

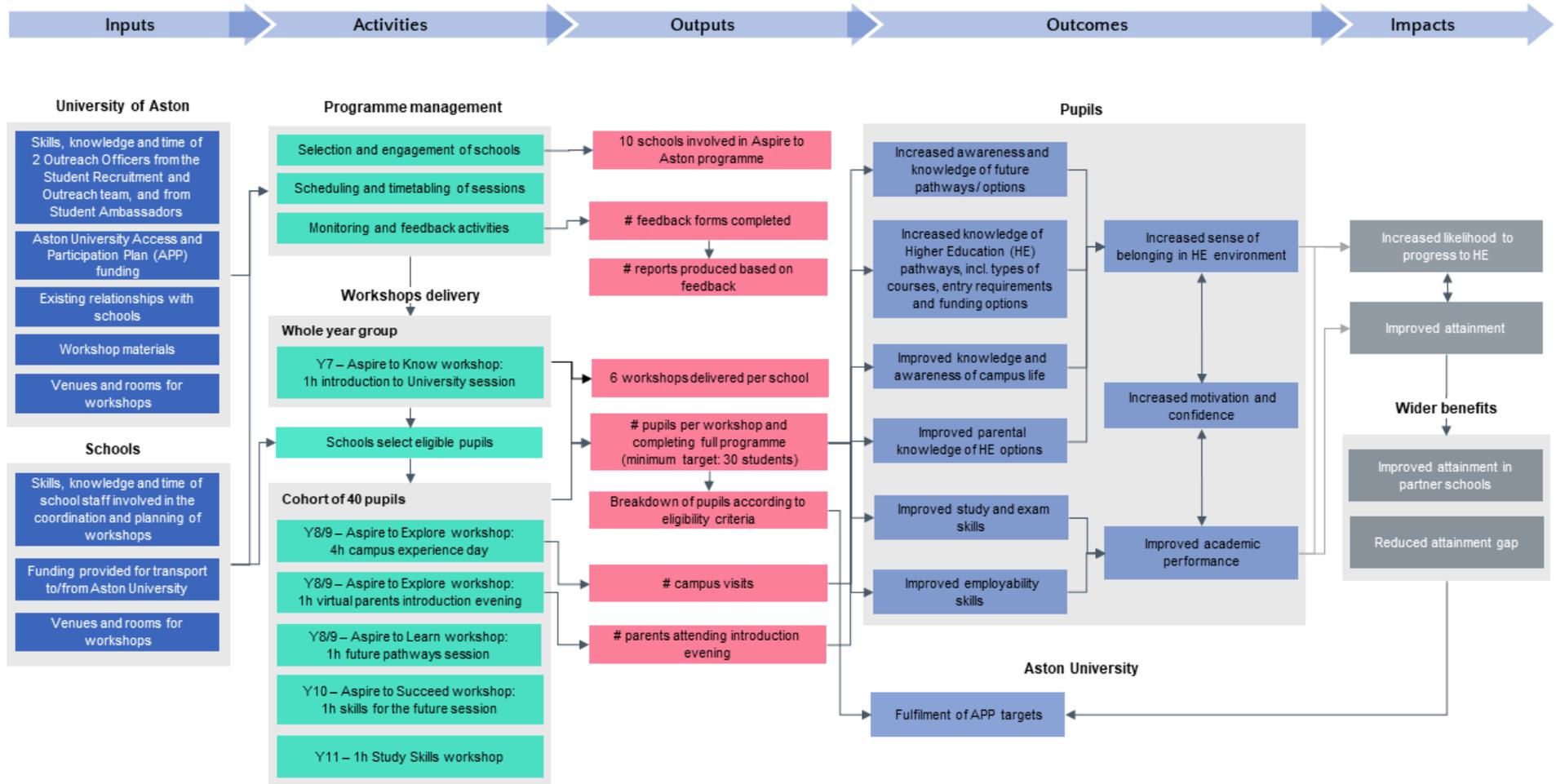
# **Theory of Change for Attainment Raising Initiatives Aspire to Aston Progression Programme**

**April 2023**

## **Contents**

<b>Why is this intervention being run?</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Who is the intervention for?</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>What is this intervention?</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>What is this intervention expected to achieve?</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Who is delivering the intervention?</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>How is this intervention delivered?</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Where is the intervention delivered?</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>How many times will the intervention be delivered? Over how long?</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>How will implementation be optimised/tailored?</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>What assumptions underpin the programme?</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>What are the key risks to delivery?</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>What are the causal pathways?</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Data collection opportunities</b>	<b>9</b>

**Theory of Change diagram**



## Why is this intervention being run?

Some young people do not consider Higher Education (HE) an option for their future. This could be due to beliefs that HE is 'not something for them' or that they do not have the required grades/finances for HE. These beliefs, and limited awareness around HE options, may impede pupils' aspirations and plans when it comes to making decisions about their future. Equally, pupils may need support to acquire the necessary skills and/or knowledge to achieve their aspirations.

The Aspire to Aston Progression Programme aims to support pupils who may have limited awareness of HE options to better understand these pathways and support them in making informed decisions about their future. It also aims to normalise the idea of going to HE, encourage pupils to start thinking about their future goals, and help them build up skills to support their academic and professional journey.

## Who is the intervention for?

This intervention is designed for Year 7 to Year 11 pupils, primarily from disadvantaged backgrounds. The first workshop is delivered in Year 7 to the whole year group. Following this, schools identify approximately 40 pupils meeting at least one of the following criteria who are offered the remaining workshops:

- Be eligible for free school meals
- Be identified as Pupil Premium
- Have a disability
- Be from a Gypsy, Roma or Traveller community
- Be a refugee or an asylum seeker
- Be in care or having experience of being in care
- Have a parent/carer who serves in the armed forces

## What is this intervention?

The Aspire to Aston Progression Programme offers a range of workshops and activities for Year 7 to Year 11 pupils (and parents). These workshops aim to strengthen and develop pupils' study, exam, and employability skills, provide information on HE to participants and parents, and facilitate pupils' visits to the Aston University campus to foster an interest in HE participation. The programme rests on the assumption that raising aspirations, confidence and motivation can support attainment raising (see [Assumption 10](#)).

## Inputs

For these workshops and campus visits to run successfully, sufficient resources (inputs) from Aston University and participating schools, including financial and human, are needed.

Specifically, the resources required from Aston University include:

- skills, knowledge and time of two Outreach Officers to manage the programme and deliver the workshops,
- skills, knowledge and time of Student Ambassadors involved in the delivery of the programme,
- funding through the Aston University Access and Participation Plan (APP),
- workshop resources such as materials and venues to deliver them, and
- the existing relationship between Aston University and schools to liaise and coordinate the delivery of the workshops.

Equally, inputs from schools are required to ensure smooth delivery of the programme. These include skills, knowledge and time of school staff involved in the coordination and planning of workshops (including identifying eligible pupils), the funding provided for transport to/from Aston University, and venues and rooms for workshops that take place in schools.

### Activities

The activities for this intervention are divided into two strands: the management of the programme and the workshops. Specifically, the management of the programme consists of selecting schools that could benefit from the workshops and engaging them to secure buy-in (see [Assumption 1](#)). Schools are then in charge of selecting approximately 40 eligible pupils to take part in the workshop following Aston University's guidance (see [Assumptions 2 and 3](#)).

Other management activities include scheduling workshops and booking rooms for the workshops, as well as monitoring and feedback activities (e.g. recording attendance).

The Aspire to Aston Progression Programme consists of five different workshops, organised by age cohort. The workshops include (see [Assumptions 4 and 5](#)):

- **Aspire to Know workshop** – This consists of a 1-hour Introduction to University session that provides an overview of HE to all Year 7 pupils. It covers topics such as the value of going to university, the courses, accommodation, clubs and societies available. This workshop is delivered in schools.
- **Aspire to Explore workshop** – This workshop is designed for Year 8 or Year 9<sup>1</sup> pupils and their parents. It consists of a 4-hour campus experience day to experience what it is like to be a student for a day. The pupils will be able to hear from current pupils about their experiences as well as get the opportunity to tour the campus. It also involves a 1-hour virtual parents introduction evening for parents to explain the aims of the programme, introduce them to the Aston University and provide information to support their children with the GCSE selection processes.
- **Aspire to Learn workshop** – This is a 1-hour interactive workshop designed to help pupils think about their GCSE choices and future options. It is addressed to Year 8 or 9 pupils and is delivered in school.
- **Aspire to Succeed workshop** – This workshop aims to help Year 10 pupils gain transferrable and employability skills such as interview techniques. It is delivered in schools.
- **Study Skills workshop** – This workshop is offered to Year 11 pupils and aims to help them with revision and exam techniques, such as structuring essays and creating study timetables. It lasts one hour and is delivered in schools.

For the 2022/23 cohort, Year 7 and Year 8 engagement is required in the workshops. Year 8 participants must have attended the Year 7 sessions to ensure pupils receive the full programme, while Year 9, 10 and 11 engagement is optional. From 2023/24 onwards, participation will be mandatory across all stages of the programme. The same pupils are expected to take part in each year event as they progress through school.

---

<sup>1</sup> Depending on when pupils select GCSE options, the Aspire to Explore and Aspire to Learn workshops can be delivered in either Year 8 or Year 9.

## What is this intervention expected to achieve?

This intervention is expected to achieve a range of outcomes and impacts for Aston University as well as the pupils attending all workshops (see [Assumption 6](#)).

### Outcomes

#### Outcomes for pupils

The first three workshops from Year 7 to Year 9 (Aspire to Know, Aspire to Learn and Aspire to Explore) provide pupils with opportunities to interact with Aston University staff, such as Outreach Officers and Student Ambassadors, and aim to improve their **knowledge and awareness of future pathways, HE options, and campus life**. This includes future education pathways not limited to HE as well as HE-specific topics, such as student accommodation and university clubs and societies available for students.

Through the interaction with university staff and campus visits, pupils are expected to **feel an increased sense of belonging in a HE environment**. The virtual sessions offered to parents are expected to **improve parental knowledge of HE options**, which is also expected to support pupils' sense of belonging (see [Assumption 7](#)).

The last two workshops (Aspire to Success and Study Skills) are expected to **improve pupils' study and exams skills, as well as employability skills**. By strengthening these skills, pupils are anticipated to **improve their academic performance** – including improved exams results.

Improvements in academic performance and sense of belonging at HE are anticipated to be linked with pupils' **motivation and confidence** such that these outcomes can reinforce one another and skills, confidence and sense of belonging are further strengthened.

#### Outcomes for Aston University

The workshops delivered will help Aston to **fulfil its 2020-2025 Access and Participation Plan targets**, which can be accessed [here](#).

### Impacts

By improving pupils' sense of belonging in HE, confidence and motivation, skills and academic performance, it is expected that pupils will be **more likely to progress onto HE**. This is because after having participated in the programme, pupils are expected to have the academic skills to complete their studies, the knowledge and awareness of finance options and resources available to progress towards HE, as well as the confidence and motivation to pursue this pathway (see [Assumption 8 and 9](#)). Furthermore, improving pupils' academic performance (and confidence and motivation) should result in **improved attainment** (see [Assumption 10](#)), which also influences their likelihood to progress onto HE.

By improving attainment of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, the programme could **contribute to improving overall attainment at school level and reducing the attainment gap**. However, it is important to note that many factors influence these potential wider benefits, and the programme would likely only be one small contributing factor. This supports Aston's APP ambitions.

## Who is delivering the intervention?

The intervention is managed, coordinated, and delivered by two Outreach Officers from Aston University. Student Ambassadors are also involved in the delivery of some workshops.

### **How is this intervention delivered?**

This intervention has both a universal and a targeted element. Whereas the universal element (Aspire to Know Workshop) caters to a whole year group, the targeted workshops (Aspire to Explore, Aspire to Learn, Aspire to Succeed and Study Skills workshops) consist of groups of approximately 30-40 pupils.

All workshops are delivered face-to-face, except for a virtual meeting with parents delivered as part of the Aspire to Explore workshop.

### **Where is the intervention delivered?**

Four workshops (Aspire to Know, Aspire to Learn, Aspire to Succeed and Study skills) are delivered in participating schools. The Aspire to Explore workshops are delivered on the Aston University campus, except for the virtual parents' introduction evening which is delivered online.

### **How many times will the intervention be delivered? Over how long?**

The full programme takes place over five years. Aston University delivers one workshop per school each year. The timing for workshops depends on school availability and preference. They last one to four hours, depending on the workshop.

### **How will implementation be optimised/tailored?**

The implementation can be optimised and impacts maximised when Aston University and participating schools sustain an effective relationship and continue to communicate their needs and expectations. By collecting constructive feedback from pupils and teachers, the workshops can be better designed to suit pupils' needs. Feedback is collected after every workshop to better understand the needs of the pupils and what could be improved. However, workshops are not designed or tailored to address the needs of any specific pupil.

Pupil experience can also be enhanced if they continue to engage in the full programme (despite it being optional after Year 9). Pupils who continue with the programme receive more workshops focused on skills, such as study, exam, and employability skills. These skills can subsequently strengthen their pathway into HE by influencing their academic performance, confidence and motivation.

## What assumptions underpin the programme?

1. Relationships with schools are strong and translate into good buy-in.
2. The eligibility criteria identify the pupils most likely to benefit.
3. Schools have a sufficient number of pupils that meet the eligibility criteria and are able to select them appropriately.
4. There is sufficient Aston University and school staff and resources to deliver all the workshops as planned.
5. There is sufficient and appropriate space available for the delivery of the workshops.
6. Pupils receiving the full programme are more likely to achieve the intended outcomes.
7. Parents have access to resources and technology to attend and engage in the virtual session.
8. The programme is responsive to diverse attitudes and beliefs, and provides pupils with knowledge and skills to progress towards their aspirations rather than change them.
9. Pupils are open to HE options.
10. Raising aspiration and improved knowledge, confidence and motivation can lead to attainment raising.

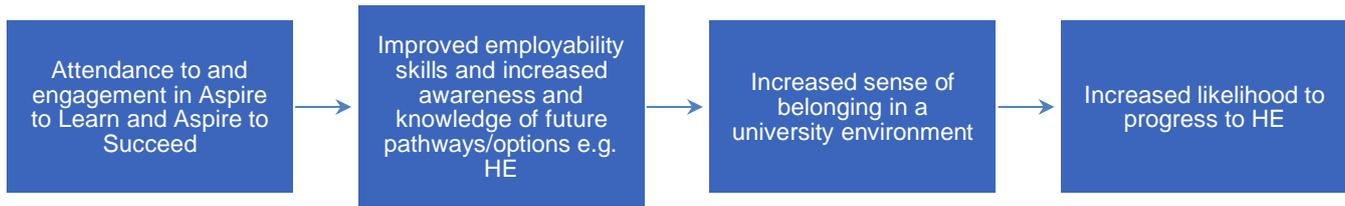
## What are the key risks to delivery?

1. Since the intervention is not designed to meet the needs of specific pupils, the content delivered may not be relevant to all pupils attending the session and/or not resonate with all participants.
2. Changes to key school staff can disrupt the relationships that have been built and maintained with schools.
3. Pupils not engaging in sessions can impact the extent to which they strengthen their knowledge of future pathways, including HE options, and develop skills associated with achieving their aspirations.
4. External influences or pupils' personal beliefs or preferences may impact pupils' interest on pursuing HE.

## What are the causal pathways?

Causal pathways explain how the programme activities are expected to lead to the anticipated outcomes and impacts. This section outlines the key causal pathways reflected in the programmes' Theory of Change and presents existing evidence to support them. These causal pathways are based on the assumptions and observations made by the Aston University team participating in the design and delivery of the programme, as well as on data collected through their monitoring and evaluation activities, and on underlying evidence base available. Please note, however, that the evidence presented here is not exhaustive.

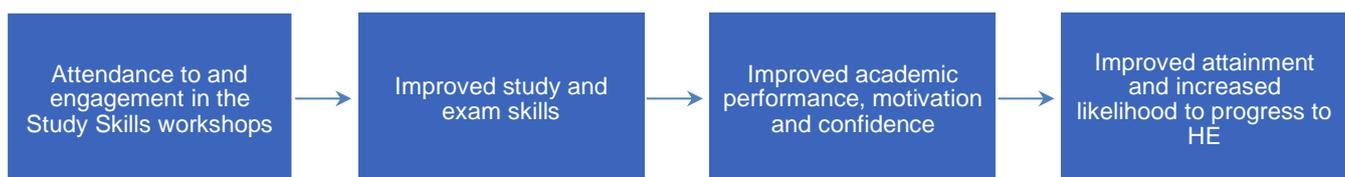
### Causal Pathway 1



This causal pathway hypothesises that pupils attending and engaging in the Aspire to Learn and Aspire to Succeed workshops – which deliver sessions on future pathways and skills for the future – will improve their employability skills and increase their awareness of future pathways and options, including HE. By engaging with Aston University Student Ambassadors and Outreach Officers, pupils can learn about the courses available, entry requirements, and funding options to access university. Through this experience, participants are expected to build confidence that they can succeed and fit in a university environment, increasing their sense of belonging. This is expected to contribute to an increased likelihood to progress to HE.

This pathway is supported by existing evidence that suggest that employing Student Ambassadors to provide information, guidance, and support to school pupils is effective and positive (see [TASO's Rapid Evidence Review](#)). Several studies have outlined that the reason why ambassadors are credited with much success is their ability to transfer “hot knowledge” (Austin and Hatt, 2005)<sup>2</sup> that comes from informal and unofficial sources. Despite this, further research is needed to confirm whether this causal pathway holds true and assess the extent to which this type of workshop and aspiration-raising activities translates into an increased likelihood to progress to HE.

### Causal Pathway 2



This causal pathway hypothesises that by attending and engaging in the Study Skills workshops – which teach pupils revision and exam techniques, as well as how to structure essays – pupils will have better study and exam skills. In turn, this is intended to improve pupils’ academic performance (e.g. by pupils applying the skills developed in the workshops in their lessons). Simultaneously, improving their skills could improve their motivation and confidence. Together, this pathway aims to improve pupils’ attainment and increases their likelihood to progress to HE.

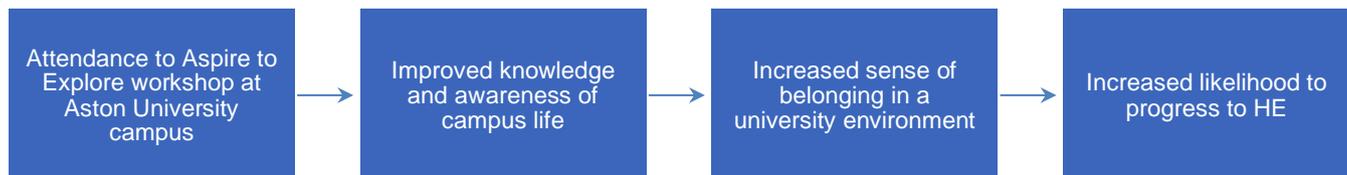
According to [TASO's Rapid Evidence Review](#), the strength of evidence for activities to develop study skills is emerging, as there is evidence that general study skills interventions contribute significantly to attainment yet the impact of these types of interventions delivered by Higher Education Providers on

<sup>2</sup> Austin, M. and Hatt, S. (2005). The Messengers are the Message: A Study of the Effects of Employing Higher Education Student Ambassadors to Work with School Students. Available [here](#)

pupil attainment has not been systematically evaluated. Therefore, further research and data collection is needed to confirm whether this causal pathway holds true and leads to improved attainment.

However, there is good evidence that shows prior academic attainment is associated with access to HE (Office for Students, 2022)<sup>3</sup>.

### Causal Pathway 3



This causal pathway hypothesises that by visiting the Aston University campus as part of the Aspire to Explore workshop and engaging with Student Ambassadors and University Staff – who explain the different University support functions and courses, and guide pupils around the campus – pupils increase their awareness and understanding of campus life. This is expected to lead to an increased sense of belonging in a HE environment as pupils can experience it first-hand. An increased sense of belonging is expected to contribute to an increased likelihood to progress to HE.

As mentioned in the first causal pathway, studies have shown the positive effects on engaging Student Ambassadors to inform and guide pupils. Some studies on programmes that involved campus visits also showed that these activities were positively associated with pupils’ knowledge of most aspects of HE and student life and progression<sup>4</sup>. Evidence on the effect of campus visits on learners’ intention towards HE is still mixed, but further evidence of a positive impact is emerging, therefore further research is still needed to assess whether this causal pathway holds true.

### Data collection opportunities

This section outlines the different data points that are currently being collected by Aston University and that can be used to assess the programme’s performance against anticipated outputs, outcomes and impacts. It also provides recommendations on future data collection opportunities where gaps have been identified.

#### Outputs

Aston University currently collects **monitoring information** that can be used to assess the outputs of the programme. Data collected include the number of schools participating in the programme and attendance data to different workshops, including attrition. Feedback surveys (see *Outcomes* below) are also collected and used to generate reports that synthesise the findings.

#### Outcomes

Aston University is able to assess its progress against some anticipated outcomes through different tools. Pupils taking part in the programme are asked to complete **feedback surveys** at the end of the

<sup>3</sup> Office for Students (2022). Schools, attainment and the role of higher education. Available [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> Patel R., Bowes L., (2021) Third independent review of impact evaluation evidence submitted by Uni Connect Partnerships. Available [here](#).

workshops. Surveys have been tailored to each workshop and seek to explore whether pupils report having a greater understanding of university (including the range of courses, support services and networking opportunities available) and/or improved attitudes towards HE. **Feedback surveys for parents** are also collected to assess their understanding of HE after attending the Aspire to Explore workshop.

*Recommendations for future data collection:*

*Revising the feedback **surveys to capture other key outcomes** such as whether pupils' confidence and motivation as well as study, exams and employability skills have changed after participating in the programme (self-reported). If surveys are collected annually (e.g. after each workshop), this could include a set of key questions about outcomes that are consistent to **track change over time**. For pupils who attend campus visits, short surveys could also include questions on awareness of campus life to further assess the sense of belonging in a university environment. University of Aston could explore using TASO's Widening Participation Questionnaire (can be requested [here](#)) which consist of questionnaire scales aimed to measure intermediate outcomes associated with HE access and success.*

*In order to assess whether participants' academic performance has improved, Aston University could work with schools to access pupil data and track whether their **academic performance** has improved since their participation in the workshop(s) – which is more relevant for older students attending skills-focused workshops. This is likely to require Data Sharing Agreements with participating schools.*

## Impacts

The assessment of the programme's long-term impacts is often more difficult to incorporate into monitoring and evaluation activities given their long-term nature. As described above, one option would be to set up Data Sharing Arrangements with schools to track participants' academic attainment over time. The assessment of other long-term impacts such as education pathways (e.g. whether they progress to HE) or career development would require longer-term follow-up with participants using primary or secondary data. One option available that Aston University already uses is **HEAT**, which allows them to check participants' progression (more described in the box below).

Overall, a future impact evaluation with a counterfactual<sup>5</sup> is needed to assess the effectiveness of the programme and whether it achieves the intended outcomes and impacts.

<sup>5</sup> For more information on evaluation methods, please visit TASO's Evaluation Methods guidance, available [here](#)

*Recommendations for future data collection:*

*HEAT members have access to data and reporting from the **HEAT Track**, an ongoing longitudinal tracking study whereby outreach participants are tracked through a range of administrative datasets to provide data showing their educational outcomes. HEAT members receive three HEAT Track reports annually which include information on exam attainment at GCSE and A-level or equivalent, as well as HE progression, which can be used to assess the educational pathways participants have chosen after finishing school. HEAT could be used to track outcomes for any pupils that took part in the programme.*

*Future evaluations should assess whether pupil-level attainment and progression data can be accessed for pupils who took part in the programme as well as a comparator group who did not.*