Access to Higher Education – Skills, Support and Progression Programme Evaluation

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Keyword(s):	Widening participation, higher education, adult learners, mature students, progression, transition, university

Introduction

The University of Glasgow (UofG) Access to Higher Education Programme (Access) is an online, part-time Access Programme designed for those who have been out of formal education for three years or more, or for those who meet one or more of our Widening Participation criteria[1].

Access students study two academic subjects, giving them the qualification needed to progress onto undergraduate study[2]. Access runs from September to April and students attend 4-6 hours[3] of academic subject classes with independent study alongside. Access students are fully enrolled UofG students, on a pre-entry, part-time plan code, giving them access to a wide range of university services and facilities. From academic year (AY) 2022/23, Access students participated in the Skills, Support and Progression (SS&P) Programme alongside their two academic subjects.

The overall aim of the UofG Access Programme is to enable students to progress onto undergraduate study. To achieve this, we are committed to not only providing students with the qualification, but to equip them with the knowledge and skills required to successfully complete Access, progress onto undergraduate study and to be successful throughout their degree.

A recent review of the past 10 years of Access data indicated lower rates of progression to undergraduate study than we would want to aim for. Improving these progression figures, alongside a desire and commitment to better supporting our students throughout the Access Programme, was the driving force for the creation and implementation of the Skills, Support and Progression Programme (SS&P). The SS&P Programme consists of an online module (Access Essentials), Skills Support and Progression Sessions, and Access Campus Days.

SS&P is designed, delivered and developed by staff members in the Adult Learner sub-team of the UofG Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning team[4].

As part of the creation of the SS&P Programme, the team were committed to undertaking an evaluation of its implementation. The aim of the evaluation was to investigate students' experience on SS&P and to what extent it impacted upon their successful progression onto undergraduate study.

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[1] SIMD 20/40 postcode, care-experienced, estranged and living without family support, unpaid caring responsibilities and/or those seeking asylum in the UK or have been granted refugee status
[2] At the University of Glasgow, and to any other institution who accepts UofG Access for entry.
[3] Arts/Social Science subjects are two hours long, Sciences are three.
[4] https://www.gla.ac.uk/study/wp/

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 you use a theoretical framework for your evaluation?

☒Theory of Change

☐Existing framework

☐Theory from literature

Method

This section discusses the methodological approach to our evaluation, focussing on our use of Theory of Change, the Design stage and an overview of the methods chosen.

Theory of Change

As our evaluation project was to assess the effectiveness of a programme of work being delivered for the first time, the team first established clear aims and objectives of the programme. To do this, we participated in a Theory of Change workshop. A Theory of Change (ToC) is a planning and mapping process for an intervention/activity and resulting evaluation of the intervention[5]. The key benefits of the ToC is giving the space to conceptualise what the aims and objectives are for an activity/programme, what actions are required to achieve these aims and how the effectiveness or impact of the activities can be evaluated in-line with the agreed aims and objectives.

During the workshop we completed the key ToC steps[6], and completed the ToC pro-forma following. The pro-forma allowed us another chance to reflect on our discussions, to be more specific in our aims within the framework and to clearly map out how we would monitor and evaluate our activities to our aims and objectives. The process of writing up our discussions into the ToC framework was exceptionally useful to ensure clarity and clear direction, but having the ToC document established at the beginning of the project allowed us to have a core document mapping out our vision that we could come back to, and also gave us the framework on which we could rely on to make an informed and considered evaluation design.

Design

In the initial stages we agreed that a mixed methods approach was the most beneficial way for us to evaluate the SS&P Programme. A mixed methods approach is research/evaluation which integrates both qualitative and quantitative research methods[7]. We established that the majority of our data was going to come from students' views and opinions, however, we were also interested in data on students' engagement on the Programme and their onward progression. The benefit of a mixed methods approach for this evaluation project allowed us to gain a rich insight into the individual experiences of students, further complimented by looking at trends across the student body giving us more confidence when drawing conclusions and making changes to our Programme activities based on feedback.

The design phase of our evaluation project was iterative. At the beginning we agreed the core evaluation methods we aimed to employ and then focussed on each of the evaluation activities at closer level as we intended to deliver them. This meant we could be responsive to the context at the time and build on our approach based on experience of the previous activity.

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[5] Campbell, K and Browitt, A 2022 'Widening Participation Evaluation Guide' Available at:
https://www.fairaccess.scot/wp-evaluation-guide/
[6] Browitt, A 2020 'How to use Theory of Change methodology for Widening Participation/Widening Access evaluation planning in a team workshop' Available at:
https://sway.office.com/sNQ81mpKUBwc0IXW?ref=Link&loc=play
[7] Bryman, A 2008 *Social Research Methods* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Our evaluation project used Access students in academic year 2022/23 as the sample group and included the following activities:

- a mid-point evaluation
- an in-person qualitative evaluation (World Café)
- an end of Programme survey
- collection and analysis of student engagement and progression data

Mid-point evaluation

The mid-point evaluation was conducted at the end of Semester 1 of Access using Mentimeter to gather responses. This evaluation activity focussed on two core aspects of the SS&P Programme (SS&P Live Sessions and Access Essentials). The question design was inspired by a workshop evaluation that we had participated in, with further research showing it to be a popular question design[8]. This question design allowed us to clearly see what was well received, what could be changed and what the overarching learning the students took from the initiatives. All questions were free-text and responses were anonymous.

World Café

Our in-person evaluation activity was a World Café, a qualitative evaluation activity carried out during an Access Campus Day in Semester 2. The aim of a World Café is to discuss experiences, gather ideas and garner suggestions for developments through relaxed chatting on particular topics[9]. We reviewed a small overview of the literature on World Cafes and used our ToC document to ensure our topics[10] were in-line with the aims of our evaluation. Each group of students discussed each topic and responses were recorded on flipchart paper. Responses were photographed and stored on our institutional cloud file storage for analysis.

End of Access Survey

The end of Access Survey gave students a final opportunity to share their thoughts on SS&P alongside their views on progressing to undergraduate study and their feelings on their preparedness for this transition[11], a direct aim identified in the ToC but not included in previous evaluation. The survey was hosted on MS Forms and students were emailed the link to complete in their own time. The survey consisted of questions that were both likert scale and free-text, and included demographic questions[12] to allow us to compare the experiences of different groups of students by these characteristics.

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[8] The questions asked students what they learned, loved, would bin, would wish for and what they would tell others.
[9] Brown, J and Isaacs, D 2005 *The World Café : Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter* Berrett-Koehler Publishers Incorporated, San Francisco
[10] The World Café topics Inductions, Student Support and Academic Skills Development
[11] It also allowed students who were not progressing onto UG the chance to share their views on this and if there was anything that could have been done to support them to do this.
[12] Access subjects as well as Widening Participation criteria

Student engagement data collection

Alongside the three distinctive evaluation methods, the ToC workshop highlighted the teams' commitment to better understand our students by recording and monitoring the demographic, participation and progression data of our Access students. Throughout AY22/23 this was collected, stored and monitored in a more systematic way. This allowed us to identify gaps in our data collection and properly analyse overall trends that could be reviewed annually. Our data collection included: demographic data gathered at enrolment; engagement with SS&P initiatives[13]; UCAS application data; overall progression figures to undergraduate study (both at UofG and other universities). Data was compiled into an Excel spreadsheet and evaluated using very basic data evaluation techniques predominantly based around percentage of student groups.

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[13] Such as induction events, SS&P live sessions, engagement with Access Essentials and attendance at our Campus Days

Discussion/ Reflections

This section discusses our key reflections on the evaluation project. Further detail on obstacles and how our evaluation activity has informed future work are discussed in the subsequent sections.

Response Rates

A key consideration throughout the evaluation project was how to generate a good response rate. This was particularly pertinent due to our student group being adult learners, studying a part-time, online programme.

As our students are online learners, we had to consider how to gather feedback in an online setting but we were keen to do this 'live' in comparison to something students would do in their own time. Additionally, we did not want to add extra time commitments for students' who were already juggling part-time study on top of other life commitments. Therefore, we used our pre-established initiatives as much as possible, such as the mid-point evaluation planned to be hosted in an SS&P Live Session and the World Café at a Campus Day.

The end of Access survey was sent to students via email, and we decided to send a series of reminder emails to encourage responses. The response rate was 17% of the whole student population, which although not large number, was an increase on the response rate from the previous year which encouraged us to continue with a series of reminder emails in future years.

Related to this, a key reflection was how the effectiveness of each type of evaluation method would be impacted by the setting that it was delivered.

The mid-point survey through Mentimeter in AY22/23 resulted in a very small number of respondents. Due to lack of attendance at the live session it was due to be delivered in, the Mentimeter evaluation questions were posted on the Moodle for students to complete in their own time. This experience gave us valuable insight in delivering this in AY23/24. Based on AY22/23, we realised that live engagement was key for success. Good attendance at the SS&P Live Sessions in AY23/24 meant that this method was far more successful this year, allowing us to gain 61 respondents compared to 10 in AY22/23. This gave us confidence that it wasn't the evaluation activity itself that was ineffective, and we are pleased that we tried the same method again rather than just automatically doing something different on the assumption that it was the method that was ineffective, rather than the context of the delivery.

With Access students studying online, in-person evaluation activity options were limited, but something we were keen to include within our activities. The Access Campus Day allowed us a great opportunity to integrate some in-person qualitative evaluation within a pre-existing in-person activity, a method that has been successfully replicated in AY23/24. We are confident that the World Café evaluation method would not have been as successful in an online setting.

Analysing findings

Another key lesson was around analysing responses and summarising key findings as soon after the evaluation activity as possible. Whilst we were able to implement enhancements to the programme in AY23/24 based on our evaluation, we were unable to produce a final evaluation report due to time constraints. A key factor impacting this was that we spent considerable time in the summer months analysing and writing up findings, time which could have been spent compiling that information into a report had we done this work soon after the evaluation activity. This realisation led us to be committed to doing this in the evaluation of our Transition Programme and we found that the additional benefit that having the activity and feedback fresh in our minds aided the analysis. We are committed to doing this for Access throughout AY23/24 and have done so for the evaluation activity carried out thus far at the time of writing.

Putting students at the centre

Throughout our evaluation activity, we were keen to think about the impact on students at the centre of our planning. We were committed to ensuring that our evaluation activities would also have a benefit to students themselves while participating. On reflection, this often also resulted in benefits for us.

During the evaluation design phase, we established that we were keen to evaluate throughout the Programme rather than just at the end. The aim of this was to allow us to put in place any changes whilst students were still on course and to increase the amount of data we had at different stages, allowing for comparison at the analysis stage should it be desired. The mid-point evaluation gave students the opportunity to share their views which could result in changes in-course, rather than feedback just informing developments for a future cohort.

Along with generating responses in line with our evaluation objectives, the question design used for the mid-point evaluation was employed as we hoped it was also beneficial for the students to reflect on what they had gained over the course of the semester and to celebrate their own individual successes. Similarly, the World Café was chosen as it provided an activity which was more relaxed and engaging for students than a focus group, but with similar response collection for us.

Establishing ground rules for students to agree to before group evaluation activities was also adopted to try and ensure that the students felt comfortable sharing their views and to encourage everyone to be respectful when responding to the comments of others.

Use of ToC to inform evaluation activity and question design

On reflection, the most impactful aspect of our evaluation project was having completed a ToC and being able to use the pro-forma generated from this to guide our evaluation throughout the academic year. Doing evaluation alongside delivering practice often leads to unexpected changes to plans, and as we were committed to being responsive to our students' needs, being flexible around the specifics of our evaluation activities was really beneficial. This approach would not have been as successful if we did not have our ToC documents, clearly articulating our aims and objectives, as an anchor to plan our activities around and to guide our design ensuring that it was all working towards the same agreed goals for evaluation.

Limitations

This section discusses specific limitations not included in the Discussion/Reflection section.

Historical data collection

As this evaluation was of the SS&P Programme which was being delivered for the first time, we were unable to look at previous years of evaluation for comparison. Although the student data collection component would have allowed for year-on-year comparisons, the way data was collected, monitored and analysed was inconsistent, meaning we were not able to access the data we wished to for previous years in a consistent or useful format therefore limiting comparisons to previous years. Now that our approach has been established and standardised, we look forward to being able to do this going forward.

Time constraints

A key limitation was the amount of time able to be dedicated to this evaluation project.

Our planned final stage of our evaluation project was to create an evaluation report, which we intended to complete across the summer months between AY22/23 and AY23/24. The report would have included an overview of the evaluation carried out, a discussion of the findings and proposals on the changes that could be implemented to SS&P in response to these findings. Unfortunately, we were only able to complete our analysis and write up our findings. Whilst this allowed us to make informed decisions on developments to the Programme, if we had been able to complete our report it would have allowed us to share this amongst other key staff who contribute to the running of the Access Programme more widely.

During the ToC workshop we discussed an enthusiasm to track students' feelings of preparedness for undergraduate study at different stages of Access. Unfortunately, due to time constraints between doing the ToC workshop and planning our induction activities, we were unable to design a survey to gather students' initial views and perceptions at the beginning of the Programme, therefore limiting our ability to track students' responses to a standardised question across the Programme.

Lessons Learned/ Future Work

This section discusses the lessons learned from the findings of the evaluation project and how this has informed our future work.

In AY22/23, Access students were asked to attend SS&P sessions alongside their two academic subjects on a voluntary basis. Our evaluation activities and data collection showed that many students did not engage with the sessions but those who did gained a lot of value from participating. Our evaluation project informed the decision to make the SS&P sessions mandatory for Access 23/24. When students signed up for the Access Programme for AY23/24, they selected a timetabled SS&P slot alongside their two access subjects. We hope that this will positively impact the retention on the programme and subsequent progression onto undergraduate study and look forward to evaluating that this year.

Access Campus Days were a core component of SS&P. As a solely online programme, this gave the students an opportunity to come onto campus, meet other classmates and enhance their experience as a student at the University of Glasgow. Although these on-campus sessions didn't see huge numbers attending[14], which was tracked based on the data collection aspect of the evaluation project, the decision was made to continue offering these on-campus sessions based on the feedback received by those who attended. The Access 23/24 cohort were given the opportunity to attend an on-campus day each semester which was aligned to their subject area[15], a decision informed by findings of the evaluation project.

This evaluation project evidenced the benefits of embedding evaluation within any programme or intervention. The lessons learned have directly informed the evaluation design for Access in AY23/24. Additionally, the Adult Learner team developed and delivered a Transition Programme in August 2023 to support UofG Access and SWAP offer holders with their transition into university, and evaluation was central to this from the outset. The team developed the Transition Programme evaluation activities based on the lessons learned from in the Access evaluation project, and from the skills gained by participating in the wider Community of Practice.

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[14] Due to several different reasons including train strikes/bad weather etc.
[15] i.e. STEM or Art/Social Sciences.

Additional Content

Images

Fig 1 + 2: During the final Skills Support and Progression session of Semester 1 22/23, the Access and Student Support Coordinator delivered an evaluation session to reflect on the students Semester 1. The point of this feedback session was to gain insight on the students' thoughts of the programme now that they were halfway through. Particularly interested in their thoughts on the SS&P sessions, Access Essentials Module and what they wished they know about the programme prior to starting. Some examples of the anonymous feedback below:

Skills, Support and Progression

SS&P sessions: What do you love?

<div style="display: grid;">

Being fully engaged with.

how informative they were

How welcoming and helpful you've been

Knowing you are free to contact if we have any questions

The schedule works well for me as I can attend the Thursday sessions.

Dedicated time to ask questions, the topics were provided ahead of time, two time slots to choose from

I assume that you mean what did i love about the course. All of it really. I found it helpful in all aspects

</div>

SS&P sessions: What would you bin?

<div style="display: grid;">

Everthng currently available is needed, wouldnt bin a thing

The information is great, just too little time to complete essentials moodle.

I don't feel strongly about binning anything.

I sometimes felt that there was too much overlap for me with what we'd gone through in Access Essentials,

Nothing

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Access Essentials

What do you love?

Mentimeter

That it is not obligatory and we are not pressured to complete it (although it is very useful).We should be pressured to complete it but given longer IMO

The tests along the way and the easy to see answers if you get them wrong.

Again the flexibility to complete the modules in our own time, their relevance to the course

I liked all of it , but loved is too strong

What would you bin?

Mentimeter

Not much.

some of the longer videos. I honesty thought the rest was great

Nothing, it was all worthwhile

Fig 3 + 4: Similarly, a feedback survey was distributed at the end of the Access programme, looking to gain insight on the students' thoughts and reflections of the programme on a whole now that they had completed Access. Students who completed the survey were asked if they were intending to progress onto undergraduate study following Access and to rate their confidence in undertaking university study:

8. How confident do you feel about undertaking university study?
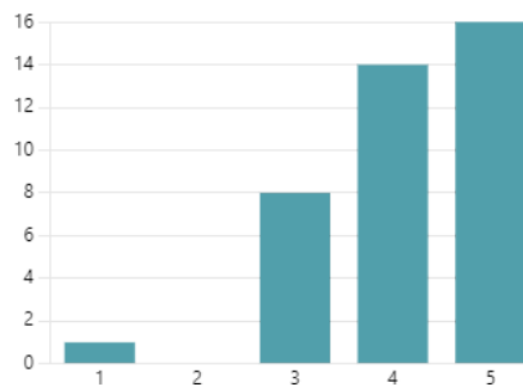
4.13
Average Rating

Fig 4: During the World Café exercise we decided on three separate topics that we wanted to gain feedback on from the students; Study skill and learning development, Preparation for Access, and Support. Figure 4 shows the prompts used during discussions with students.

1) Study skills and learning development
   a. How has study skills and academic skills development support impacted your learning?
   b. Where did you/would you look for LD support?
   c. In your experience, how integrating has LD been in your Access subject classes?
   d. Do you feel you had or developed adequate study skills to understand subject matter (i.e. Psych) – why/why not?
2) Preparation for Access
   a. So far, is Access what you expected it to be?
   b. How prepared did you feel when you started?
   c. Info given in advance realistic/representative of the programme?
   d. Was there anything missing?
   e. Was there anything missing from Sem 1 to prepare you for Sem 2?
3) Support
   a. If you were looking for support, where would you start?
   b. What does "support" mean to you as an access stu. What do you expect as support available for access students
   c. Are there any gaps?