



The Plus Programme Annual Report 2020-2021



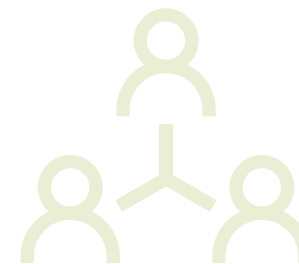
UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS



Improving equality of opportunity for our students

Leeds is committed to providing equality of opportunity for our students.

One of the University's keystone initiatives for helping ensure those from Widening Participation backgrounds have the greatest chance of success, at Leeds and beyond, is the Plus Programme. We act as a central hub with the knowledge and experience of working with and supporting the success of these students and our work directly contributes to achieving the University's student success Vision, as set out in the Access and Student Success Strategy:



What is Widening Participation?

At the University of Leeds and across the sector more broadly we know that while many students have positive outcomes, there are also gaps for some students in relation to their retention, awarding and outcomes. These students may share common characteristics such as where they are from geographically, their socio-economic situation, their ethnicity or their personal circumstances. These characteristics are used as Widening Participation (or WP) markers to identify groups where intervention is needed to improve outcomes. An Access and Participation Plan submitted to the Office for Students (OFS) maps what the current situation is at each institution, and shows where there are gaps and areas for intervention.

Our vision

The University will be a place where students from diverse backgrounds feel they belong, can thrive, and are valued for their contribution.

This work is important because we know from research and from performance data available across the higher education sector, that students from a Widening Participation background are less likely than their peers to go to university. They're also less likely to finish their course, be awarded as highly or achieve the same graduate outcomes.

Our approach

The Plus Programme aims to improve the experiences and opportunities available for WP students, and understand why gaps and barriers exist.

We act as a 'base camp' for these students, listening to our students' perspectives and through our activities and collaborations, we develop an in-depth understanding of their experiences. By targeting our expert support where there is need, our students are able to access the full provision of opportunities available throughout their studies to get the most out of their time at Leeds.

Our support includes signposting students to help, information and advice, provision of financial support, targeted mentoring schemes, exclusive events and regular communications to help students to feel part of a community.

"I feel like I belong a bit more at Leeds. If I didn't have the Plus Programme, I wouldn't have met the friends I made during my first year because the environment for us to meet would not have been there"

Undergraduate studying Chinese and Management

We provide support, ensure access to opportunities and remove barriers that might negatively impact on the university experience and outcomes for Widening Participation students.

To inform our activities, we use theories of change that look at each aspect of the student experience. A theory of change considers who we are supporting, why we are supporting them, what support is needed, how we will deliver this support and how we'll measure the impact of our intervention. Each theory of change considers different barriers or challenges that may exist for WP students and aims to support students to succeed; combined, they are the foundation of everything we do.

Theories of change



Sense of belonging: feeling well-settled and that they belong to the University



Financial security: not seeing finance/funding as a barrier to opportunities



Information and advice: being able to make well-informed decisions



Mental health: having a level of wellbeing that supports learning, helps students to manage change and enables them to build relationships



Confidence and academic confidence: enabling students to approach opportunities and experiences in line with their peers



Employability: equality of employability opportunity, information and access to networks



Who do we help to engage through the Plus Programme?

We support students from a wide range of backgrounds and situations, reviewing and targeting support where there is need. Students we support include:

- Students eligible for contextual admissions schemes (such as our Access to Leeds, Reach for Excellence, and Realising Opportunities programmes)
- Students who are care experienced
- Students who do not have parental support (i.e. estranged)
- Students entering university from a geographical area of low participation (using both POLAR and IMD measures)
- Undergraduate means tested scholars
- Leeds Masters scholars
- Students from ethnicities underrepresented at the university
- Refugees and asylum seekers
- Students with current or prior caring responsibilities

"I'm a mature student, a single parent and come from a working class background...I didn't know anything about university, I didn't even know how to apply...and I heard about the Plus Programme when doing my research and it was a big selling point for me"

First Year Undergraduate Social Work student

Listening to students

To understand the challenges Plus Programme students face and make sure our support remains relevant and accessible, we spend time listening to our students. We have a student-led steering group that meets regularly and feeds into our approach. Termly surveys help us to understand student needs and how we will continue to deliver the most appropriate support.

We also work closely with the Leeds University Union Executive and with societies including the Social Mobility Society, Commuter and the African and Caribbean Society, collaborating on events and activities and speaking to members.

"[The Plus Programme is] very open to listening to different students, it's not just a top down approach"

Third Year Undergraduate Sustainability and Environmental Management student



Becoming part of the Plus Programme

We automatically enrol students who meet the qualifying criteria. We're also happy for students to self-refer to us or for University staff to signpost eligible students to us.

Our impact

In 2020/2021, the Plus Programme supported 4,483 students from WP groups.

To evaluate impact, we mapped outcomes for our students in relation to retention data and also compared cohorts against similar students who were not on the Plus Programme.

96.3%

The overall retention rate for Plus Programme students in 2020/21

A comparison of like-for-like cohorts using the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) measure showed that in 2020/2021, Plus Programme students were more likely to stay on course.

The retention rate for IMD quintile 1 students on the Plus Programme

96.2%

versus

The retention rate for IMD quintile 1 students not on the Plus Programme

94.2%

*IMD – Index of Multiple Deprivation, a measure which looks at deprivation using a range of measures such as income, education and health

“The Plus Programme has helped me to feel part of the University and part of a community, and it’s given me the confidence to know that I do belong”

First Year Undergraduate Social Work student

“The Plus Programme has helped me gain confidence in different skills and knowing that I have loads of things to talk about as I graduate. For me it’s just been part of my degree, a big part of it....and it’s just been a source of constant support really”

Third Year Undergraduate Sustainability and Environmental Management student

“The Plus Programme has genuinely helped me to settle in well and get rid of the imposter syndrome I so often experience”

Plus Programme student, via end of term survey

Focus on digital poverty support for Widening Participation students during COVID – 19

To support student retention during this difficult year, we collaborated with colleagues across the University to ensure that WP students were not disadvantaged by digital poverty.

We contributed to the development of a process for laptop and Wi-Fi loans, including the identification of priority student groups. The Plus Programme team liaised with the University’s IT team to provide laptops and/ or Wi-Fi to 38 students. 18 of the students were from POLAR and/or IMD quintile 1 areas, 7 were care experienced and/or estranged from their families, and 8 were disabled students.



Dedicated support for Plus Programme Taught Postgraduate students

We’ve significantly increased our support for our Plus Programme Taught Postgraduate students this year, with the aim of easing transition, building sense of community and providing information and signposting to support students with post-graduation plans.

A new dedicated, fortnightly postgraduate newsletter was opened by an average of 61% of recipients and we ran a range of exclusive events from social to informative, such as a TPG Takeaway and Movie Night, and ‘How to Sell Yourself as a Masters Student’.

During 2020/2021, the Leeds Masters Scholars Next Steps Mentoring scheme was also piloted, which matched 28 students with industry professionals and academic staff, helping WVP students access relevant support based on their ambitions.

“This was a great scheme. I learnt a lot from the partnership and felt supported. I gained more confidence and we are staying in contact.”

Taught Postgraduate Student participating on the Next Steps Mentoring Scheme

Financial support

The Plus Programme helps students to access financial support via a range of funds.

The Opportunities Fund helps with access to a wide range of professional development opportunities including interview costs, training, internships and professional development.

£29,000

In 2020/2021, £29,000 was awarded to 125 recipients.

“The opportunity fund process was efficient and friendly from initial application to end and is so beneficial in giving those at an inherent disadvantage the chance to equal career success!”
Opportunity Fund applicant

Means tested scholarships donated by alumni provided £3,000 per year of study to 160 undergraduates in 2020/2021 and £5,000 to 60 students at Masters level. The difference made can be as fundamental as whether or not a student feels able to complete their studies.

“[Receiving a Leeds Masters Scholarship] 100% made the experience better. Realistically, I’m not sure I’d have stuck it out, I wouldn’t be able to produce the quality of work I have because I would have had to get a job. It’s lifted the burden and gave me the clarity to work.”
Leeds Masters Scholar

The Sanctuary Scholarship for forced migrants meets full tuition fees and provides up to £10,000 per annum towards living costs. Three scholarships were awarded.

“It’s helped with things like transport to the University...a laptop and a desk for studying. It’s really enabled me to feel relaxed and not stressed”

Sanctuary Scholar, Second Year Undergraduate Chemical and Energy Engineering Student

Outside of our scholarships, **over £150,000 of additional funding** was distributed to Plus Programme students:

- £2,000 through our LUU Clubs and Societies Fund
- £29,000 through our Opportunities Fund
- £124,000 on Christmas and summer top up payments for care experienced and estranged students
- £1,900 for welcome packs and housing guarantor services for care experienced and estranged students



Estranged and care experienced student support

In 2020-21, the Plus Programme supported 181 students who were estranged or care experienced. A dedicated point of contact liaises with social workers to support transition and priority access to scholarships, and additional financial support (for example, accommodation and kitchen and bedding packs). We also deliver bespoke activities for our estranged and care experienced students.

“When I was in college, I also became estranged from my dad and my extended family, and that was quite difficult because I didn’t know what it was. I did a bit more research and saw there was a lot of support at Leeds.”
Third Year Undergraduate Sustainability and Environmental Management Student



Access to Clubs and Societies

Sense of belonging is a key element of our work and this year we worked with Leeds University Union to support our students in overcoming any potential barriers to the Clubs and Societies provision, in recognition of the benefit of participation on students' experience at university.

As part of this work, we piloted the Clubs and Societies Fund, which aims to minimise the financial barrier and helps our Plus Programme students access the University's full range of clubs and societies. Students can apply for reimbursement of annual membership fees over £20 – for as many clubs and societies as they like – and this helps provide equal opportunities to participate.

£2,000

In 2020/2021, we supported 64 students to join 18 different societies, funding nearly £2,000 of membership fees.

"...It's helped me feel like I belong at Leeds....some of the people I lived with never applied for societies this year and you can tell they've had a very different first year to me. University shouldn't just be about the academic stuff, and disadvantaged students have already struggled enough to get into university so they shouldn't be excluded just because they can't afford to join societies."
First Year Undergraduate Communications and Media Student

"It helped, especially when it came to any worries I had...I'm getting to know people, there's safety, security, friendships and that social bonding"
Second Year Undergraduate studying Dentistry

Collaborating with other Faculties and Services

We link closely with other teams within the University, including the Student Success project, the Careers Service and the Lifelong Learning Centre. Collaborating with University faculties and services is crucial in terms of engaging with students and working with colleagues to identify barriers and curate opportunities. A strong institutional commitment is key to ensuring what we do has as broad, and as meaningful, an impact as possible.

Targeted support from the Careers Service

An ongoing collaboration with the Careers Service ensures that our WP students receive targeted and relevant support.

Four Employability and Progression Assistants (EPAs) with a specific understanding of student diversity encourage and support our Plus Programme students to engage with employability activity. University of Leeds graduates themselves, the EPAs deliver peer-like support through tailored one-to-one careers information and signposting to our students.

They also provide specific information based on widening participation research findings relating to for example, barriers to progression for underrepresented demographics, student voice surveys and postgraduate study, which feeds into the development of events focused on these key topics, as well as with regular newsletters.

Between August 2020 and March 2021, 54% of Plus Programme students logged in to the careers opportunities portal, 'MyCareer', compared with 46% of the full student population.

691

of our Plus Programme students attended at least one of a series of 54 targeted events over the year.

A dedicated Insight Day Officer also runs events with organisations to provide Plus Programme students with the opportunity to gain an understanding and experience of working for a range of employers. Each event offers the opportunity to get a feel for the organisation, ask questions and better understand what is needed to pursue a career in that field. This year 236 students attended 24 events in industries such as Tech and Digital, Public Sector and the Arts.

"I've had opportunities to improve my skills and learn more from a professional perspective. I come from a background where there's not that many people in those professional roles and...I need someone else to tell me how it works, so it's been really helpful"
Third Year Undergraduate Arabic and French Student

New areas of focus for 2021/2022 and beyond

Expanding our work with Taught Postgraduate students

We're continuing to ensure our relevance and reviewing what Widening Participation means in the Postgraduate space. Chaired by the Universities of Leeds and Manchester, we're closely aligned to the NEON Widening Participation in Postgraduate Study network and wider sector level research, as we look at how we can extend our Plus Programme support to additional cohorts of Taught Postgraduate students.

Working Class project

The Plus Programme team is investigating whether, in addition to existing metrics such as low participation neighbourhoods, looking at social class in more detail would benefit our students. We will work closely with students and the Leeds University Union's Social Mobility Society to prepare a manifesto for change co-created with students who will directly input on the priorities.

Student involvement

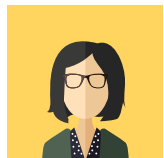
To embed increased student involvement into Access and Student Success work and policy-making at the University of Leeds, the Plus Programme is providing a mechanism and a forum to facilitate regular dialogue and collaboration between staff and students.

The Student Involvement project will offer a platform for students to work with the University to co-create policy and be even more involved in the development, delivery and evaluation of Widening Participation activity. The aim is for our students to feel as though they are an integral part of the University of Leeds community and the way that we work.



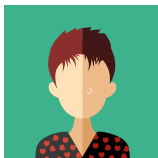
Your Plus Programme team

We are a central hub for knowledge and experience of working with students from WP groups, and supporting them to succeed.



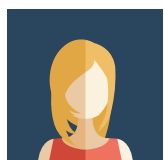
Jenn

Speak to me about: Plus Programme strategy, graduate outcomes, and our work on widening participation into postgraduate study



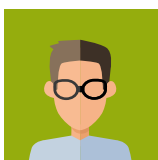
Emily

Speak to me about: student retention, equality and inclusion and sense of belonging



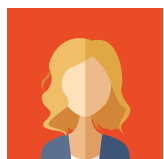
Elen

Speak to me about: transition to higher education and through university, student finance and student wellbeing



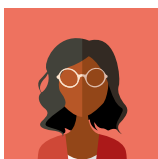
Alex

Speak to me about: employability, forced migrant students and evaluation



Lucy

Speak to me about: transitional activity for new students, peer mentoring and undergraduate scholarships



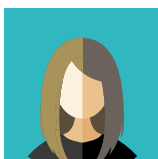
Naomi

Speak to me about: student voice, student involvement and engagement of students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds



Lisa

Speak to me about: estranged and care experienced students, students with caring responsibilities and mature students



Liv

Speak to me about: Plus Programme communications to students and our activities and support for postgraduate students

Get in touch

For more information about the Plus Programme at University of Leeds and how we support the success of students from WP groups, please contact us:

Email: theplusprogramme@leeds.ac.uk

LinkedIn: [University of Leeds Plus Programme](https://www.linkedin.com/company/university-of-leeds-plus-programme)

Instagram: [plus_programme](https://www.instagram.com/plus_programme)

Further information for University of Leeds colleagues is available on our webpages: https://ses.leeds.ac.uk/info/22254/student_success/1257/the_plus_programme

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