

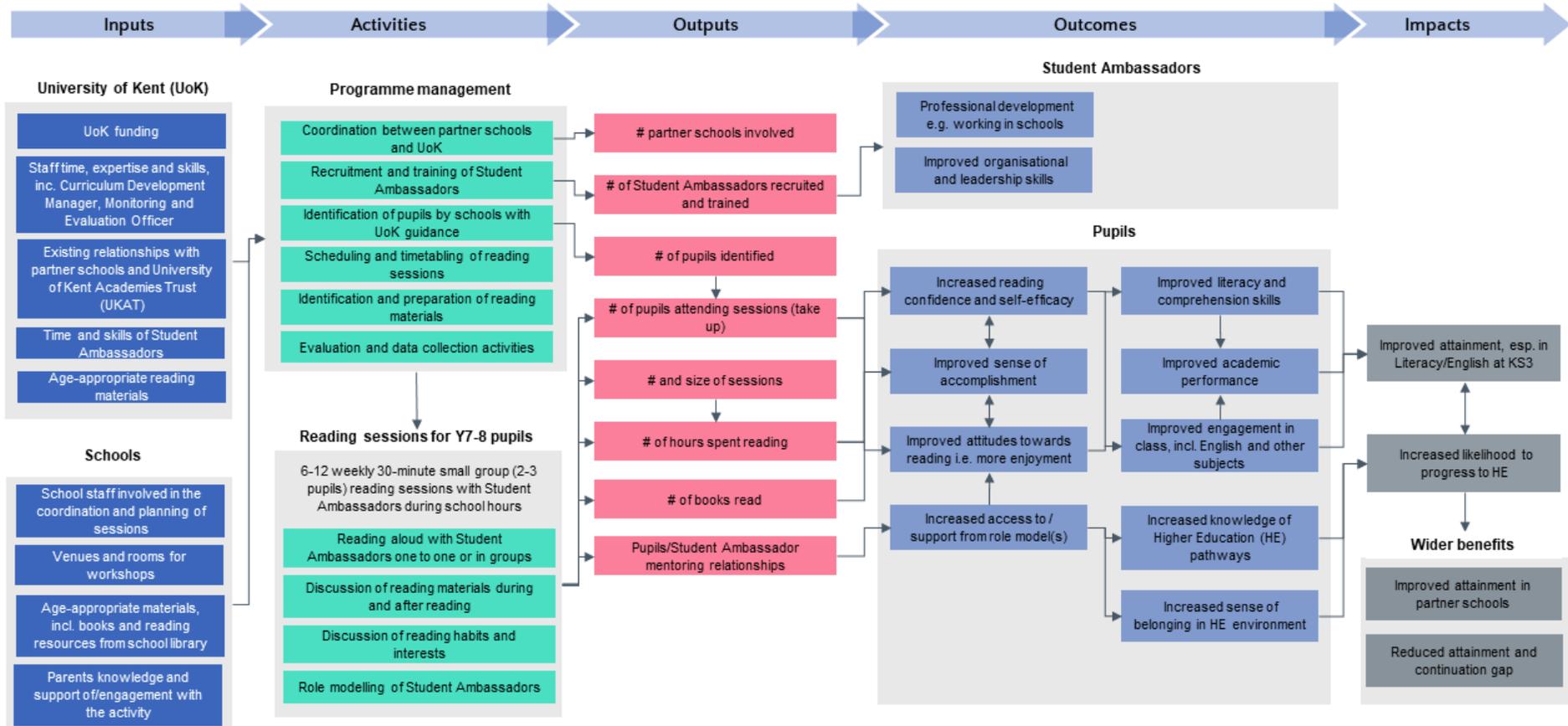
Theory of Change for Attainment Raising Initiatives Small Group Reading Support Programme

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Theory of Change diagram



Why is this intervention being run?

The University of Kent (UoK) partner schools include 40 non-selective schools and colleges in Kent and Medway, which historically have had lower attainment and a higher proportion of disadvantaged pupils – such as pupils eligible for Free School Meals.

Deprivation and the Covid-19 pandemic have exacerbated attainment disparities and led to pupils needing more support in reading and literacy. The lack of reading skills among pupils is often a barrier to progressing into Higher Education (HE), as pupils are less likely to obtain good passes at GCSE level. National research shows that Key Stage 4 attainment is critical to future HE progression (Crawford, 2014).

Based on existing evidence that literacy-based programmes can contribute to attainment raising, the UoK Small Group Reading Support Project aims to raise attainment levels across KS3 in selected partner schools, and increase pupils' confidence and engagement with learning. A secondary aim is to help pupils discover more about HE and to consider whether university might be right for them.

Who is the intervention for?

This intervention is designed for Year 7 and Year 8 pupils from non-selective schools in Kent and Medway who typically underachieve in literacy and/or English, and/or those pupils whose literacy confidence may be impacting their attainment or engagement in other subjects.

What is this intervention?

This programme pairs UoK Student Ambassadors with pupils in partner schools to deliver weekly reading sessions, with the aim to develop their literacy confidence and skills.

Inputs

For this intervention to be delivered successfully, sufficient resources (inputs), including both tangible and non-tangible, are needed from University of Kent and partner schools.

First, UoK funding is critical in keeping the project in operation. UoK staff time, expertise, and skills – including Curriculum Development Manager, and the Monitoring and Evaluation Officer – are needed to coordinate the programme throughout the year. The Outreach Activities Coordinators will be involved in liaising with the schools and managing Student Ambassadors – delivering training and briefings, monitoring attendance and collecting feedback. Additionally, UoK Student Ambassadors' time and skills are required to run the reading sessions and support pupils in building reading and literacy skills. Their attendance on a regular basis helps them build relationships with the pupils and models commitment and reliability.

The programme relies on existing relationships between the University and partner schools and inputs from partner schools are equally critical in mobilising the programme. These include staff involvement in the selection of pupils that take part in the programme, coordination and planning of sessions, and provision of both physical space for workshops – such as rooms, venues, and access to the school's library – and supporting the selection of age-appropriate reading resources for the pupils. Ideally the reading materials need to be in a good condition.

Activities

The activities for this intervention are divided into two strands: the management of the programme and the delivery of reading sessions.

Specifically, the management side involves coordination across partner schools and UoK to ensure that needs and expectations from the intervention are communicated clearly and promptly (see [Assumption 1](#)). Whereas UoK is responsible for the recruitment and training of Student Ambassadors (see [Assumption 2](#)), the schools need to identify pupils in line with the UoK guidance. This tends to focus on pupils underachieving in literacy and/or those whose literacy confidence may be impacting their attainment or engagement in other subjects (see [Assumption 3](#)).

Other management activities include scheduling and timetabling reading sessions – which require the involvement of both UoK and school staff – identifying and preparing reading materials, and collecting data to inform evaluation activities.

Activities for Year 7 and 8 pupils include 6-12 weekly 30-minute small group (2-3 pupils) reading sessions with Student Ambassadors. These sessions typically take place in their school library and during school hours. In exceptional circumstances they can be offered in a virtual setting. During these sessions, pupils and Ambassadors take turns reading aloud and engage in a discussion about the reading materials during and after each session.

Student Ambassadors and pupils also discuss their reading habits and interests, which can then help Ambassadors select reading materials that are aligned with pupils' interests (see [Assumptions 4 and 5](#)). Student Ambassadors are also expected to act as role models for pupils, which can indirectly support them in learning more about HE options.

What is this intervention expected to achieve?

This intervention is expected to achieve a range of outcomes for pupil and Student Ambassadors and wider impacts for pupils involved in the programme.

Outcomes

Outcomes for pupils

The groups aim to create a supportive and positive environment that gives pupils confidence to read aloud, make mistakes and improve. Student Ambassadors also help them to better understand the reading material (see [Assumption 6](#)). For instance, Student Ambassadors might help pupils look for words in the dictionary or discuss the story that is being read so it can be better understood and enjoyed. As a result, it is expected that pupils will have **increased reading confidence and self-efficacy** and **improved literacy and comprehension skills**. This environment is also expected to **improve attitudes towards reading such as enjoyment** and give pupils a **sense of accomplishment** when they finish books and become more proficient and confident readers. Positive experiences can reinforce and consolidate skills further, to support sustained interest in reading (see [Assumption 8](#)).

These changes in confidence, attitudes and skills are expected to **improve pupils' engagement in class, including English and other subjects**, which in turn can have a positive impact on **their academic performance**.

Reading sessions also give pupils the opportunity to speak to the Student Ambassadors about their university experiences and future careers. By building relationships with Pupil Ambassadors ([Assumption 7](#)), pupils are expected to **gain a better understanding of future pathways** and become more **aware of HE options** available.

Lastly, because of the intervention, pupils are expected to see an **increase in their motivation and confidence**.

Outcomes for Student Ambassadors

By engaging in reading activities with pupils, Student Ambassadors can **develop professionally**. They are expected to better understand pupils' needs and work with them more effectively by finding suitable reading materials. Student Ambassadors are also expected to **improve their organisational skills**, as they have to balance their university courses and their Student Ambassador role.

Impacts

On the assumption that literacy activities can lead to better reading skills (see [Assumption 9](#)), and that pupils have access to both appropriate and interesting reading materials (see [Assumptions 4, 5 and 11](#)), the intervention is expected to lead to **improved attainment levels in Literacy/English at KS3 and potentially other subjects** (see [Assumption 10](#)). This, combined with some additional awareness of HE options, is expected to increase pupils' **likelihood to progress to 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.

Who is delivering the intervention?

The intervention is delivered by self-selected UoK Student Ambassadors and overseen by UoK staff in partnership with schools. [Student Ambassadors](#) include current undergraduate and postgraduate students at UoK studying a range of courses.

How is this intervention delivered?

This intervention can be delivered in individual or small group settings. Pupils receive either one-on-one sessions with the Student Ambassadors or they are placed in a group of 2-3 pupils with similar reading skills and abilities.

Where is the intervention delivered?

This intervention is mainly delivered in-person in schools. School staff help identify suitable locations, for example, the school libraries. During the COVID-19 pandemic, some sessions were delivered online.

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

The 30-minute sessions are delivered on a weekly basis for 6 to 12 weeks. The ideal number of sessions is at least 8-10.

Will the intervention be tailored?

Since Student Ambassadors work closely with individual pupils or small groups, they are able to select genres and reading materials that suit pupils' interests and literacy levels.

How will implementation be optimised?

The intervention can be optimised when reading materials selected are age-appropriate, diverse and inclusive and aligned with pupils' interests. It is also important that there is a positive and trusted relationship between pupils and Student Ambassadors, and there are positive group dynamics that allow pupils to feel confident and comfortable engaging in sessions. This can support the development of a mentor relationship, where groups might talk about future pathways, such as HE.

The intended impact can be strengthened when pupils have access to reading materials once reading sessions end. This can encourage them to read more on their own time and gain a sustained interest in reading ([Assumption 11](#)). *The University will look to ensure suitable reading materials are available for pupils after the project, either by purchasing books for them or by working closely with schools to provide suitable materials.*

Ideally supporting or facilitating staff should be as consistent as possible to ensure limited time is not wasted.

It could be positive if parents are aware of the programme and supportive of its aims. This may even encourage reading at home(s). If a parent feels there is a stigma attached to the intervention or has concerns the pupil is missing time in class, this could create a negative association. Alternatively, if a parent is reluctant to admit their child is not attaining the expected levels or has literacy difficulties themselves, they may downplay the importance of practising these skills. Parents and Carers are also key in ensuring high levels of attendance, so pupils can actually attend the programme.

What assumptions underpin the programme?

1. Strong relationships between UoK and partner schools and sufficient school buy-in to support the project helps ensure communications are constructive and timely. This also helps stakeholders manage their time and resources accordingly.
2. UoK recruits appropriate Student Ambassadors – for example, they have strong social skills when interacting with young people and an enthusiasm for reading.
3. School staff identify eligible pupils who they perceive will benefit from the project.
4. Student Ambassadors can select engaging and interesting reading materials based on their understanding of pupils' reading levels and preferences.
5. Reading materials of the right length enable pupils to build on their existing reading skills without being exposed to content that is too challenging.
6. Sessions are delivered one-to-one or in small groups of 2-3 pupils with similar reading capabilities.
7. Pupils feel safe and comfortable enough to engage and interact with the group.

8. Student Ambassadors develop positive and trusted relationships with pupils.
9. Positive experiences around learning lead to more reading and better pupil outcomes.
10. Literacy activities can lead to better reading skills.
11. Improved literacy skills and increased confidence allow pupils to perform better in English and other subjects, thereby improving attainment.
12. Pupils have access to reading materials after the reading sessions and once the programme is completed (e.g., they have access to the school library).

What are the key risks to delivery?

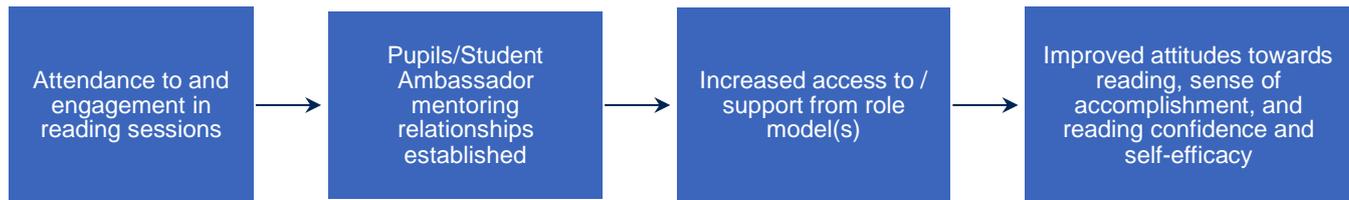
1. Sessions delivered using online platforms are not as effective since it is difficult for ambassadors to see the body language of the pupils as well as how receptive they are to the small group activities.
2. If pupils do not have access to resources and materials between and after the intervention, it could be difficult for them to sustain the progress made.
3. Some pupils might not find the selected reading materials interesting. This may discourage them from engaging in the session.
4. Negative group dynamics can affect the group environment and complicate engagement and progress.
5. Involvement in the activity may clash with other aspects of the pupils' schooling. It is important there is buy-in involved from all school staff to be effective. If the Senior Leadership Team or Special Educational Needs Coordinator are supportive but teachers find it creates regular clashes with assessments or the curriculum, this could impact upon pupil attendance and engagement with the activity. Some targeted pupils may be provided with several interventions e.g., Speech and Language Therapy and it is important the whole school works together to avoid clashes. There may be an 'opportunity cost' for pupils if they miss a favourite lesson or one where they can excel. Thoughtful planning may help minimise this. It could negatively affect the pupil's attitude and impact upon progress.
6. Venues for sessions need to be made available, but they also need to be appropriate – noise or interruptions will impede focus. A pleasant environment reflects the importance of the venture – squeezing a small group in a broom cupboard may be a last resort, but it shows the importance the programme is afforded by the school.

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 UoK team participating in the design and delivery of the

programme, as well as on data collected through their monitoring and evaluation activities, and on the underlying evidence base available. Please note, however, that the evidence presented here is not exhaustive.

Causal pathway 1



By attending and engaging in reading sessions, pupils develop relationships with UoK Student Ambassadors. It is expected that Student Ambassadors will demonstrate role modelling behaviour (e.g. displaying positive attitudes about reading and education) and be perceived by some pupils as role models (e.g. someone they identify with who successfully got into University). Through this role modelling behaviour and the direct reading support provided during the sessions, this pathway hypothesises that pupils will improve their attitudes towards reading, gain a sense of accomplishment, and increase their reading confidence and self-efficacy.

Overall, there are relatively few studies where the adults delivering reading interventions are University students, compared to teachers or parents. However, as noted by Lee and Szczerbinski (2021) who evaluated the Suas Paired Reading programme that included University students as tutors, they may offer unique strengths such as high literacy levels, available time, willingness to speak about HE, and the ability to act as a positive role model¹. While Paired Reading is a formalised intervention not directly comparable to UoK Small Group Reading Support project, the study provides insights that may be transferable. Overall, there was no evidence to suggest that Paired Reading improved pupils' reading performance, but there were positive subjective benefits. For example, parents observed changes in the reading behaviours and attitudes of their children, and teachers reported pupils' showing more confidence and interest in reading. Furthermore, many features of the UoK project align with those Willingham (2015) highlights as important factors in supporting reading enthusiasm, for example, reading in short intervals (e.g. 20 minutes), allowing students choice in selecting what to read, facilitating a sense of community through reading with an adult, and focusing on reading for pleasure². Overall, more evidence is needed to understand the role of the mentoring relationship and its influence on pupils' attitudes about reading, including the reading enjoyment, and/or reading confidence.

¹ Lee L. & Szczerbinski M. (2021). Paired reading as a method of reading intervention in Irish primary schools: an evaluation. *Irish Educational Studies* 589–610. Available [here](#).

² Willingham, D. T. (2015). *Raising Kids Who Read: What Parents and Teachers Can Do*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Causal Pathway 2



Building on the above, this causal pathway hypothesises that improvements in pupils' attitudes towards reading, sense of accomplishment, and reading confidence and self-efficacy will result in improved literacy and comprehension skills plus better engagement in class (e.g., pupils can follow the content of the class better or feel more confident in participating). Together, this is anticipated to lead to improved academic performance and attainment, which could also increase the likelihood that pupils progress to HE. However, for this to happen in the context of this intervention, reading sessions have to be tailored to the needs of the pupil group and different assumptions have to be fulfilled (See [Assumptions 1 to 11](#)).

The relationship between reading habits, positive reading attitudes, and attainment is well-established³. For example, exploratory analysis by Clark and De Zoysa (2011) found that reading enjoyment was directly related to attainment and indirectly through reading behaviour⁴. There is also a large evidence base on interventions that aim to improve literacy and reading comprehension, many of which are detailed in the EEF Toolkit and Evidence Reviews. For example, oral language interventions – which includes targeted reading aloud and book discussions – have a high impact on pupils' reading outcomes, particularly those with frequent sessions over a sustained period⁵. However, it is important to note that the evidence was based on interventions delivered by teachers and teaching assistants rather than University Student Ambassadors. There are a small number of studies involving University students, including the Suas Paired Reading example above and the Books and Stories intervention delivered by Bournemouth University, which found that guided reading sessions led to improved reading skills and confidence (Office for Students, 2022)⁶. There is also some evidence from volunteer tutoring programmes that programmes did not have to use a particular type of tutor to have positive effects on reading (Ritter et al. 2009)⁷

According to [TASO's Rapid Evidence Review](#), there is evidence that general study skills interventions contribute significantly to attainment yet the impact of these types of interventions delivered by HEPs on 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. If so, there

³ See for example: Department for Education (2012). Research evidence on reading for pleasure. Available [here](#); Department for Education (2015). Reading: the next steps. Available [here](#).

⁴ Clark, C, and De Zoysa, S, (2011). Mapping the interrelationships of reading enjoyment, attitudes, behaviour and attainment: An exploratory investigation, National Literacy Trust. Available [here](#).

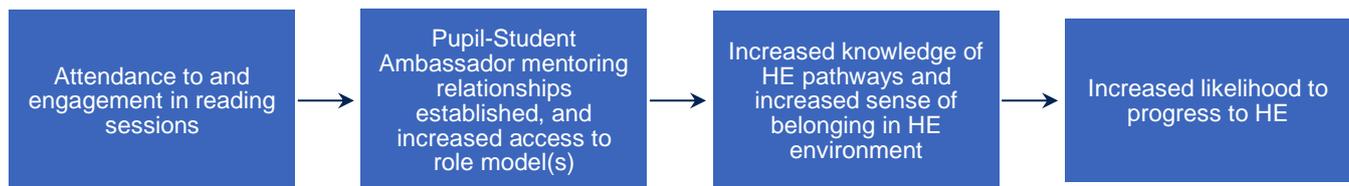
⁵ Available [here](#).

⁶ Office for Students (2022). Bournemouth University: Books and Stories. Available [here](#).

⁷ Ritter, G. W., Barnett, J. H., Denny, G. S., and Albin, G. R. (2009). The Effectiveness of Volunteer Tutoring Programs for Elementary and Middle School Students: A Meta-Analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 3–38.

is good evidence that shows prior academic attainment is associated with access to HE (Office for Students, 2022)⁸.

Causal Pathway 3



By attending and engaging in reading sessions, pupils develop mentoring relationships with UoK Student Ambassadors. As mentors, it is anticipated that Student Ambassadors share information about university, which increases pupils’ knowledge of HE pathways. For some pupils, access to and support from a role model is expected to support their sense of belonging in a HE environment. Together, this pathway hypothesises that the intervention will increase pupils’ likelihood to progress to HE.

This pathway is supported by existing evidence that suggests 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 ambassadors are credited with much success is their ability to transfer “hot knowledge” (Austin and Hatt, 2005)⁹ that comes from informal and unofficial sources. In their literature synthesis, Sanders and Higham (2012) report that the literature generally suggests ambassadors can be a role model for pupil and trusted sources of knowledge about how to access HE and the HE experience¹⁰. Despite this, further research is needed to confirm whether this causal pathway holds true and assess the extent to which this leads to pupils’ increased likelihood to progress to HE.

Data collection opportunities

This section outlines the different data points that are currently being collected by UoK and which 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

UoK currently collects **monitoring information** relevant to specific outputs, including number of partner schools involved, number of Student Ambassadors recruited and trained, and number of pupils identified by schools that could participate in reading sessions. UoK also collects information on attendance.

⁸ Office for Students (2022). Schools, attainment and the role of higher education. Available [here](#).

⁹ 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](#)

¹⁰ Sanders, J., and L. Higham. (2012). *The Role of Higher Education Students in Widening Access, Retention and Success. A Literature Synthesis of the Widening Access, Student Retention and Success. National Programmes Archive*. York: Higher Education Academy.

Outcomes

UoK collects **qualitative feedback** from Student Ambassadors and school staff that can be used to assess whether the anticipated outcomes are being achieved. Through informal conversations during reading sessions, Student Ambassadors also gather information that can help UoK assess progress against outcomes (e.g., pupils' plans for after completing GCSE). They also keep **diaries** where they record the books that have been read and take notes on the activities and pupils' attitudes and behaviours during the session. School staff can also provide qualitative feedback on pupils' engagement in class and overall academic performance.

UoK also conducts **pre- and post-reading sessions surveys**, which collect pupils' self-reported reading confidence, reading habits, feedback on reading sessions (only applicable to post surveys), and plans after completing GCSE.

In one school, the school librarian actively keeps record of books taken out by pupils over time. This information, if monitored consistently, could be used to **keep track of the level of difficulty of books** and reading levels.

Recommendations for future data collection:

*With the support of Student Ambassadors, UoK could collect information on the number and size of sessions, the number of books read, and the number of hours pupils spent reading as part of the sessions. This could be done through **monitoring forms** completed at the end of each reading session.*

*As part of the short **pre- and post- reading session surveys**, UoK 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.*

*To achieve **high response rates**, Student Ambassadors delivering the reading sessions should ensure pupils understand the value of completing the surveys and the difference this can make to improve future sessions. Surveys could be delivered through different means, such as online through QR codes or on paper.*

*Conducting short **pre- and post- reading sessions surveys and collecting qualitative feedback** to ask delivery staff and Student Ambassadors about any impact on their organisational and leadership skills, as well as their professional development.*

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. UoK have Data Sharing Agreements in place with partner schools and can therefore access **pupils' attainment data and track this over time**. They are currently receiving attainment data from only one school, although there is scope to collect data from other participating schools.

UoK are also **HEAT members** and can therefore access educational data for outreach students and other long-term impacts such as education pathways (e.g., whether they progress to HE) or career development (more described in the box below).

Overall, a future impact evaluation with a counterfactual¹¹ is needed to assess the effectiveness of the programme and whether it achieves the intended outcomes and impacts.

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.

¹¹ For more information on evaluation methods, please visit TASO's Evaluation Methods guidance, available [here](#)