LEAPS Transitions Course Evaluation

Host Institution(s)/Partner(s):	LEAPS
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Introduction

LEAPS is a widening participation programme that supports LEAPS-eligible students across the Borders, Edinburgh, Forth Valley, and the Lothians who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education to access and prepare for higher education study.

LEAPS is a partnership organisation, funded by its higher education institution and local council partners to increase progression to higher education. LEAPS is also supported by Skills Development Scotland and delivers the Scottish Funding Council's Schools for Higher Education Programme in South East Scotland and the Forth Valley, in partnership with the National Schools Programme. Find out more about the LEAPS partnership at www.leapsonline.org.

The project we are discussing in this case study is an evaluation of the LEAPS Transitions Course.

The LEAPS Transitions Course evolved from a previous strand of the LEAPS programme, the LEAPS Summer School, which had a similar focus on preparing students for the move from school to university – one of the key differences being that the summer school ran in the summer break and the course runs during the school year.

The LEAPS Transitions Course is designed to give LEAPS-eligible students the skills and experience needed to make a positive transition from school to university. Students take the course as part of their sixth-year timetable at school. Throughout the course, students work with university academics, postgraduate tutors, and students from other schools on developing first-year university-level academic skills. The aim is for them to gain confidence and an understanding of what it takes to be successful at university. The course is blended, and students experience both online and in-person teaching on a university campus. The course is offered as a 20 credit SCQF Level 7 course, and many universities consider it for university admissions purposes (www.leapsonline.org/leaps-transitions-course-university-entry-requirements).

The LEAPS Transitions Course evaluation aims to assess the effectiveness of the course. As the course is a new strand of activity, we wanted to evaluate it from both a process and an impact perspective to learn if it is effective and to better understand any changes we may need to make as we develop it.

We felt this evaluation project was especially important given the focus in the Commission on Widening Access report *A Blueprint for Fairness* on bridging activities and on making better use of S6, as well as the desire in the widening access sector to improve the evidence base on issues relating to fair access.

Methodology

What sort of data did your evaluation involve?

☐Quantitative

☐Qualitative

☒Mixed methods

Which methods did you use?

☒Questionnaires

☐Validated Scales

☐Interviews

☐Focus Group(s)

☒Analysis of existing data from your intervention e.g. monitoring data routinely collected

☐ Analysis of externally sourced data, e.g. bespoke, institutional or publicly available

☐Other

Which software package(s) if any did you use to assist with your evaluation?

☒Excel

☐SPSS

☐NVivo

☐ Tableau or PowerBI

☐Other

Did your project involve the usage of any statistical methods?

☐Distribution	☒Mean	☐Median	☒Mode
☐Range	☐Standard Deviation	☐Variance	☐Interquartile Range
☐Paired samples	☐None		
☐Other			

Did you use a theoretical framework for your evaluation?

☒Theory of Change

☐Existing framework

☐Theory from literature

Method:

We took a mixed methods approach to our evaluation, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data in the hope that this would provide us with more robust evidence than if we focused only on either quantitative or on qualitative data alone. Our aim was to use the quantitative data to demonstrate what our findings were and (where possible) to use the qualitative data to better understand them through any themes or narratives that were identified.

At the outset of our evaluation, we posed a research question to help us focus in on what we were trying to understand – we wanted to assess the effectiveness of the course. One of the first Community of Practice training sessions we participated in was a Theory of Change workshop. This helped us to describe the changes we were hoping to see as a result of the intervention, and better understand how we could try and measure these. As a result, we incorporated the Theory of Change theoretical framework that we developed into our evaluation plan and applied it to our study design retrospectively.

Our primary data source was questionnaires, to be issued at five key points before, during and after the course. Some were delivered in person and some were delivered digitally.

1. Pre-Course Questionnaire (prior to the course starting) - completed September 2022
2. Mid-Course Questionnaire (halfway through the course) - completed December 2022
3. Post-Course Questionnaire v1 (at the end of the course) - completed March 2023
4. Post-Course Questionnaire v2 (mid-way through first year of higher education) - completed December 2023
5. Post-Course Questionnaire v3 (end of first year of higher education) - to be issued summer 2024

The data collected focuses on:

- Higher education applications planned / submitted
- Beliefs/confidence around progressing to / preparedness for / completion of higher education
- Beliefs around the impact the course will have on aiding progression to higher education
- Higher education initial post-school destination
- First-year higher education completion data
- Qualitative feedback from students who took the course, their course tutors and their school teachers

We also looked at relevant data that was available to us from the delivery of the course itself. This included student data relating to motivations for applying to the course, attendance and withdrawal data, assessment data, and informal feedback on course logistics. The aim was to use this data to help us gain a broader understanding of student engagement with the course. It would be interesting to look at ways in which we could analyse these strands of data more deeply, perhaps exploring if correlation analysis would be of use.

Once responses were collected using both Microsoft Forms and physical paper copies, the data was exported into Excel. The raw data was used in tracking student engagement in the evaluation itself, and providing qualitative quotes for the External Examiner report, Quality Assurance report, as well as sharing with teachers. The uses for the response data were shared with students ahead of them completing the questionnaires. Excel was also used for a top-level analysis of the data, for reporting to the Scottish Funding Council, and the Academic Advisory Group for the course.

This involved using data analysis skills developed in the Introduction to Data Analysis training facilitated by the Community of Practice, such as collating and cleaning the data, and generating pivot charts. The use of Excel over any other software was primarily due to knowledge and access. We were already familiar and comfortable using Excel and basic chart functions, and this knowledge was bolstered by the Community of Practice training session. Though programmes such as SPSS are perhaps more powerful, our team did not have access to these nor the expertise to use them.

During the interim analysis (after the first three questionnaires were completed) we looked at measuring the mean and the mode of the data collected so far. Again, these methods were used primarily for ease and confidence with prior knowledge and experience. A lack of detailed expertise in data analysis meant that only a very light touch analysis was attempted. It is worth noting that the evaluation has not yet concluded as students from this cohort still have questionnaires to complete. Therefore, further statistical methods will likely be utilised at the end of the evaluation. However, part of our approach will be to aim to source external support for data analysis at this point having recognised that we would benefit from further guidance with this, and therefore our direction and methodology is still a work in progress.

Discussion/ Reflections

We have used the Gibbs Reflective Cycle, to reflect on the evaluation project and provide structure to our overall discussion.

Feelings: We feel that students are keen to support evaluation work and that they generally respond well to in-person explanations of the aims of the evaluation project and requests to complete questionnaires, but it is low on their priority list and this is reflected in the engagement. For questionnaires that were completed throughout the duration of the course, we were able to offer encouragement and incentive to complete them – for example, creating dedicated time within a session to complete a questionnaire – but once the students have completed the course and are receiving questionnaires digitally to be completed in their own time, the engagement (response) rates drop off considerably.

Evaluation: There are both positives and negatives from the initial evaluation projects. Response rates have increased year on year for the course, as the evaluation has become more embedded in the course structure. The results themselves were also positive, as overall trends for the students' responses did go in the direction we hoped they would, with a few outliers. However, as stated, we were limited by both sample sizes but also our own capacity for in depth analysis. It has however provided a strong base for future evaluation work, as well as lessons to be learned from.

Analysis: When analysing the reason for these positives and negatives, much of this is contextual, and anecdotal. In order to provide more robust reasoning, further study and investigation would be required. In terms of the positives, it appears that students are willing to share their thoughts and feelings in theory, but the practicalities lead to the low response rates and lack of detail. While students are on the course, when handed a physical copy of the evaluation questionnaire, all students who attended completed them. However, if a student is absent, they are then sent the questionnaire digitally, which puts the onus on the student to find time to do it. Once the students have finished school, this is then also combined with other new commitments, and also the possibility they do not want to think about a course they took at school when they have moved on.

Another challenge would be asking students to self-reflect on something that they have no experience of yet. We are asking students to anticipate their success and preparedness for something they are yet to embark on. Students don't always know yet what they don't know, and this can be reflected in the responses.

Conclusion: At this stage, we were able to use the evaluation to make changes to the course to implement immediately. We have also been able to use the interim results as part of our reporting to external stakeholders. We also were able to take lessons from the evaluation model to amend the format, such as trying to embed it more into the course to allow students to complete the evaluation questionnaires during course sessions. We have also been able to assess our own capabilities in terms of time and knowledge, and therefore we know what steps we may need to take next for a more robust evaluation.

Limitations

One limitation of our evaluation approach was the lack of a control group. We had attempted this in a prior evaluation project, but we had limited success due to a lack of responses from the control group. For this reason, we chose to focus our efforts solely on the cohort taking the course to try and increase their engagement with our evaluation project.

A second limitation was incomplete data. While we have had a relatively high response rate for the questionnaires that have been carried out so far, we have not yet achieved a 100% response rate. In addition, (and as expected) our cohort has changed in size over the duration of the course due to withdrawals. This has reduced the number of students who have the potential to complete all five questionnaires, and therefore reduced the size of a consistent cohort to be analysed across our full data collection timeline. As a result, our analysis is not based on the exact same cohort for each questionnaire, and therefore our findings lack some robustness.

We also recognise that our own knowledge and understanding of our evaluation approach is a limitation. We are very much still learning and developing in this area, and the SCAPP Evaluation Matters Community of Practice has been a great support as we continue to build our own evaluation capacity.

Lessons Learned/ Future Work

A key top-level lesson that we have learnt during this evaluation project is the need for us to give as much time and energy, if not more, to the Analyse, Report, and Act stages of the evaluation cycle. We identified prioritising time for this as our biggest challenge, followed closely by the need for specific support around data analysis and building confidence in this area. Having spent a significant amount of time on the Focus, Design and Gather stages, we felt once delivery of our project started we had less time to give to fully analysing data and reporting on findings. We did discuss findings internally as a team and key points were highlighted - particularly through qualitative data - allowing us to Act and implement changes for future interventions, however we felt we could take a more detailed approach to these stages of the evaluation cycle if more time was prioritised for them and analysis guidance provided. It was reassuring to hear through Community of Practice discussions that we were not alone in feeling this way, and ultimately it has helped us to identify the specific areas of evaluation that we know we need - and want - to improve in.

On a more practical level, we learnt some key lessons around data gathering. Unsurprisingly, questionnaires undertaken in person had a higher response rate than those undertaken digitally. For the final two questionnaires in our evaluation design, our cohort is no longer engaging with us in person having finished the course and moved on to post-school destinations. Digital questionnaires are the obvious method for us to reach students at this point and we are considering incentivising these (we have had limited success in the past with this), but we are also considering the possibility of offering an in-person reunion style event to see if this could help us increase our response rate for our final questionnaire and the chance of us gathering more detailed qualitative data. Furthermore, we want to ensure from a data collection perspective that we have a functioning non-school email address to reach all students on after they have finished the course so that we can continue to reach them regarding our ongoing evaluation project.

Lastly, we learnt that qualitative data isn't routinely being captured through our questionnaires in great depth and feel we are missing out on what could be valuable information as a result. For the future we are considering ways in which we can better encourage students to share their in-depth reflections with us, including providing a structured online form at the end of the course that has focused questions about different aspect of the course for them to consider and complete.

Additional Content

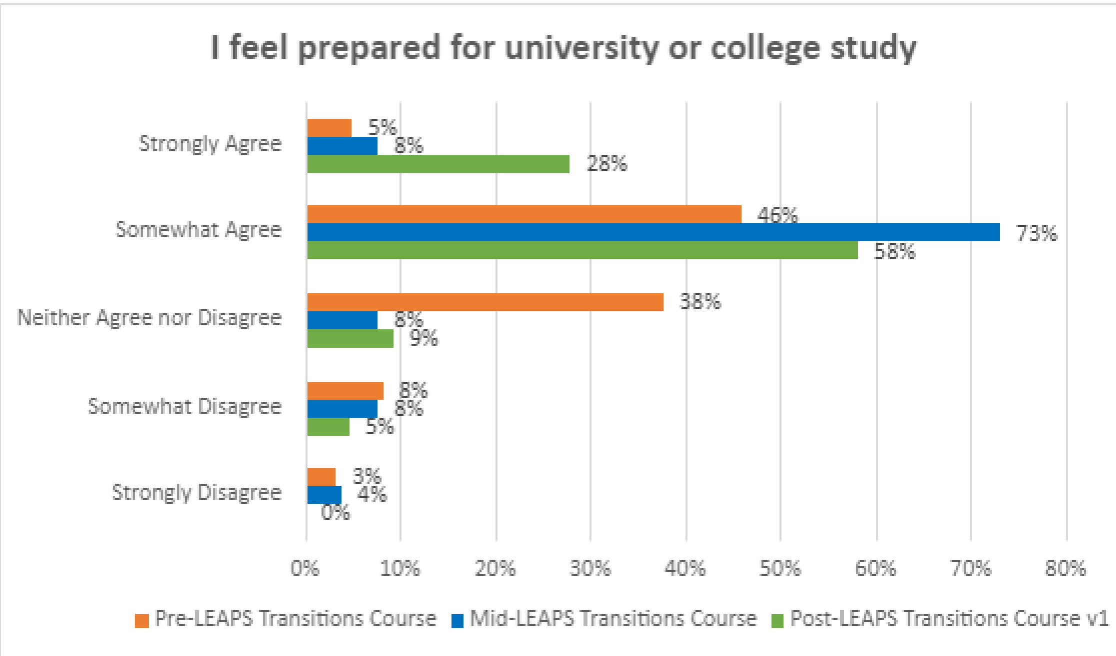
Images

LEAPS Transitions Course evaluation research question:
Does completion of the LEAPS S6 Transitions Course result in/support a successful transition to university for LEAPS-eligible students?

LEAPS Transitions Course Top-level Theory of Change:

Inputs	Activities	Outputs	Short or Medium Term Outcomes	Impact / Long-term Outcomes
Funding LEAPS Team External Colleagues Course Design & Coordination	LEAPS Transitions Course Academic Sessions Non-academic sessions Assessments Campus visits Independent Travel	Develop first-year university-level academic skills Experience of university setting (academic and non-academic)	Successful application to higher education Successful transition to higher education	Successful completion of first-year of higher education Successful completion of higher education programme

Top-level quantitative analysis:
LEAPS Transitions Course students from the 2022-23 cohort were asked to rate the statement ‘I feel prepared for university or college study’. The chart below is based on responses from those students who completed the first three questionnaires before, during, and at the end of the LEAPS Transitions Course.



Top-level qualitative analysis:
'I loved the course. It was a great way to meet new people and pushed me out of my comfort zone (in a good way of course). I feel much more prepared for university and life in general. Not only this, LEAPS also made me feel more confident in my choice to go to university. I am going to the University of Edinburgh so I also got to use this course as an opportunity to explore the campus and get a trial of student life in Edinburgh. The staff were absolutely lovely and incredibly welcoming, making everyone comfortable with talking to them and asking them for help with anything. The tutors were also very lovely (I had Corin) and very interesting, as they talked about their experience with university as well. The activities we did outside of coursework just made LEAPS that much more enjoyable, like mince pies and juice at Christmas while we got an opportunity to chat with current students.'

LEAPS Transitions Course Student, 2022-23 Cohort

Cohort Size / Response Rates:
Having highlighted cohort size and response rates several times throughout our case study, we thought it might be helpful to share these below. Please note, due to withdrawals the cohort changed in size over time.

	No. of Responses	Cohort Size	Response Rate
Pre-course questionnaire	61	77	87%
Mid-course questionnaire	26	61	43%
Post-course questionnaire v1	43	55	78%

URLs

LEAPS Transitions Course web page: www.leapsonline.org/transitions-course