

Durham University Access and Participation Plan: Core Theories of Change (2025–2029)

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Abstract

This article outlines the Core Theories of Change (TOCs) underpinning Durham University's Access and Participation Plan (APP) for 2025–2029. TOCs provide strategic frameworks that map how specific interventions are expected to lead to desired outcomes and long-term impact. Using TASO's model, nine Core TOCs are presented, aligned with seven intervention strategies targeting pre-16 and post-16 outreach, transition support, disability inclusion, mature learners, ethnicity heritage-specific programmes and belonging. These TOCs offer strategic clarity, guidance for programme design, and support robust evaluation. They are not static and evolve over time with emerging evidence. As the APP progresses, these Core TOCs will evolve into Enhanced TOCs with detailed causal mechanisms and 'if–then' logic statements, forming the basis for rigorous evaluation frameworks. This article marks the first formal output of the APP evaluation plan and contributes to sector-wide evidence building on equality of opportunity.

Keywords

Access and Participation Plan; Theory of Change; Higher Education; Widening Participation; Evaluation Framework; TASO TOC Model; Equality of Opportunity.

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Introduction

Durham University's Access and Participation Plan (APP) presents details of one of the university's key strategic aims - to enhance equality of opportunity at Durham, and across the sector. It includes details of analysis highlighting the key risks to equality of opportunity in our context at Durham, our strategic aims and objectives, and associated targets. It also presents a programme of activities/interventions, along with rigorous evaluation plans aimed at investigating their impact. The full plan details seven intervention strategies to be rolled across the academic years of 2025/26 to 2028/29. A copy of the plan can be found here:

https://www.durham.ac.uk/visit-us/schools/access-engagement/access-and-participation-plans/

This report is the first output from the APP Evaluation Plan. It sets out the Core Theories of Change that underpin the interventions in our APP. The first sections of this report will present a definition of a Core Theory of Change, explain the key elements of our TOCs and how we use them to inform our ongoing development, evaluation and reporting. The main section of the report presents nine Core Theories of Change that underpin our APP's seven intervention strategies. The penultimate section of the report explains how we will develop these Core Theories of Change further into Enhanced Theories of Change across the span of this current APP and how these are then linked to our Evaluation Plans/Frameworks to test the effectiveness of our interventions. The final section includes the references for citations included in the report. Theories of Change are not static but are constantly changing and adapting as further evidence and literature comes to light. This report is a snapshot in time as we begin the new APP round.

Definition of a Theory of Change (TOC)

TASO, an independent organisation that supports the higher education sector in evidence building and evaluation aimed at reducing equality gaps, defines a Theory of change as:

"A visual representation of how an intervention's activities contribute to the intended outcomes and impact" (TASO)

A "Core" Theory of change is an overarching, high-level summary of an intervention and its activities and the change we want to see. An "Enhanced" Theory of Change is a more detailed TOC outlining individual assumptions, mechanisms and logic models that link each element of the intervention to the change we want to see. At this stage in the APP we present our initial Core TOCs. This is the first version of these live documents that change throughout the APP process and will develop to become more detailed over time. They may also adapt as evidence informs what aspects of the interventions work well or not well. There are many models for presenting TOCs, but common key elements are listed below.



Key elements of a Theory of Change

We have used TASO's Core Theory of Change template to present our TOCs, set out in the format illustrated *Figure 1* below. This model presents the following key elements*:

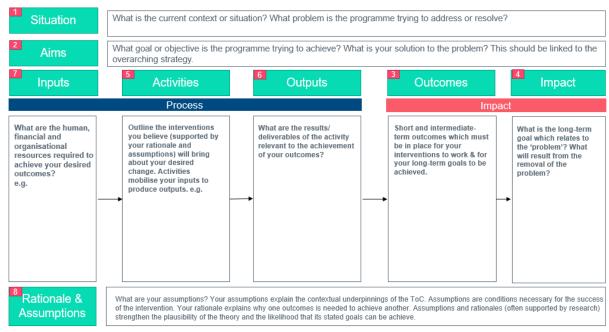
- 1. *Situation:* A problem statement that describes specific issue or inequality that the intervention is aiming to address.
- 2. *Aims:* The goal or objective the programme is trying to achieve. What a solution to the situation would look like.
- 3. *Outcomes:* The changes you hope or expect to see as a result of the activities, including changes in behaviour, attitudes, skills, engagement, or attainment.
- 4. *Impact:* The long-term goal or systemic change you are hoping to bring about, or contribute to, through your intervention. The targets you want to reach.
- 5. *Activities:* The specific actions or activities that will be delivered through the intervention. The activities mobilise the inputs to produce outputs.
- 6. *Outputs:* The results/deliverables of the activity relevant to the achievement of the outcomes.
- 7. *Inputs:* The resources (human, financial and organisational) that are required to carry out the activities, and reach the outcomes, as intended.
- 8. Rationale and Assumptions: The logical mechanisms underpinning why we expect an intervention to work and the conditions necessary for success. These mechanisms are often supported by research and indicate the likelihood that an intervention will be successful. (Where possible, at Durham University, we will write these as "if then" statements based on literature i.e. If this event happens, then we expect to see this outcome)

(Based on TASO's Core TOC Guidance and Resources available at: https://taso.org.uk/libraryitem/core-theory-of-change/)



Figure 1: TASO's Core Theory of Change Template





The Role of Theories of Change in Ongoing Development and Evaluation Reporting

- 1. Strategic Clarity: To help stakeholders understand the purpose of activities/interventions and the evidence supporting them.
- 2. *Practical Planning:* To inform programme design, including activity selection, data collection methods, and sample size considerations.
- 3. Evaluation and Feedback: To inform and work alongside evaluation designs and plans.
- 4. Annual Reporting: Insights from yearly reports guide adjustments in future iterations (for example the Pre-16 MIP pilot informed Year 1 rollout).
- 5. Evidence generation: Where possible, final impact reports aim to establish causal and/or rigorous evidence of the effectiveness of interventions, with the potential to influence national and international practice through publications in HEEL and peer reviewed journal articles (e.g. the Boliver and Jones (2024) paper on contextual offers).



List of Theories of Change and how they relate to the intervention strategies in our APP

This section of the report presents the nine Core Theories of Change related to our APP's seven intervention strategies. Any citations used in the Core Theories of Change are presented in the Reference Section. They are as follows:

Figure 2: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 1a - Pre-16 Multi-Intervention Programme (MIP)

Figure 3: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 1b - KS5 Multi-Intervention Programme (MIP)

Figure 4: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 1.2 - Transition Support

Figure 5: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 2 - Asian Heritage Multi-Intervention Programme (MIP)

Figure 6: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 3 - Black Heritage Multi-Intervention Programme (MIP)

Figure 7: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 3 - Investing in Understanding (Black Heritage)

Figure 8: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 4/5 - Bespoke prearrival days (Disability)

Figure 9: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 6 - Dedicated mature learners' coordinator

Figure 10: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 7 - Increasing Belonging



Transforming Access

Figure 2: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 1a - Pre-16 Multi-Intervention Programme (MIP)

TASO IS1a: Pre-16 Multi-Intervention Programme Theory of Change **Durham** and Student Outcomes University in Higher Education The proportion of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds at Durham University is smaller than the sector as a whole Situation The continuation rates of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds at Durham is lower than those from less deprived areas. For students in TUNDRA Q1 & students eligible for free school meals... Aims Reduce attainment gaps at GCSE and improve attitudes/aspirations towards Durham University and HE in general. (Intermediate aims) Improve access to Durham and high tariff universities and improve continuation gaps when at Durham. (Long-term aims) **Outputs** Inputs **Activities** Outcomes **Impact** Impact **Process** Design/deliver new pre-16 MIP Students will have had Intermediate Outcomes Long-term targets Resourcing the opportunity to: · Focus: attainment raising; improving · Improvements in attainment-· The intervention will be university preparedness; building positive To reduce the ratio of · Complete baseline related outcomes (e.g., cognitive, delivered by the perceptions of HE/Durham University; TUNDRA Q5:1 from 3.6 to strategies, critical thinking). tests/survevs Schools, Outreach and North-East focus. 2.7 by 2028/29 · Improvements in attainment at · Attend campus visits Widening Participation · Y7 and Y10 pupils in 24/25 & scale up to To increase enrolments of Team. The total FTE is Receive information. Y8, Y9 and Y11 from 25/26 onwards with a Increased academic self-efficacy, entrants eligible for FSM 21.3. advice and guidance total 200 students per year group each knowledge of HE, HE from 9/1% to 10.5% of the Receive academic skills expectations, and sense of · We have estimated the UG student population by development belonging. non-pay cost of the Target schools with high proportions of 2028/29 Receive near-peer intervention to be students from TUNDRA Q1 and/or eligibility mentoring To reduce the gap in Long term outcomes £432k over a five-year · Attend the Scholars for Free School Meals. continuation rates between period. Programme Activities: Information, Advice and To feed progression to KS5 MIP students from IMD Q5 Complete post Guidance (IAG); campus visits; academic and transition interventions at postcodes and IMD Q1 surveys/GCSEs skills development; near-peer mentoring; postcodes from 7.2 to 4.2 Transition to KS5 MIP as Progression to Durham University The Brilliant Club's Scholars Programme by 2028/29 appropriate and participation in HE in general. twice during the programme. If students attend a multi-intervention outreach programme, then they will have improved aspirations and attitudes towards Higher Education, and this will lead to higher Rationale & access to HE (TASO, 2023; e.g. UniConnect & the Access Project showed greater likelihood of progressing to HE). If students receive individually tailored IAG then their **Assumptions** attitudes and aspirations towards HE will improve (TASO, 2023), If students receive academic peer mentoring, then their attainment and attitudes/aspirations towards HE will

improve (EEF in TASO, 2023). If students attend the Scholars Programme, then their attainment will improve (The Brilliant Club)



Figure 3: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 1b - KS5 Multi-Intervention Programme (MIP)

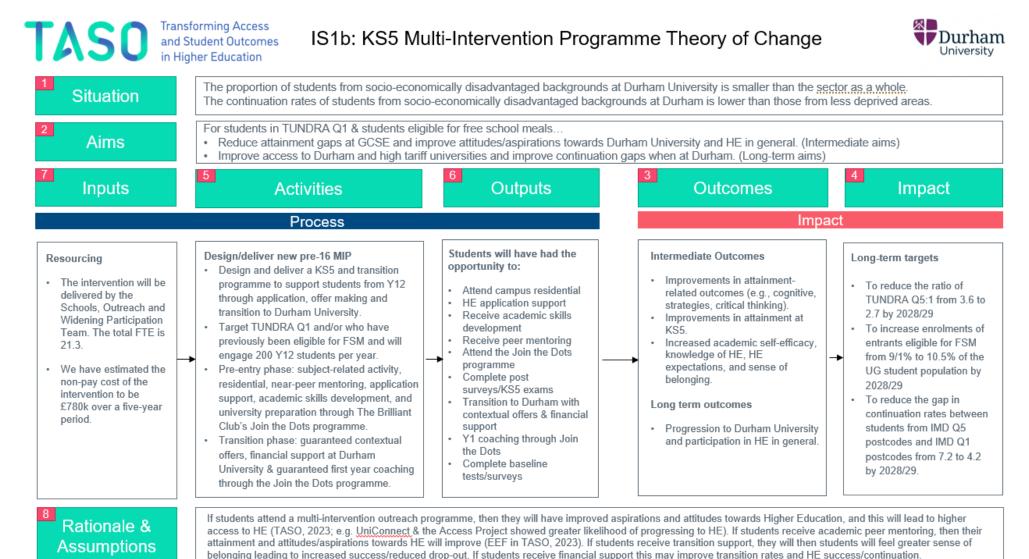




Figure 4: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 1.2 - Transition Support

Transforming Access TAS0 **Durham** IS1.2: Durham University Transition Support: Theory of Change and Student Outcomes University in Higher Education The proportion of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds at Durham University is smaller than the sector as a whole. Situation The continuation rates of students from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds at Durham is lower than those from less deprived areas. For students in TUNDRA Q1 & students eligible for free school meals... Aims Improve access to Durham and high tariff universities and improve continuation gaps when at Durham. (Long-term aims) **Inputs Activities Outputs Outcomes Impact Process** Impact Students will have had the Resourcing Long-term targets Design and deliver a new activity Intermediate Outcomes opportunity to: · We have estimated the · Improvements in attainment-· To reduce the ratio of With the Durham Centre for Academic pay cost of the · To attend subject specific related outcomes (e.g., cognitive, Development, a training programme will be TUNDRA Q5:1 from 3.6 to intervention to be transition support. strategies, critical thinking). developed for academic departments to design 2.7 by 2028/29 £259k over a five-vear Complete pre and post Improvements in attainment at To increase enrolments of and build pre- and in-sessional subject-specific period. surveys and open entrants eligible for FSM · The project will be transition support, focusing on general response items. Increased academic self-efficacy. supplemented by from 9/1% to 10.5% of the fundamental academic skills as well as knowledge of HE, HE Academic staff will have management and expectations, and sense of UG student population by department-specific skills, for all students steering from DCAD had the opportunity to: belonging. 2028/29 entering via contextual pathways. senior leadership. To reduce the gap in This provision will scale over time, to delivery support by To receive training on Longer term outcomes continuation rates between eventually reach 800 undergraduate students DCAD Student developing subject-Improved first year exam results students from IMD Q5 Success staff. per year. specific transition support. Improved continuation and · The total FTE is 13. postcodes and IMD Q1 success for students involved postcodes from 7.2 to 4.2 by 2028/29. 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 Rationale & 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 **Assumptions**

al, 2016; Grier-Reed, 2016; Cho et al., 2012), although there is no clear evidence the association is causal. 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).



Figure 5: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 2 - Asian Heritage Multi-Intervention Programme (MIP)

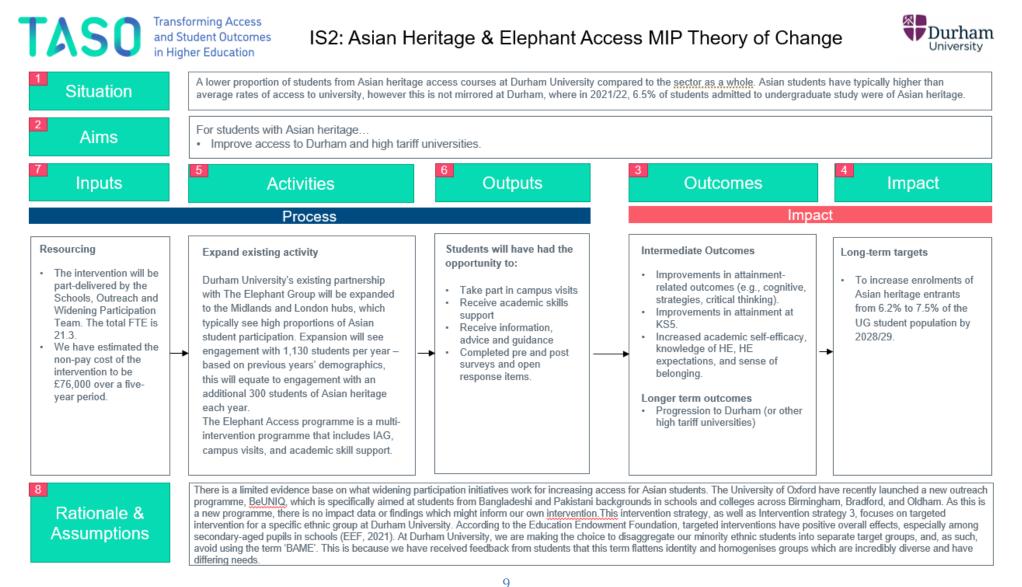




Figure 6: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 3 - Black Heritage Multi-Intervention Programme (MIP)

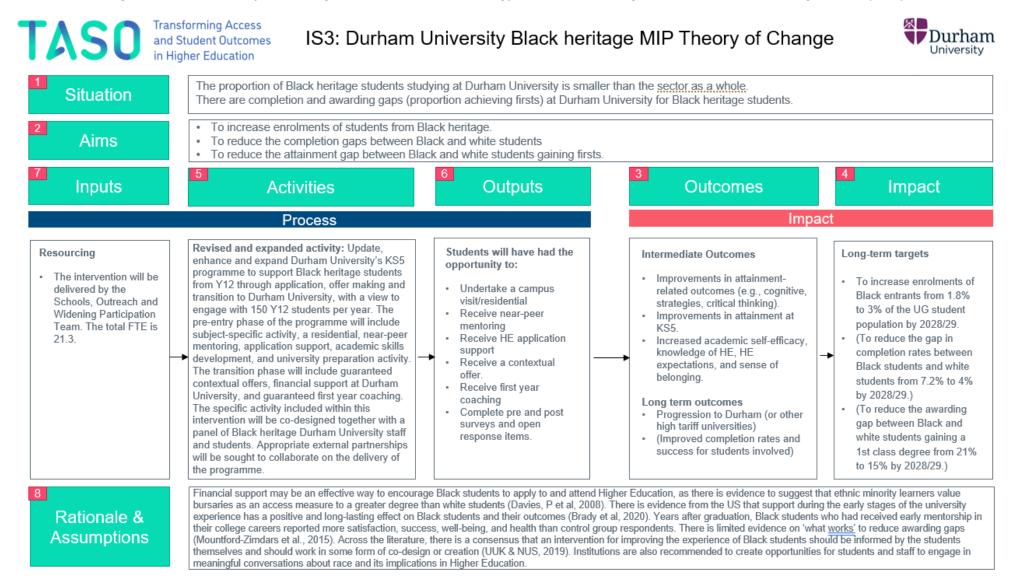




Figure 7: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 3 - Investing in Understanding (Black Heritage)

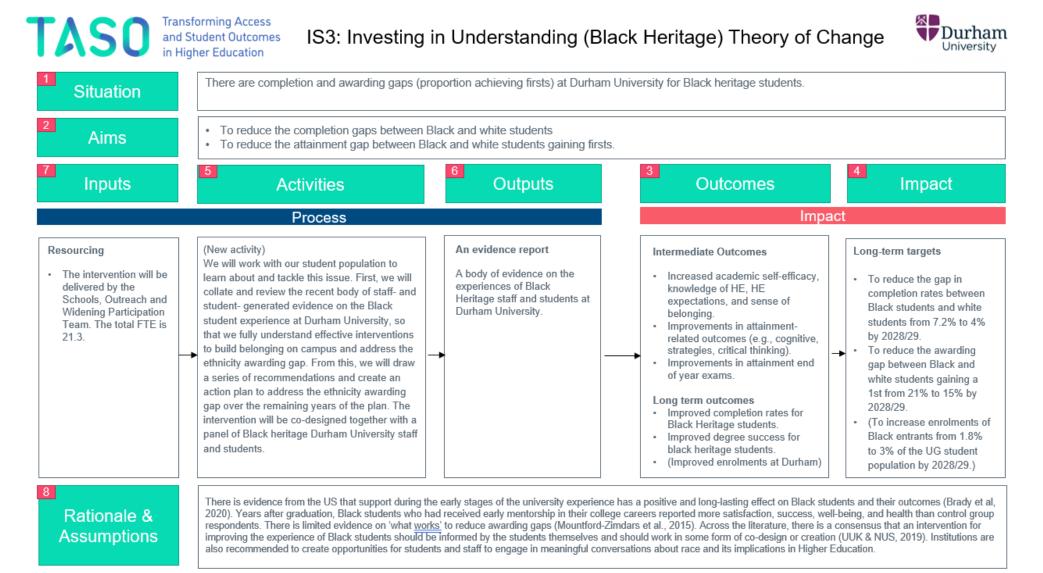




Figure 8: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 4/5 - Bespoke pre-arrival days (Disability)

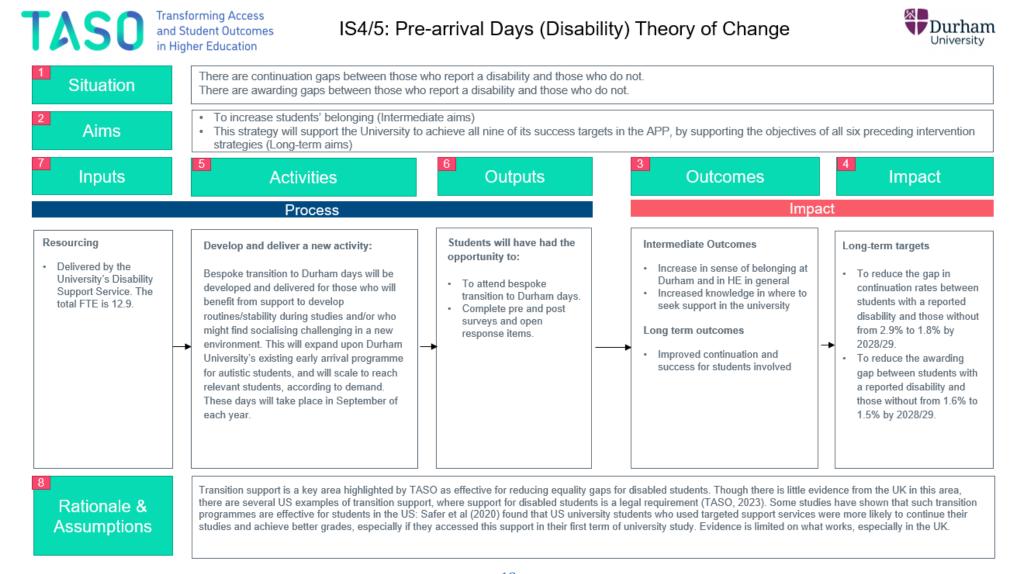




Figure 9: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 6 - Dedicated mature learners' coordinator

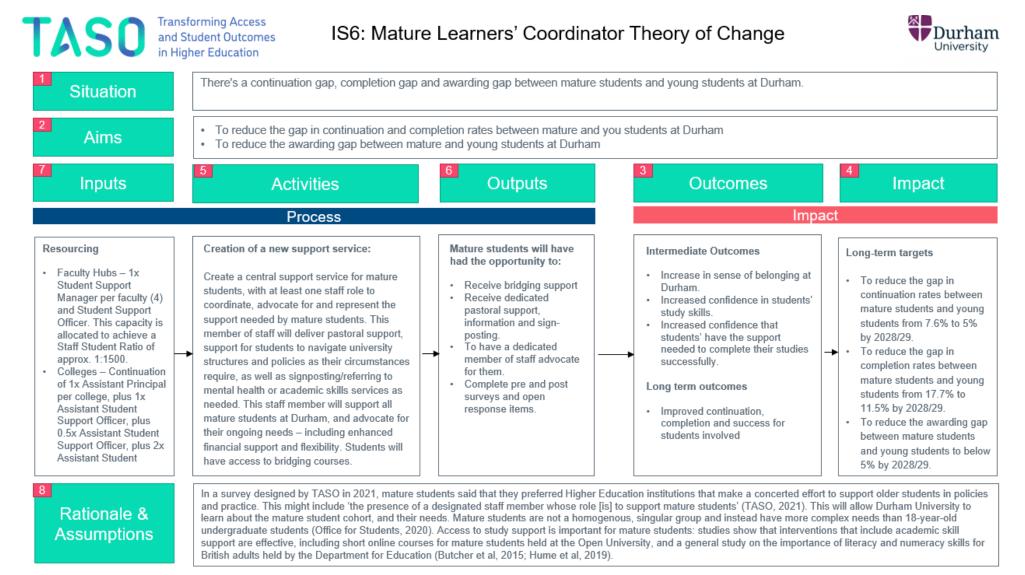
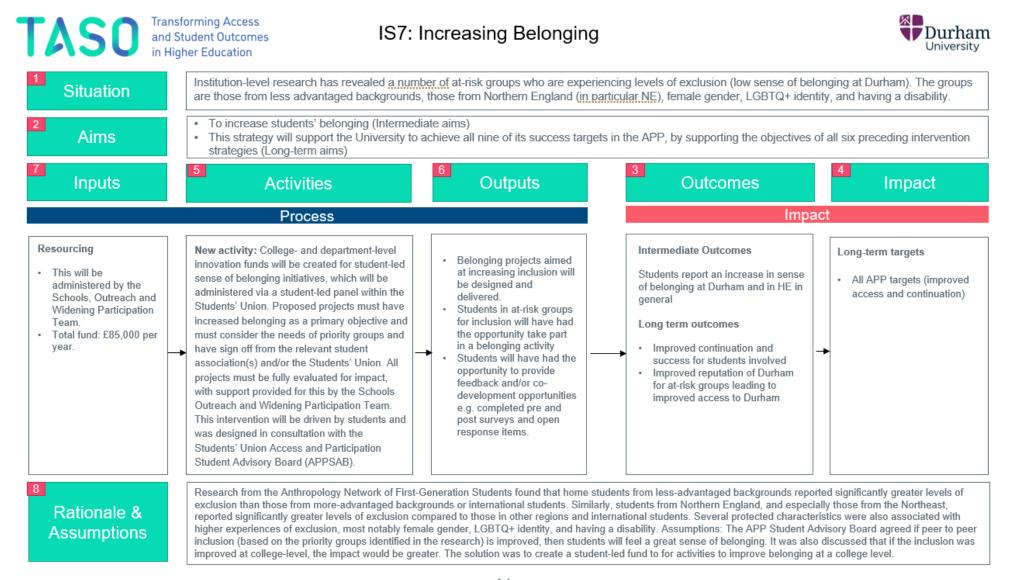




Figure 10: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 7 - Increasing Belonging





What next? Evaluation Plans and Enhanced Theories of Change

As the programmes develop throughout the APP period, the assumptions and rationale section will be developed further into more detailed mechanisms and causal pathways. These refinements aim to strengthen the programme's logic and evidence base. The mechanisms will be articulated using simple, testable "if-then" statements to clarify the expected causal relationships. For example:

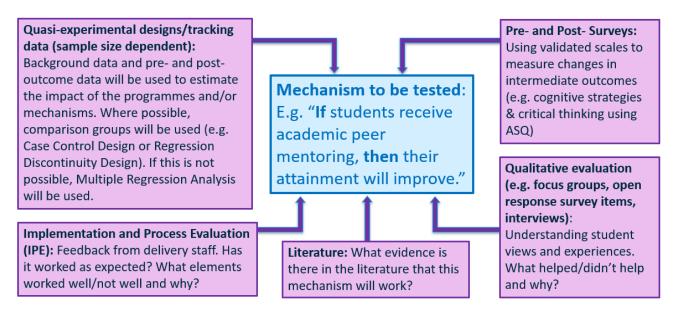
"If students receive academic peer mentoring, then their attainment will improve."

The collection of these mechanisms and causal pathways will form an Enhanced Theory of Change, offering a more granular and evidence-informed understanding of how programme activities lead to desired outcomes.

To assess the effectiveness of the intervention or mechanisms, an ambitious evaluation plan has been developed. This plan includes a range of evaluation designs that will be used to inform future iterations of the interventions and to provide evidence of what does and doesn't work.

An overview of the Evaluation Plan adopted by Durham University for the APP is shown in *Figure 11* below. The mechanism or intervention is in blue and the evaluation designs that we plan to use to evaluate them are in pink. The Framework will be adapted to each intervention/mechanism. Some interventions will be more focussed on literature and qualitative evidence on the understanding of student experience (e.g. the Investing in Understanding - Black Heritage), whilst others will focus on establishing causal evidence (e.g. the Pre-16 MIP).

Figure 11: Evaluation Plan using an example mechanism from the Pre-16 Multiintervention Programme





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