

# **What Works?**

## **Evaluation Impact Report [2022]**

### **University of Wolverhampton**

Matt Horton, Phil Gravestock, Ada Adeghe, Ruby Hart and  
Debra Cureton



# Forward by Professor Julia Clarke, Deputy Vice Chancellor, University of Wolverhampton

John Blake, the Director for Fair Access and Participation at the Office for Students, has gone on record to say that his top priority is “evaluation, evaluation, evaluation”. For the University of Wolverhampton our top priority is “inclusivity, inclusivity, inclusivity”. Yet evaluation would be up there as a close second along with “co-production, co-production, co-production”. It is only through testing, monitoring, adjusting and continuously improving our strategies that we will become more inclusive. And it is only through working in partnership with our students that we will become an institution where all feel they belong and have the chance to succeed.



Inclusivity underpins our mission as the University of Opportunity. The University attracts a highly diverse student population who bring with them their identities and interests from their own communities (local, regional, national, and international). Many are the first in their family to attend higher education and have to fit study into busy and complex lives, coming to university as mature students. We recognise our responsibility to adopt respectful behaviours, demonstrate that we care, and build an inclusive culture so that all of our students can succeed in meeting their full potential. The design and delivery of our courses has to be informed by students’ lived experiences and interests, thereby nurturing their sense of belonging.

Our Inclusive Curriculum Framework sets out the principles through which we enact and embed inclusivity, equity, and social justice in learning, teaching and assessment. All of the interventions described in this report are aligned to and infused by those principles: students seeing themselves in the curriculum, removing barriers, co-creation and developing our inclusive lens.

I offer my sincere thanks to all colleagues and students who have been involved in these projects, not just for all their time, energy, and commitment but also for their willingness to engage with the evaluation. Thank you.

# Contents

## Section 1

**Introduction**

3

**How are we Improving our Standards of Evidence?**

4

**Progress in Improving our Standards of Evidence**

5

## Section 2

**What Works? Summary of Evaluation Projects (21/22)**

6

**Evaluation of Academic Coaches** [Dr Chinyi Nzekwe-Excel and Matt Horton]

7-8

**Business School Curriculum Evaluation** [Sarah Williams, Alun Morris, and Matt Horton]

9-10

**An Evaluation of Student Transition and Success through Cross-Team Collaboration and Integrated Practice** [Dr Chinyi Nzekwe-Excel]

10-11

**Step Marking Pilot Evaluation** [Phil Gravestock and Colin Gibson]

11-12

**Financial Well-Being Evaluation Trial** [Kings College London and Social Care What Works Centre, Emma Stockdale, Matt Horton]

12

**Graduate Gains Exit Survey** [Matt Horton, Alun Morris, Colin Gibson, and Abi I'Anson]

12-13

## Introduction

---

The University of Wolverhampton has a diverse student population which includes a high proportion of mature students and individuals who are the first in their family to go to university. The University provides opportunities for significant numbers of disadvantaged students to study in HE and is a major contributor to widening participation across the HE sector. Once students enter the University, we are committed to ensuring that they are supported effectively and are able to achieve their full academic potential. We are committed to providing targeted support so that students will be more likely to: continue and complete their studies; achieve a good honours degree; and progress onto further study or graduate level employment. These strategic objectives are outlined within our Access and Participation Plan (APP), the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), Office for Students (OfS) outcome metrics and UoW Vision 2030.

We understand that in order for us to meet our strategic commitments across the student lifecycle, it is necessary to understand and appreciate which types of student support / interventions are most and least effective. Establishing 'what works' will enable us to effectively target our resources to improve student outcomes. The OfS, TASO (Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education) and the wider HE sector are endeavouring to improve evaluation standards of evidence and an emphasis has been placed upon the potential contribution that experimental approaches to evaluation can make to demonstrating the impact of different interventions. Improving our standards of evidence requires a whole institutional approach so that a robust culture of evaluation is embedded across the institution. Collecting and reflecting on the best evidence possible is critical to meeting our ambitions to improve outcomes for all students, closing performance gaps and enabling equitable outcomes for all students.

This report provides a summary of our progress with the task of embedding robust standards of evidence across student support interventions. In addition to considering our progress in this area, the report also describes a number of projects / interventions that have been developed specifically to support improvements in student success and progression outcomes. The strength of evidence relating to the impact of these projects<sup>1</sup> is considered. It is important that all evidential findings should be considered within the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic which has affected student outcomes. Where it has been possible, experimental methods have been incorporated into evaluation approaches with comparison groups used to provide some level of control for student characteristics.







---

<sup>1</sup> This report solely focuses on impact evaluations. The report does not summarise other work completed in 2021/22 such as reviews (e.g., 'what works for mature students?'), validation of toolkits to support learner analytics (e.g., the Careers Registration Survey) and the Belongingness Survey.

## How are we Improving our Standards of Evidence?

In 2019, the OfS published APP guidance for HEIs to develop improvements in the standards of evidence when evaluating projects / interventions. To support the development and implementation of these improvements the University employed an Evaluation Manager in late 2020. The Evaluation Manager and University Evaluation Group have strategically co-ordinated evaluation work across the institution in order to: embed a robust evaluation culture; improve standards of evidence; identify what works and what does not work in improving student outcomes; and gauge impact upon our strategic priorities. This work will play a pivotal role in improving equity of student outcomes and ensuring that our students are able to realise their full academic and personal potential. This work has been supported by the projects outlined in figure 1.

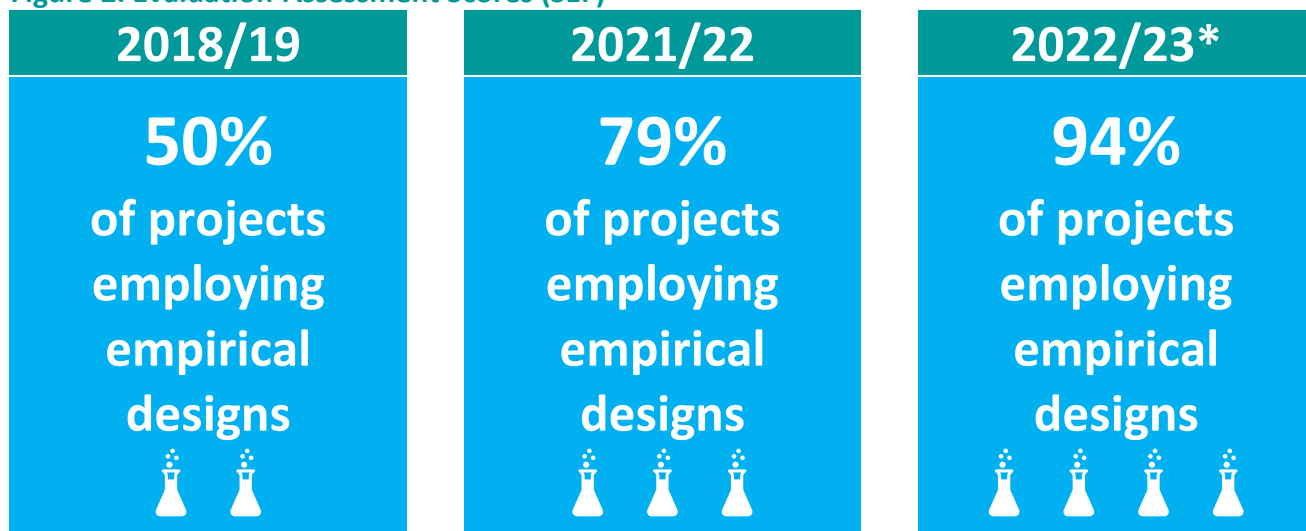
**Figure 1: Embedding Robust Evaluation Practices**

<p><b>Scoping Exercise</b></p> 	<p>A University-wide scoping exercise helped to understand what projects / interventions were being delivered across the University and student lifecycle to improve outcomes. This helped to identify gaps in provision and areas to be prioritised for evaluation.</p>
<p><b>Skills Audit</b></p> 	<p>We have conducted an evaluation skills audit to understand staff evaluation strengths and where training is required. Findings suggested more support was required in terms of developing theories of change and employing experimental methods.</p>
<p><b>Workshops</b></p> 	<p>Workshops, resources, and guidance have been aligned to the OfS standards of evidence. This has supported the development of an institutional evaluation framework with a key focus on developing theories of change and embedding of experimental methods. This work is complemented by qualitative evaluation.</p>
<p><b>Collaboration</b></p> 	<p>To improve our standards of evidence we are encouraging academics to collaborate with projects leads when evaluating interventions. Harnessing this expertise is helping to build capacity and embed a more independent view of 'what works?'. Internal and external (e.g., West Midlands HE Evaluation Group) evaluation committees are supporting further collaboration.</p>
<p><b>Student Voice</b></p> 	<p>To support the co-ordination of evaluation we have student representatives on the University Evaluation Group. We regularly collect feedback from student to improve their university experience and outcomes. Recently we have launched a Belongingness Survey across the whole university.</p>
<p><b>Review</b></p> 	<p>Annually we review our progress in embedding robust standards of evidence via the OfS evaluation self-assessment toolkit (SEF). Evidence suggests that we are making significant improvements through embedding robust experimental designs.</p>

## Progress in Improving our Standards of Evidence

Annually, we review our progress in embedding robust standards of evidence via the OfS self-evaluation framework (SEF). Our initial SEF review was completed in 2019 and found that there were very few examples of theories of change (ToC) and experimental designs being implemented. Since this initial assessment we have observed significant improvements within our SEF scores mainly around themes of strategic context and embedding robust evaluation designs. ToCs are now being more widely implemented across the University. The delivery of evaluation support, including workshops and drawing upon the expertise of academics, is embedding an increased use of experimental designs. Our application of experimental design evaluations has increased from 50% of projects in 2019 to 94% of projects in 2022/23 (see figure 2). This is further evidenced by an overall improvement within our SEF scores (in 2019 a score 48 and 2021/22 a score of 60). We are currently evaluating 18 projects, of which a number now include randomised controlled trials (RCTs). In the future we will be focusing on ensuring that more projects are robustly evaluated with learning from reflecting on gathered evidence being widely shared to support further improvements in student outcomes and achieving the priorities outlined within our strategic objectives (e.g., APP, TEF, OfS student outcomes metrics).

Figure 2: Evaluation-Assessment Scores (SEF)



\*2022/23 –based on provisional in-year data



## What Works: A Summary of Evaluation Projects (21-22)

---

This section summarises the evaluation findings of six student support interventions delivered in the 2021/22 academic year. A number of other projects were evaluated in 21/22 with final reports to follow: JEDI Programme [Business School]; Reverse Mentoring Programme [FABSS]; and Equivalency testing supporting access to PRSB courses via English and Maths level 2 entry qualifications [FEHW].

The report presents evidence for the impact of these interventions on student outcomes defined as continuation, completion, attainment, and progression. The final section presents data on a University-wide survey (Graduate Gains) completed for the TEF. These summaries do not outline other findings and recommendations provided within the full report. Full reports can be accessed by the links provided or requested from project leads.



## Evaluation of Academic Coaches

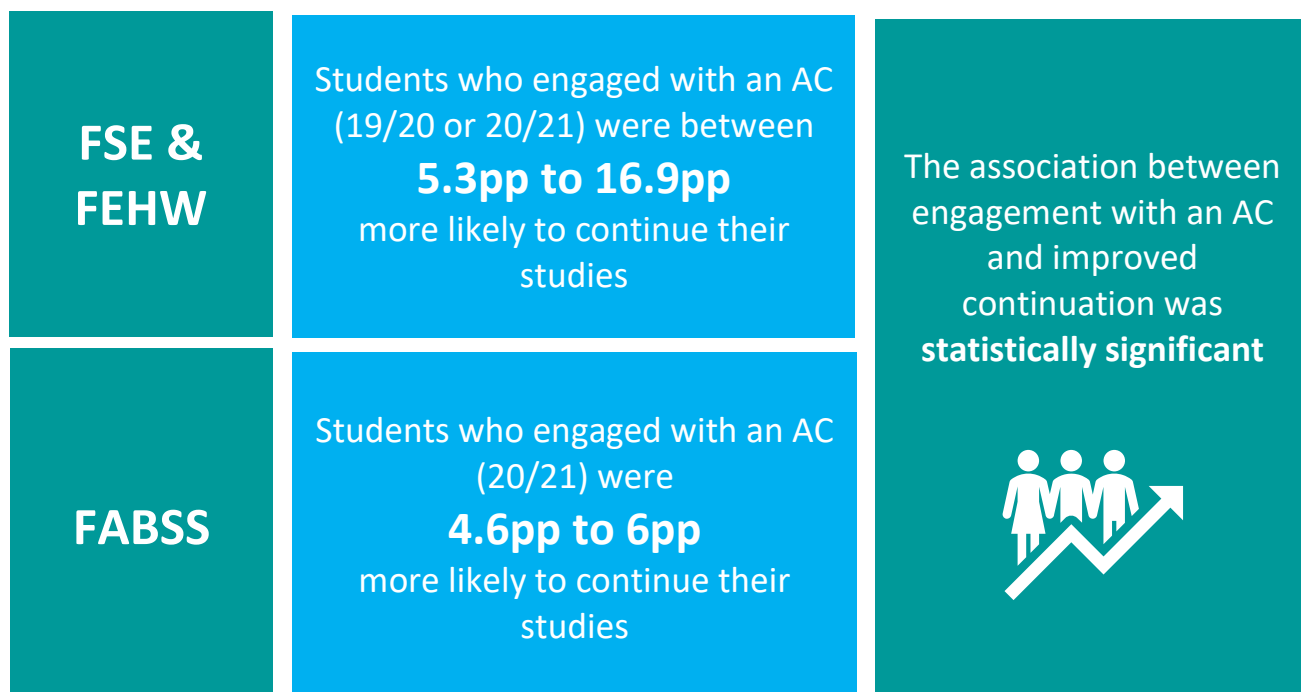
[Dr Chinyi Nzekwe-Excel & Matt Horton, November 2022]

This evaluation investigated the impact of the Academic Coaches (ACs) on improving level 3, 4 and 7 student continuation and attainment outcomes. It employed a quasi-experimental design which involved comparing attainment and non-continuation outcomes between a matched group of students (e.g., ethnicity and IMD) who had and had not engaged with ACs. All findings presented are indicative of an association between engagement with an AC and improved student outcomes. Although experiment and comparison group students were matched in terms of important background characteristics it is possible that the groups differed in other ways due to missing data (e.g., AC analysis did not include all students who did not engage) and sampling bias (e.g., those engaging may be more motivated to succeed).

### Key Findings: Continuation

A logistic binomial regression found that students who engaged with an AC were significantly more likely to continue their studies than students who did not engage. However, this effect was not significant across all faculties. Figure 3 summarises the key findings. PP refers to percentage point differences in continuation rates between students who engaged with ACs compared with those who did not (the comparison group).

Figure 3: ACs Impact on Student Continuation



FSE [2019/20] 16.9pp more likely to continue (AC group 80% and comparison group 53.1%); FSE [2020/21] 18.3pp more likely to continue (AC group 82.4% and comparison group 64.1%); FEHW [2019/20] 5.3pp more likely to continue (AC group 68.8% and comparison group 63.5%); FEHW [2020/21] 9.1pp more likely to continue (AC group 82.1% and comparison group 72%); FABSS [2019/20] 4.6pp more likely to continue (AC group 81.7% and comparison group 77.1%); FABSS [2020/21] 6pp more likely to continue (AC group 83.6% and comparison group 77.6%).

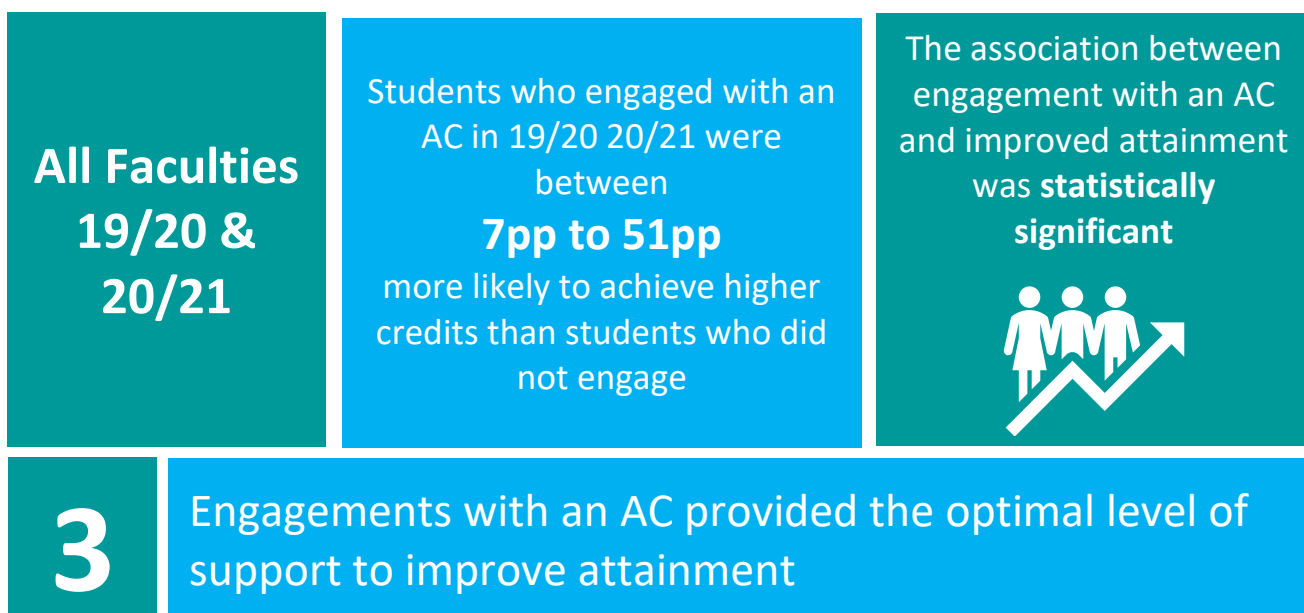


## Key Findings: Attainment



A linear regression model found that ACs are having a significant impact on students' attainment (likelihood of achieving 80-120 credits) across all three Faculties and academic years (19/20 and 20/21). The analysis also presents evidence for a 'dosage effect', showing an association between how frequently students engaged with an AC within FEHW<sup>2</sup> in 20/21 and their attainment outcomes. As a student's engagement with an AC increased from one to three contacts, their likelihood of obtaining 80-120 credits increased. The optimal point was three engagements, and this did not vary by faculty, ethnicity, or a student's IMD (Index of Multiple Deprivation). After this point, as engagement increased, a student's likelihood of achieving 80-120 credits decreased. The descriptive data are presented in figure 4. Note: Even though the data seemed to suggest that three engagements is the optimal point, this must be carefully considered as it could be that those students who engaged more times had more complex needs and / or started from a lower prior attainment level.

Figure 4: ACs Impact on Student Attainment (80-120 credits)



FSE [2019/20] 51.1pp more likely to achieve 80-120 credits (AC group 67.6% and comparison group 16.5%); FSE [2020/21] 4.6pp more likely to achieve 80-120 credits (AC group 64% and comparison group 29.4%); FEHW [2019/20] 15.9pp more likely to achieve 80-120 credits (AC group 69.5% and comparison group 53.6%); FEHW [2020/21] 16.7pp more likely to achieve 80-120 credits (AC group 71.1% and comparison group 54.4%); FABSS [2019/20] 7.3pp more likely to achieve 80-120 credits (AC group 70% and comparison group 62.7%); FABSS [2020/21] 7.6pp more likely to achieve 80-120 credits (AC group 60% and comparison group 52.4%)



## Business School Curriculum Review Evaluation Report

[Sarah Williams, Alun Morris & Matt Horton, November 2022]

Within the Business School (UWBS), student continuation and degree outcomes were relatively low compared to other Schools across the University. It is likely that to a certain extent these outcomes were negatively impacted by over-assessment of students. To address this matter in the 2021/22 academic year, a revised curriculum was embedded across most subjects (non-PRSB). The new curriculum moved subjects from a 20- to a 30-credit model which led to a reduced number of assessments. Evaluation assessed the impact of these changes on student continuation, attainment and NSS scores. The analysis employed an empirical design comparing student outcomes for the new 30-credit model (21/22) against earlier student cohorts in the Business School that had completed the 20-credit module. The 18/19 cohort was employed as a baseline because this was prior to the Covid-19 Pandemic and therefore provided a more valid comparison group. Comparisons in student outcomes were also made to other Schools across the University. The analysis provided indicative evidence that the new curriculum had supported improvements in student outcomes.

### Key findings:

- When compared to the 18/19 cohort, the new curriculum supported a 5pp improvement in UWBS FT UG students' (21/22) continuation rates from year 1 to year 2. Most other Schools experienced a 1pp to 26pp decrease in continuation during this period.
- UWBS Global Majority (GM) students benefited the most as the continuation gap halved with white students from 24pp in 18/19 to 12pp in 21/22.
- No discernible benefits for UWBS FT UG students' continuation rates from year 2 to year 3. However, changes in assessment may have helped to close the gap between GM and white students.

**Moving from a 20 to 30 credit model improved student continuation (YR 1-YR2) and closed ethnicity gaps**



- An improvement in the proportions of all UWBS students (except unknown ethnicity) achieving higher degree classifications in 21/22 compared to the 18/19 cohort.
- Closing of gaps in degree outcomes between UWBS Black and White students (from 28pp in 18/19 to 15.8pp in 21/22). Conversely the gap between Asian and White students increased (from 16.5pp in 18/19 to 22.3pp in 21/22); the gap for Mixed/other students remained static at around 21pp.
- Perhaps the most notable benefits were observed in NSS scores with the Business School significantly improving on previous years. Scores were higher than the university average and above sector levels (CAH3).

You can access the full report here: [Business School Curriculum Review Evaluation](#).

**Improved overall attainment but mixed findings for the impact on ethnicity attainment gaps**



**Improvements in NSS scores**



## **An Evaluation of Student Transition and Success through Cross-Team Collaboration and Integrated Practice**

*[Dr Chinny Nzekwe-Excel, September 2022]*

Within the Business School, evidence suggests that international students have lower levels of engagement within their modules. This contributed to lower assessment submissions and a higher record of academic misconduct. The purpose of this pilot study was to identify inclusive ways of supporting the teaching and learning needs of undergraduate and postgraduate International students in the Business School aiming to increase student levels of engagement, enhance students' academic and professional skills and their ability to cope with the demands of HE. The project could also support improvements in student continuation and success outcomes. The pilot project embedded academic writing sessions (EWS) within specific modules. The project sought to explore how teaching/academic and teaching-related/professional services staff could be more integrated and promote equality of educational opportunity for the University's diverse student population. The project aimed to support collaborative teaching practice with students as co-researchers. A mixed methods approach was employed for the evaluation. This included a questionnaire which 85 students (18% UG and 82% PG) completed and returned.



## Key Findings



- 85% agreed that the EWS contributed highly to their learning. Statistical analysis also showed there was a positive association between students' level of study and attendance to (engagement with) the EWS.
- The qualitative analysis found that both the students and staff had a positive experience with the EWS. Staff feedback affirmed that students demonstrated improved performance and enhanced understanding of assessment components and increased confidence/readiness to learn in the students.
- EWS fostered an academic support environment that enabled students to make the link between what they were taught or learned and the assessment task, and also to consolidate their learning.
- Both students and staff stated that academic writing support provision should be integrated into their modules and that attendance to the sessions should be mandatory. Findings suggest that continuing the EWS project, and perhaps embedding it more widely, may support improvements in students' continuation and success outcomes as a consequence of: increasing student engagement with their studies; increasing levels of assessment submission; reducing instances of academic misconduct. However, further research is required to determine if wider outcomes beyond engagement/attendance can be improved by EWS. You can access the full report here: [Evaluation of Student Transition and Success](#).

Engagement with academic writing sessions was significantly associated with improved course attendance



## Step Marking Pilot Evaluation

[Phil Gravestock & Colin Gibson, August 2022]

Step marking is where students are provided with stepped marks (e.g., 55% or 60%) rather than fine grained percentage marks. It has been suggested that the degree classification system may magnify the difference in award gaps between different groups of students, particularly with respect to bunching of marks at grade boundaries (e.g., Konstantinidis-Pereira & Scott, 2020<sup>3</sup>) and that other forms of marking (e.g., Grade Point Average, step marking) may help to reduce this.

In 2021/22 we piloted this approach within the schools of SSHIPS (level 4), Pharmacy (level 7). Psychology (all levels) has been using this approach for a while.



<sup>3</sup> Konstantinidis-Pereira, A. and Scott, I. (2020) Is the inclusion of first-year assessment in the calculation of GPA deleterious to students from a widening participation background? *Perspectives: Policy and Practice in Higher Education*, 1, pp. 24-33.

GPA weighted student module averages in 21/22 for the step marking pilot were compared against modules where step marking did not take place in 21/22. A controlled comparison was also employed to compare scores between students on the step marking modules in 20/21 to results for these modules in the previous year. A matched group design was employed by comparing student scores by ethnicity. The analysis focused on percentage point change in GPA averages.

Findings suggest that step marking did not support improvements in closing the GM and White attainment gap.

**Step marking did not support improvements in closing the GM and white attainment gap**



## Financial Well-Being Evaluation Trial

*[Kings College London & Social Care What Works Centre, Emma Stockdale, Matt Horton, March 2022]*

The University worked in collaboration with the Social Care What Works Centre and Kings College London to trial a light touch information and guidance intervention aiming to improve disadvantaged students' financial wellbeing and their continuation outcomes. A randomised controlled trial was employed whereby ten information and guidance text messages were sent to students within the treatment group over a period of ten weeks. Messages signposted students to resources and encouraged budgeting. The control group did not receive these messages. Pre- and post-intervention surveys were employed to measure shifts in students' financial wellbeing/capability. Findings suggested that the light touch text messages did not have a significant impact on students' personal and financial wellbeing, perceived control, help seeking, and financial behaviours. However, the intervention did have a significant effect on students' financial attitudes and information seeking behaviour. Due to the limited impact on these outcomes, analysis was not conducted to compare continuation rates between the treatment and control groups. Overall findings suggest that the pilot should not be rolled out further. You can access the further details on the findings here: [Financial Well-Being Evaluation Trial](#).

**Overall light touch text messages had no significant impact on disadvantaged students' financial well-being.**



## Graduate Gains Exit Survey

*[Matt Horton, Alun Morris, Colin Gibson & Abi l'Anson, October 2022]*

Within the TEF, an HEI's performance is measured against a number of graduate outcome metrics. HEIs are advised to provide their own self-assessment of student educational gains. To support the self-assessment exercise, we implemented a graduate exit survey for the 2022 summer and autumn graduations. The analysis

includes the first pilot of the survey which was completed by 622 students. The survey measures student self-perceptions of how attending university has benefitted their self-confidence, life satisfaction, mental health, and career pathways. Overall, UoW seems to be having a positive impact on these factors, with the exception of student mental health which slightly decreased on graduation. Similar impacts on student mental health during the pandemic have also been found within national studies<sup>4</sup>. Access the full report here: [GGES](#).

## Key Findings

**30.9**  
percentage point

increase in students' **self-confidence** after attending UoW

52.8% high level of self-confidence before attending UoW & 83.7% after

**25.6**  
percentage point

increase in students' **life-satisfaction** after attending UoW

57.7% high level of life satisfaction before attending UoW & 83.1% after

**-2.4**  
percentage point

decrease in students' **mental health** after attending UoW

71.2% had excellent / good mental health before attending UoW & 68.8% after

**75.6%**

of student's reported that attending UoW had helped them in their **career path**

The analysis also found that graduate gains differed by student characteristics. White students (compared to Global Majority) and those from disadvantaged neighbourhoods (compared to advantaged) were more likely to benefit in terms of self-confidence and life-satisfaction. In terms of mental health, larger decreases were observed for GM students, followed by disadvantaged IMD and White students. Conversely students from advantaged neighbourhoods indicated that their mental health had improved. Both GM students and those from a disadvantaged neighbourhoods reported that UoW had benefited them more in terms of their career pathway.



<sup>4</sup> A number of national surveys found that between 52% to 58% of students reported that their mental health worsened during the pandemic (HEPI, 2020; NUS 2020; ONS 2020 – see: Coronavirus and the impact on students in higher education in England: September to December 2020 - Office for National Statistics.



Matt Horton  
Evaluation Manager  
[matthew.horton@wlv.ac.uk](mailto:matthew.horton@wlv.ac.uk)