there is a 2.7 % gap in continuation for Durham University students with a reported disability compared to students with no known disability. It is important that this gap gets smaller and does not worsen, so we are committed to building on and improving our already successful approaches to supporting students with disabilities. This is also important as we've seen a dramatic rise in the amount of the undergraduate population in the UK reporting a disability in recent years, with a 47% rise in students with disabilities since the 2014/15 academic year (HESA 2019/2020). If the population of disabled students continue to rise, we need to ensure that they have enough support to access and succeed at university.

Our interventions:

i. Enhanced student support model

We are investing £1.3 m (annually) in a new Student Support model. This includes dedicated support roles within our academic departments. Our new Student Support Officers provide support to ensure students engage effectively in their academic studies. They are also the Department Disability Representatives, working closely with our Disability Support Service, to ensure Disability Support Plans are implemented in our academic departments. We have undertaken an extensive review of the Implementation of Disability Support Plans (DSP) process and have a robust process in place to ensure students with disabilities are effectively supported to succeed in their studies.

ii. Bespoke pre-arrival days

Transition support is a key area highlighted by TASO as effective for reducing equality gaps for disabled students. Though there is little evidence from the UK in this area, there are several US examples of transition support, where support for disabled students is a legal requirement (TASO, 2023). Some studies have shown that such transition programmes are effective for students in the

US: Safer et al (2020) found that US university students who used targeted support services were more likely to continue their studies and achieve better grades, especially if they accessed this support in their first term of university study. Ultimately, there is limited evidence on what specifically works in transition programmes for disabled students, especially in a UK context.

Across the sector, there are a few programmes aimed specifically at students with disabilities: University of Warwick, for example, hold a bespoke transition programme for students on the autistic spectrum, and the University of Derby hold a specific two-day transition event for students with disabilities before they arrive at university.

At Durham University, we will develop bespoke pre-arrival days for disabled students. This will build on Durham University's existing pre-arrival support for autistic students, expanding and scaling to meet demand. The programme will focus on activity to support students to develop routines/stability during studies, as well as those who might find socialising challenging in a new environment.

iii. Institutional approaches to inclusion

Taking institutional approaches to disability inclusion, such as organising staff training or peer-to-peer support, is one of the key recommendations suggested by TASO for improving the experience of students with disabilities. TASO also acknowledge that more sector evidence on the efficacy of different training approaches is needed in this area (TASO, 2023).

There has been evidence of programmes like these across the sector: Teesside University, for example, have implemented an online training module aimed at raising confidence levels of all staff when interacting with students with existing and potential mental health conditions. The University of Southampton, too, are planning to implement a programme of autism-focussed training for academic and administrative staff. At Durham University, we will also design a programme of staff training, tailored to address staff understanding of and confidence in supporting students with mental health conditions and with autism.

Additionally, we will ensure Durham University staff are trained in, and have access to, digital accessibility initiatives and integrated assistive technology, taking a Universal Design for Learning approach. There is limited sector evidence on assistive technologies, but what we do have has shown that technologies have a positive impact on the educational outcomes of students with disabilities (McNicholl et al. 2020). TASO suggest that more research and evaluation is needed in this area. According to TASO, inclusive learning approaches promote equal access and equal opportunities for all students; for example, via changes to learning materials or the actual curriculum. Overall, there is not a good understanding of what inclusive practice is and how to facilitate it effectively within Higher Education.

Though there is limited evidence on the effectiveness of assistive technology, we can see many examples of their use to support students with disabilities across the sector: the University of Kent, for example, provide a package of support in this area, including integrated assistive technology on their learning platform, the ability to download documents in different formats (including MP3 files), and recording and providing captions on lectures. The University of Bath, too, are planning to implement a programme of digital accessibility technology.

iv. Support groups

Many of the existing sector interventions for disabled students focus on improving support at university level, and usually focus on peer-to-peer support. There is some evidence that peer-led interventions have a positive impact on the wellbeing of students. In particular, students with autism might benefit from peer support, as the literature shows that a common concern amongst students with autism is a lack of understanding amongst the wider student and staff population of their differences (Gurbuz et al., 2019). Though there is a smaller amount of evidence on the impact

of peer support on autistic students in Higher Education, a study conducted on school leavers showed allowing students to experience and explore autistic culture and spend time with their peers is associated with positive emotional outcomes (Crompton et al, 2023). TASO do, however, flag that 'further work should be completed to evaluate peer-led interventions [...] as these approaches are often used with specific at-risk groups and show emerging evidence of promise' (TASO, 2023).

Several support groups are already in existence at Durham University, and we will establish further groups that are specifically aimed at students with autism and ADHD. There has been a significant increase in the volume of students presenting to Disability Support service at Durham University with ADHD or challenges associated with it. Despite this, the diagnosis process for ADHD can be arduous, and many students who report challenges that may be associated with ADHD will not be able to receive a diagnosis until after their studies. An ADHD-focused support group might offer support to these students, who are not able to access more formal routes of disability support.

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Intervention strategy 5: Degree outcomes for students with a reported mental health disability

The % Gap in degree attainment is wider for students with a mental health disability (compared to reported disability more broadly) and trend analysis indicates that it the gap could widen further. Therefore, specific interventions to support students with mental health difficulties are recommended. The numbers of students achieving firsts or 2:1s fluctuates year on year. Correspondingly, so does the % gap, albeit there's a slight downward trend we can cautiously observe. The intention here is to set a target that, if achieved, will see more consistency in the achievement of firsts and 2:1s by students with mental health difficulties and for the gap to be more consistently at the lower end of the existing range. This means 230 students with mental health disabilities achieving a first or 2:1 each year.

Evidence base and rationale:

Across the sector, students with mental health disabilities or difficulties are more likely to drop out of university, and less likely to earn good grades than their peers. We know that the numbers of students who report a mental health problem across the UK has risen significantly in recent years: the number of undergraduates with mental health difficulties rose from 6% to 16% between the 2016/17 and 2022/23 academic years. We also know that mental health is by far the main reason that undergraduates cite for considering dropping out of university – in sector-wide data, this is 25 percentage points higher than any other given explanation (TASO & KCL, 2023).

According to the OfS, students who declare a mental health condition are less likely to gain a 2:1 than their peers, and less likely to progress into skilled work or further study. At Durham University, we have noticed a gap in degree attainment between students with a mental health disability, compared to students who report other disabilities. Though the number of students achieving firsts or 2:1s fluctuates year on year, we can observe a slight downward trend in the number of students with mental health disabilities achieving these grades. Our interventions will aim to reduce this gap between students with mental health conditions and their peers.

There is an increasing reporting incidence of mental health and other disabilities among the student population. 20% of the student body now register a disability, of which mental health difficulties are now the largest category of disclosure. By necessity therefore, the focus of the Disability Support service has expanded to focus on support for students with long term mental health disabilities. Managing mental health risk amongst the student body is a key and growing challenge. Risk amongst those students presenting for support is increasing. It is very common for students presenting to the Counselling and Mental Health Service to report the use of self-harm to manage their mood, either historically or currently. Complexity amongst those students presenting for support is also increasing. For example, the number of students presenting with diagnosed Autistic Spectrum Conditions has increased by 140% over the last five years. These students are amongst those with the most complex support needs and often have co-morbid mental health difficulties. We currently employ 12.65 FTE in terms of permanent, dedicated mental health professionals (counsellors, psychological wellbeing practitioners and mental health advisers) which equates to a staff student ratio (SSR) of 1:1750 for specialist services. There is not a recognised SSR for student support capacity in Higher Education. The only reference to benchmarks found in the UK was via the British Association for Counselling & Psychotherapy which stated that: 'Traditionally, one full-time counsellor to 3,000 students/staff has been seen as minimum provision, although this may need to be revised according to the particular population the service covers and the percentage uptake.'⁴ (BACP, 2017). This was felt to be too high when taking into account current demand. The project reached out to UK University counselling networks, but institutions were unwilling to share this data. Looking internationally, the International Accreditation of Counselling Services in the USA states 'Every effort should be made to maintain minimum staffing ratios in the range of one F.T.E. professional staff member (excluding trainees) to every 1,000 to 1,500 students, depending on services offered and other campus mental health agencies'⁵ (IACS, (no date)). In consultation with stakeholders this was felt to be more appropriate in terms of managing demand and risk and so the project set a working assumption of 1:1500 as an upper limit, on which it would strive to improve where it could. To help with demand, our permanent

staffing is bolstered using agency staff. However, whilst this has provided additional capacity, it has limitations as agency resource misses some of the value-added activity of permanent staff in terms of group work development, continuous improvement and consistency of the student experience. Therefore, to make space for more value-added activity, such as targeted work with students with mental health disabilities as they transition into the University, as well as to reduce waiting list times and therefore reduce risk to students, we recommended investment in our specialist services including increasing capacity in counselling, mental health and disability support services.

Our interventions:

i. Enhanced student support model

As explained in intervention 4, this investment aims to provide support throughout the University ecosystem for students who need additional support. The investment in roles enables each department to have a specific Disability Representative, and help students access other specialist support services. A role specific training plan will ensure all staff involved in student support have the right skills and knowledge to perform their role with confidence and that students receive consistent, high-quality support. This incorporates training for over 150 people across 11 teams on processes, systems, student communications and change support. A programme of process reviews will mean that staff and students have easy access to clear guidance, providing better consistency.

ii. Supporting mental health through partnership

This intervention strategy also includes various links and partnerships with NHS services. Sector evidence shows that links between the NHS and universities improve pathways to support students, especially students who are experiencing mental health problems. One example is the Liverpool Liaison Model is a bridging network and service situated between HE providers and NHS services. This model includes two services – the Student Liaison Service, which helps to support students as they access care services, and a service providing therapeutic support to students presenting with self-harming behaviours, delivered through a collaboration between local HE providers and the NHS Trust.

Working along similar lines, Durham University will continue to work closely with several NHS Services, including NHS talking therapies, County Durham's Rape, Sexual Assault, and Counselling Centre, and the local NHS Eating Disorders Service. Our partnerships and links with these services will be managed by the Functional Leadership Team and will include working with these services to fund counselling, design guidance, and engage with students.

iii. Mental health support website

Designed for any student living with mental health difficulties, Durham University's mental health support website provides information and resources around university life, what support is available and information on how to manage mental health and wellbeing at university. As part of its expansion, the website will be supplemented by events for students with pre-existing mental health conditions. This will be an opportunity to provide information on transferring care, what support is available, and to hear students' stories and ask questions.

There is evidence in the sector for online mental health support as part of mental health provision in Higher Education – a scoping review on digital mental health interventions that have been designed specifically for students in higher education describes their utility in bridge the gap in providing mental health support to students, and reducing the burden on mental health services in higher education institutions (Oti & Pitt, 2021). indeed the Office for Students provides funding for Student Space, an online platform providing vital mental health and wellbeing resources, as well as one-to-one text and web chat support services (Department for Education, 2024).

iv. Mind management workshops

In collaboration with students, and facilitated by mental health professionals, Durham University will deliver an annual suite of mind management workshops based on CBT principles. The aim of these workshops would be to provide additional support for those who are at risk of under-performing academically due to their mental health. The TASO guidance for what works for students with mental health problems states that 'psychological and mindfulness-based interventions appear to have the strongest underlying evidence base'. However, TASO suggest that this evidence base still comes up short, as 'more longitudinal studies are needed to establish the longer-term impact of these interventions on student mental health and wellbeing, and on specific outcomes such as attainment, retention and progression' (Robertson, Mulcahy & Baars, 2022).

Sector evidence also shows that interventions that are informed by CBT principles have positive effects on generalised anxiety disorder, depression, eating disorders, social and emotional skills, self-perceptions, and emotional stress. A meta-analysis conducted by Huang et al (2018), for example, found strong causal evidence that CBT-based interventions are effective in addressing anxiety and depression. There are several other studies that show a positive link between CBT-informed interventions and mental health (Goodmon et al., 2016; Hirshberg, 2017; Schoeps, de la Barrera and Montoya-Castilla, 2020).

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Intervention strategy 6: Continuation, completion and degree outcomes for mature students

Mature students perform well at Durham in terms of continuation (~90%), compared to the sector (84%). Correspondingly, the % Gap at Durham is also smaller than the sector mean but some of our key competitors have smaller gaps. However, Durham performs less strongly in terms of the completion rate for mature students (~82% completion, which is a 16.3% Gap compared to younger students). The targets for mature students are to reduce the % Gap for continuation to 5.0%, completion to 11.5%, and degree outcomes to 5.0%. Interventions therefore need to focus on transition / early support. There is a clear need to ensure mature students are supported through to graduation.

Evidence base and rationale:

Sector evidence shows that mature students are more likely to drop out of their course and also tend to have poorer degree outcomes than younger students (OfS, 2021). A smaller proportion of mature students achieve a 2:1 or a First than their peers, and often report struggling to 'fit in' to the university environment.

According to TASO, mature learners face many additional challenges on campus, especially around emotional belonging, as well as their perceptions of their identity as undergraduate students. Mature students may have caring or career responsibilities that they feel set them apart from the 'typical' 18-year-old school leaver. TASO recommend that universities think about how they can increase or foster a sense of belonging among mature students and consider how they might be able to offer affordable, flexible programme options to help mature students better access and succeed on their courses.

Mature students at Durham University continue their studies at a higher rate (90%) than the sector average for mature students (84%). Completion rates, however, stand at 82% for mature students, which is a 16.3% percentage point gap when we compare to younger students at Durham University. Our intervention strategy is designed to narrow the existing gaps in continuation, completion, and attainment, with a particular focus on increasing belonging among mature students. We will create a central support capability for these students, including establishing a mature student-specific role in our widening participation team. We will also initiate a programme specifically aimed at providing support, as well as information, advice and guidance, for mature students.

Students spend a significant amount of time in their academic department, and it is therefore inevitable that student support issues are raised there. For some, more often PGT or PGR, students in Purpose-Built Student Accommodation (PBSAs) that are not or may never become actively engaged with their college, their interaction with the University comes primarily through academic departments. The same can be true for mature students. However, this was not reflected in our model for student support. Support issues were picked up by staff in departments who did not always have appropriate training and were unaware of how to signpost, so students did not consistently receive an efficient and effective response.

Support for academic progression is delivered through the allocation of academic (e.g. academic advisers and programme directors) and some PSS (e.g. L&T teams, PGR Coordinators) time. The

roles differ in each department, making it challenging to ensure all staff have the knowledge and expertise to support students, leading to inconsistent and sometimes inaccurate advice being given, creating a poor student experience. It requires significant senior PSS and academic staff time to navigate processes, rectify errors, rather than higher value activities such as proactive support. Academic advisers are required to foster good working relationships with their students through a focus on academic support and guidance, feedback on academic performance and advice on study choices. However, the addition of dedicated student support capacity would reduce workload on academic staff by significant reduction in their requirements to deliver student support administration and welfare related activities.

Dedicated academic support is already available in DCAD where the majority of students on the Foundation Programme are from backgrounds of socio-economic and educational disadvantage and have particular support needs to help them transition successfully to degree programmes at Durham. Similar dedicated support has also been successfully piloted in the Geography Department. The combination of proactive support and detailed knowledge of specific programmes is a service that students in the project's student advisory group, chaired by the Student Union's Welfare and Liberation Officer, say they value. These roles deal almost exclusively with academic and department-facing issues so there is limited overlap with the remit of College welfare support. In Geography, this has proven to be a popular source of support with 223 face to face meetings in 19/20. 84% of those students had not consulted with their college prior to speaking with them. This shows that there is a precedent for the use of this type of model.

Following extensive consultation with stakeholders across the university including the SU led Student Advisory Group and taking learning from the pilot in Geography and role in DCAD, it is proposed that dedicated student support capacity is added into departments (coordinated by Faculties) which will complement and augment the existing provision in colleges and the specialist central services. Given most student support cases present both academic and pastoral issues, it is essential the three complementary dedicated services within the model (Student Support and Wellbeing Directorate, Colleges and Faculties and Departments) work in unison and are resourced to do so. The proposed dedicated capacity will work closely with pastoral support leads in colleges, with specialist support at the centre and with curriculum, learning and assessment services in the Academic Office and staff in departments on matters of academic progression. The format of the support also needs to be adaptable to reflect a direction of travel for more interdisciplinary programmes. In considering the options for dedicated capacity, the project considered the responsibilities of a role both with and without management responsibility and the numbers of students and departments to be supported.

Our interventions:

i. Dedicated “mature learners” coordinator

The first activity in this intervention strategy is to create a central support capability for mature students, and at least one role to coordinate, advocate for and represent mature students so that they can access the support they require. In a survey designed by TASO in 2021, mature students said that they preferred Higher Education institutions that make a concerted effort to support older students in policies and practice. This might include ‘the presence of a designated staff member whose role [is] to support mature students’ (TASO, 2021). Though TASO recognises that more research needs to be done in this area, creating a specific staff role will allow Durham University to learn about the mature student cohort, and their needs.

The dedicated mature learners coordinator will act as pastoral support, but also to support students to navigate university structures and policies as their circumstances require, as well as signposting/referring to mental health or academic skills services as needed. In 2020, the Office for Students emphasised the importance of prioritising mature student access and success, and recognising that mature students are not a homogenous, singular group and instead have more complex needs than 18-year-old undergraduate students. This staff role will allow Durham to contribute to the sector-wide evidence on mature students. (Office for Students, 2020)

There is some sector-wide evidence that transition programmes and information, advice and guidance interventions may be helpful in equipping mature students to navigate the unfamiliar world of Higher Education. Transition programmes are particularly effective for mature students when they are delivered flexibly, in a way that helps mature students balance their transition programme with other, competing priorities.

Access to study support is important for mature students: studies show that interventions that include academic skill support are effective, including short online courses for mature students held at the Open University, and a general study on the importance of literacy and numeracy skills for British adults held by the Department for Education (Butcher et al, 2015; Hume et al, 2019). At Durham University, mature students will be able to access academic transition activity, as discussed in Intervention strategy 1.

ii. Support network

An evidence review by TASO (Gongadze, Styrnol & Hume, 2021), found that Mature learners can face many different kinds of challenges related to identity and belonging in HE institutions, particularly around feelings of “age disconnect” with younger peers. At Durham University, we will create a supportive network of staff and peers for mature students, in order to address this disconnect. The development of this network will be led by the Mature Learners coordinator, in collaboration with Durham University Mature Students’ Association. This network will have a supportive function for mature students, as well as running regular events to foster belonging and build staff-student relationships. An Irish study found that this type of peer-focused activity can be helpful for mature students: these groups, especially when they are long-term, result in better social connection for mature students and an easier transition into Higher Education (Downey, Cunningham, & Buggy, 2023). Similarly, an Australian study highlighted connections and relationships with staff as fundamental to mature learners’ sense of belonging (Crawford et al., 2022).

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Intervention strategy 7 - Increasing Belonging (an overarching intervention strategy to increase sense of belonging for all Durham University's identified priority groups)

Research from Anthropology Network of First-Generation Students found that across all but one domain (college support), home students from less-advantaged backgrounds reported significantly greater levels of exclusion than those from more-advantaged backgrounds or international students. The effect sizes were large and held after controlling for other variables (gender, sexuality, religious faith, ethnic background, age, disability, and year of study). Students from Northern England, and especially those from the Northeast, also experienced significantly greater levels of exclusion across four domains, even after accounting for the strong association between socioeconomic background and (UK) region of origin. In other words, coming from a less socioeconomically advantaged background and coming from the Northeast were independently associated with experiences of exclusion at Durham University. Several protected characteristics were associated with experiences of exclusion, most notably female gender, LGBTQ+ identity, and having a disability.

After discussing solutions to this problem, the APP Student Advisory Board (APPSAB) agreed that the focus should be on improving peer-to-peer inclusion and that whether students felt a sense of belonging with their college was pivotal to their overall sense of belonging, because colleges were a fundamental part of the wider support networks at Durham. Therefore, it was agreed that the pot should be focused at college- and department-level, but should be spent with agreement from the Students' Union or an association connected to the relevant target group, to ensure joined up thinking. This will be a student-led intervention strand.

Evidence base and rationale:

A rapid review by TASO (Thomson et al., 2022) suggests that university students with a higher sense of belonging are more likely to persist with their studies (Hausmann et al., 2007) and have higher academic achievement (Walton & Cohen, 2007). This is particularly important for students from underrepresented backgrounds, who have been shown to respond well to belonging-related interventions. A recent project at a post-92 university in the North of England highlighted how co-creation projects can add value to sense-of-belonging and community-building for students (Shakir & Siddiquee, 2023).

In this intervention strategy, Durham University will create college- and department-level innovation funds for student-led sense of belonging initiatives. Proposed programmes will have increased belonging as their primary objective and will consider the needs of each of our priority groups. We will also ensure that colleges work with the Students' Union to design and run these activities.

We know that emotional belonging is a barrier from students from our target groups at Durham University. Research from Anthropology Network of First-Generation Students found that across all but one domain (college support), home students from less-advantaged backgrounds reported significantly greater levels of exclusion than those from more-advantaged backgrounds or international students (Capannola & Johnson, 2022).

We also know that there are regional differences when it comes to the experience of emotional belonging on campus. Students from Northern England, and especially those from the Northeast, also experienced significantly greater levels of exclusion across four domains, even after accounting for the strong association between socioeconomic background and (UK) region of origin. In other words, coming from a less socioeconomically advantaged background and coming from the Northeast were independently associated with experiences of exclusion at Durham University. Several protected characteristics were associated with experiences of exclusion, most notably female gender, LGBTQ+ identity, and having a disability.

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Expanded description of overarching evaluation methods

Activity	Outcomes	Method(s) of evaluation	Summary of publication plan
Evaluation of all on course strategies with sufficient sample sizes (including access courses for students who go on to attend Durham University).	For all relevant at-risk groups: Increased access to Durham. Reduced continuation gaps. Reduced completion gaps. Reduced awarding gaps. Associated intermediate measures listed in each separate evaluation strategy. In particular "sense of belonging".	Non-random control with pre and post-test/interrupted time-series design & multiple regression (quasi-experimental design). We will track students who took part in interventions across the whole student lifecycle (including Widening Access Programmes) and compare them to non-participants, controlling for measurable differences to compare like with like. Where sample sizes are small cohorts will be combined. (binary and continuous outcome measures e.g. continued or not; Year 1 marks, sense of belonging scores from validated survey). Where possible a difference in difference interrupted time series approach will be used to track the same students across time and dosage information will be included where appropriate. Interaction terms can be included if sufficient power (e.g. attainment and gender) (Type 3).	Annual report presents on website (December each year). Quasi-experimental design report shared with sector and/or academic paper as appropriate. Interim report December 2028, final December 2029).
Evaluation across all strategies in our plan.	Tested theories of change and enhanced evidence base.	Enhanced theories of change , including literature reviews and testing mechanisms using quantitative and qualitative evaluation findings (Type 1/ Type 2 & Type 3 evidence). One example of how this could be done is the "Policy Scientific Approach" (see Jones <i>et al</i> , 2014*) (Type1/Type2)	Enhanced theories of change will be staggered across all strategies (Reports: 1 or 2 a year Dec 2026 to Dec 2029 on website and shared with sector). These will be updated as Type 3 evidence becomes available.

*Reference: Jones, K., & Tymms, P. (2014). Ofsted's role in promoting school improvement: The mechanisms of the school inspection system in England. *Oxford Review of Education*, 40(3), 315-330. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2014.911726>

Annex C: Targets, investment and fees

The OfS will append the information from the fees, investment and targets document when an access and participation plan is published.

