

HEIR Annual Conference 2025

**University of East Anglia
New Science Building**

Hosted by:

CHERPPS, The Centre for Higher Education
Research Practice Policy and Scholarship

University of East Anglia
Norwich, NR5 9NJ

Contact: cherpps@uea.ac.uk

Conference enquires: heir.2025@uea.ac.uk

UEA Conference Committee:

Prof Fabio Aricò, Conference Chair

Prof Kelly Edmunds

Prof Helena Gillespie

Dr Becky Lewis

Dr Ritchie Woodard

In partnership with



Programme – 4 September

09:00-10:00

Registration and Refreshments

New Science Building (NewSci) Foyer – NewSci 0.01

10:00-10:15

Conference Opening

Julian Blow (UEA Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research and Innovation)

Fabio Aricò (Conference Chair)

Rachel Bowden and Matt-Hiely-Rayner (HEIR Network Co-Convenors)

Room: NewSci 0.07/8

10:15-11:15

Keynote 1: Bart Rienties (Open University)

The role of artificial intelligence and digital assistance in student inclusion, retention and outcomes

Room: NewSci 0.07/8 – Chair: Fabio Aricò

Dr. Bart Rienties is Professor of Learning Analytics and programme lead of the learning analytics and learning design research programme at the Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University UK. He leads a group of academics who provide university-wide learning analytics and learning design solutions and conduct evidence-based research of how students and professionals learn. As educational psychologist, he conducts multi-disciplinary research on work-based and collaborative learning environments and focuses on the role of social interaction in learning, which is published in leading academic journals and books. His primary research interests are focussed on Learning Analytics, Learning Design, and the role of motivation in learning. Furthermore, Bart is interested in broader internationalisation aspects of higher education. He has successfully led a range of institutional/national/European projects and has received a range of awards for his educational innovation projects. He is President of the Society of Learning Analytics Research (SoLAR), the largest researcher community on learning analytics. More information.

11:15-11:30

Comfort Break

11:30-12:30

Research Presentations – Parallel Sessions – Informing Policy

Room: NewSci 0.02 – Chair: Helena Gillespie

Matt Hiely-Rayner (University of Sussex), Elif Unsal Ozberk, Benedict Watling and Mohammed Yakub (Buckinghamshire New University)

Beyond awarding gaps: developing a value-added metric to understand graduate outcomes in UK higher education

Degree outcomes and graduate outcomes – do these tell the full story of an institution's value and effectiveness?

This research introduces the development of a Value-Added Graduate Outcomes (VAGO) metric designed to assess how effectively UK higher education institutions add value to students' career progression. Drawing on sector-wide data, VAGO estimates the expected outcome of a student based on historical entry qualifications and demographic profiles and compares this to actual outcomes. This comparison highlights where institutions may be exceeding or falling short of expectations. Building on established value-added methodologies, such as the Value-Added Score from The Guardian University Guide, the project explores the potential of VAGO to provide a meaningful indicator of institutional impact. It aims to support evidence-based interventions, inform Access and Participation Plan (APP) goals, and offer a benchmarking tool for educational equity. Early insights into the development process, methodological design, and possible applications will be shared.

Laura Harvey (Loughborough University), Fabio Aricò and Ritchie Woodard (University of East Anglia)
Exploring educational gain as a metric to tackle attainment gaps and promote inclusion in higher education in the United Kingdom

This paper considers different conceptualisations of Educational Gain and their various implications for Higher Education Institutions and Policy makers. Our findings indicate that the interpretation of Learning Gain varies substantially by measure used and suggests different patterns of attainment gaps. We utilise institutional administrative data for mid-ranked English university, which considers itself to be both research and teaching intensive, to test different measures of Learning Gain for 7 cohorts of students from a variety of courses and with rich demographic data for the students.

11:30-12:30

Research Presentations – Parallel Sessions – Supporting Retention

Room: NewSci 0.03 – Chair: Kay Yeoman

Nigel Page (Kingston University London), Rachel Hunt, Lauren Albee and Alison Snape (King's College London)

Understanding the post-covid-19 student landscape – have we adapted?

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly reshaped the higher educational landscape. As we transition into the post-pandemic world, understanding its impact on students and adapting to their evolving needs is crucial. Our research across three London institutions, reveals distinct commuting patterns, with more evidence of students living at home and facing longer commutes to university since the pandemic, amid rising transport costs. Class scheduling has adapted little to student preferences with key reasons for absenteeism remaining single events timetabled on a day and the need for a later start (e.g. 10.00). Our data highlights the need to understand the impact on attendance when students perceive they are falling behind in their studies, and decisions influenced by class quality and social interactions. Additionally, many students reported non-engagement due to fatigue or physically or mentally illness. Ultimately, we reflect on how we can truly adapt to student preferences and address reasons for non-engagement/absenteeism.

Joe Mahon (evasys)

From comments to action: empowering practitioners with AI-driven student insights

Higher education practitioners face the challenge of extracting meaningful, actionable insights from the immense volume of student feedback, particularly within free-text comments from surveys like NSS, PTES, and PRES as well as internal surveys. This lightning talk will address common practitioner pain points by showcasing how AI capabilities can revolutionise the analysis of this qualitative data. We will briefly explore how AI goes beyond simple sentiment to identify critical themes, highlight nuanced student experiences, and pinpoint specific areas for intervention. The focus will be on demonstrating the practical application of AI to generate clear, actionable insights that enable practitioners to enhance the student experience, refine support services, and make evidence-based decisions, ultimately contributing to improved student retention and success.

12:30-13:45

Lunch, Posters, Sponsor Stands and Networking

Room: NewSci 0.01 & Foyer

13:45-15:15

Research Presentations – Parallel Sessions – Supporting Retention

Room: NewSci 0.02 – Chair: Ritchie Woodard

Marta Almeida Hill (University of Kent)

Investing in success: the impact of financial support on student retention and engagement

This research investigates the University of Kent's financial support package for students at risk of economic disadvantage, based on household income and area-based indicators of socio-economic disadvantage. The aim is to evaluate the impact of this intervention on student retention, progression, and success, particularly relevant at a time when many students are forced to work more to supplement their income. While academic support is often the focus, our research highlights that financial support is equally crucial for student success. Students need sufficient financial resources not only to reduce their working hours but also to fully engage with their academic studies. Using a matched-comparator group approach, we assess outcomes for students receiving the financial package compared to those who do not. Our preliminary findings show a positive impact on retention, progression, and success. We will share our analysis methodology, key findings, and implications for future interventions.

Nandarani Maistry (University of Johannesburg)

A different lens on retention: strategic responses to student risk in a developing country higher education context

This study explores how a higher education institution in a developing country supports students to progress through their studies and complete their qualifications, enabling their transition into the world of work. It presents the institutional initiatives at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in response to student risk, compared to selected UK and Irish universities. UJ uses strategic indicators, including module success rates, dropout rates, time to completion, graduate output, and graduation rates. Drawing on institutional data such as enrolment trends and the Programme Qualification Mix (PQM), the analysis situates retention initiatives within South Africa's broader challenges of massification, inequality, and change. The results highlight both standard and context-specific strategies, including financial support models, first-year transition programs, early warning systems, and epistemic access projects. The study offers insight into how universities can respond to student risk signals across the lifecycle to improve retention in different higher education contexts.

Gemma Standen (University of East Anglia)

Continuation: exploring why HE students persist through their studies

This research explored why undergraduate students choose to persist with their studies by examining the challenges and enablers they face and how these are navigated to reach desired outcomes. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining a survey (n=52) with semi-structured interviews (n=12). Harrison's (2018) conceptual model of Possible Selves informed analysis of how temporality shaped motivation and goals. Findings revealed students from higher-income households (above £35,000) reported greater confidence and engagement. Motivations were largely career-related or focused on improving quality of life. Key challenges included limited belonging, low self-belief, lack of support, and financial pressures. Persistence was often supported by personal routines and strong support networks. However, many students prioritised 'ought-to' goals—such as immediate employment—over 'desired-for' aspirations due to perceived competition and urgency. The study highlights a need for proactive, tailored interventions to help students plan effectively for long-term, meaningful outcomes.

13:45-15:15

Research Presentations – Parallel Sessions – Widening Access

Room: NewSci 0.03 – Chair: Kelly Edmunds

Paul Howard-Jones, Colin J. Davis, Lucy McCarthy, Martin Parker, Tom Ralph, Kate Tilling, Kaitlin Wade, Lucy Wenham (University of Bristol) and Joe Williams (University of Cardiff)

Student international travel related to higher education: carbon costs, wellbeing and recruitment

Scope 3 HE emission estimates now include student flying but often lack accurate data. Our study aimed to trial an innovative means to gauge student flying, to identify its extent and purposes and find ways to reduce it. Four departments at a South-West university required students (N=1709) to open a flying survey before submitting the year's final assignment (providing an 86% response rate). Student focus groups at four regional universities brainstormed ways to address emissions. Student flying emissions were almost 5 times the university's combined Scope 1 and 2 emissions. Most (63%) derived from international students, with 33% from the annual return trip, 42% additional homeward trips and 25% tourism. Focus groups emphasised flying to escape loneliness and the need for climate education. Support pursuing surface & UK-based travel, changing the academic year structure and more vacation social events could potentially reduce emissions while also improving student well-being and recruitment.

Kate Ayres (Durham University)

Out of our hands? towards collaborative accountability in elite admissions

This session challenges current policy assumptions about institutional accountability in widening participation (WP). Using Durham University as a case study, the research examines the 2019 centralisation of admissions and finds that, despite improvements in procedural fairness, the institution's social profile remained largely unchanged. The analysis suggests that student decision-making—shaped by cultural capital, social signalling, and institutional reputation—has a greater influence on access patterns than offer-making practices alone. As such, Office for Students-set WP targets tied to entrant demographics risk holding universities accountable for factors beyond their control. This session advocates for a shift in policy thinking: measuring actions and changes universities can actually implement—such as offer-conversion patterns and outreach breadth—rather than outcomes shaped by external behaviours. It calls for more realistic, system-aware metrics that reflect the complex interplay between institutional behaviour, student agency, and market stratification.

Francesca Plom and David Smith (University of Kent)

Evaluating an intervention to support boys from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds

The Championing Boys Programme at the University of Kent is a school-based widening participation initiative designed to address barriers experienced by boys in education. Grounded in research and aligning to the Taking Boys Seriously principles, the programme provides boys with a supportive space to explore their identity, develop confidence and engage more meaningfully in their education. This research paper will highlight how the university effectively incorporates and actions student voice within it's evaluation methodologies, drawing on qualitative findings from the past 3 academic years. Using a mixed-methods approach, the evaluation includes focus groups, reflective writing, and stakeholder interviews, enabling a nuanced understanding of boys' lived experiences and the impact of the intervention. The presentation will outline the rationale behind the programme's design, the evaluation framework used to capture change, and the ways in which findings have shaped both delivery and strategic direction.

15:15-15:45

Coffee Break, Sponsor Stands and Networking

Room: NewSci 0.01 & Foyer

15:45-16:55

Lightning Talks

Room: NewSci 0.07/8 – Chair: Helena Gillespie

Kirsty Webb and Sam Swinton (University of East Anglia)

Data-led interventions to improve BAME representation: a case study

Efforts to improve recruitment outcomes for BAME applicants were initially guided by the assumption that low appointment rates stemmed from a lack of BAME applicants, an assumption driven by limited data capability. Early interventions therefore focused on attraction strategies, with little impact. The implementation of a new applicant system enabled us to analyse data across the applicant journey. This revealed significant attrition through applicant, shortlisting and interview stages: for academic posts in the year 2023-2024, 65% of applicants were BAME, reducing to 38% of shortlisted candidates and 25% of appointments following interview. This raised important questions: was this the result of lower quality applications, were international candidates disadvantaged by a lack of understanding of UK employment practices, or was unconscious bias influencing outcomes? This lightning talk will explore the challenges of diagnosing barriers to inclusion, sharing insights from our data-led approach to developing meaningful and measurable interventions to drive outcomes.

Scott Knight (University of East Anglia)

Inclusive admissions, recruitment & marketing: a case study for collaboration within HE providers

This session aims to share the success, challenges and impact across UEA on developing an inclusive Admissions, Recruitment & Marketing strategy. Aligning UEA's student experience & education objectives, regional & national recruitment targets and Widening Access & Participation objectives, the strategy aims to champion diversity, ensure courses are accessible and that students from underrepresented groups are reached through broader marketing and recruitment efforts. The talk will highlight the agreed principles of the strategy, the data & insight used to develop interventions, give examples of initiatives that have shown impact and outline the key questions to consider for those

looking to collaborate within their institutions to maximise the impact of their widening access programmes.

Sierra Smucker, Rachel Bowden and Joanna MacDonnell (University of Brighton)

From transitioning to belonging: an examination of the relationship between an extended transition program and students' feelings of belonging in higher education

Institutions of higher education in the UK have invested substantial resources in recruiting and supporting students from underrepresented backgrounds. Following access programs that target pupils in primary and secondary education, transition programs are the first opportunity for universities to ensure all students have the resources and support they need to succeed. Research suggests that these programmes are critical for ensuring students thrive at university. However, there is limited research into whether transition programmes create differential impacts across students from underrepresented groups. Such information could help inform universities efforts to support students, improve retention of underrepresented groups, and improve outcomes for all students. This study takes up this challenge drawing on attendance data for a first-year transition program and mapping it to student feelings of belonging, engagement, and academic self-confidence. We then examine the impact across student subgroups, particularly those targeted in widening participation efforts across the sector.

Chun Hao Wang and Genovefa Kefalidou (University of Leicester)

Research culture insights from I-REACCH: differing perceptions and expectations at the University of Leicester

How do staff and postgraduate researchers at the University of Leicester understand and experience research culture, and where should the University intervene first to bridge the gap? This lightning talk shares early findings from the Wellcome-funded I-REACCH (Inclusive Research Environment Achieved through Culture CHange) Research Culture Survey conducted in February 2025. The survey mapped perceptions along the researcher journey, recruitment, career development, local environment, and empathetic leadership, and compared responses across the University's four colleges. Initial results show a common desire for greater space for creativity and innovation, but sharply divergent definitions of research culture. These diverse perceptions also influence expectations around teaching and research environments. The I-REACCH evaluation team will present insights on how fostering positive and inclusive cultures can inform pedagogical strategies, suggest prioritised interventions that integrate research and teaching practices, and reflect on how participatory approaches can enrich the academic environments.

Tomoko Torii (Waseda University) and Elena Zaitseva (Liverpool John Moore University)

Advancing EDI at university: reflexive practices in UK-Japan higher education contexts

This research presents preliminary findings from an ongoing comparative study of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) initiatives in UK and Japanese universities. It investigates how institutions embed EDI goals into strategy and practice, with a focus on dialogical and reflexive approaches that frame universities as learning organisations. Early insights highlight the UK's Access and Participation Plans as structured, data-driven interventions fostering cross-institutional collaboration, while Japan's staff job rotation system cultivates multifaceted perspectives, skills and experiences essential for improving inclusive practice. The talk invites researchers and practitioners to engage in reflecting on their institutional approaches and identifying adaptable frameworks for EDI implementation across contexts. By sharing emerging themes and challenges, the presentation aims to spark conversation on what constitutes effective, transferable models of EDI and how institutional learning can be strengthened globally. Feedback and dialogue will inform the next stage of this research, including deeper case studies and international collaboration.

Vanessa Dodd (University of Staffordshire)

Reflections on the first year of student co-creation to support the APP

This lightning talk explores a multi-modal approach to student co-creation embedded as part of our Access and Participation Plan (APP). Students play distinct and purposeful roles across our plan: some co-designed and informed pedagogy training delivered to academic staff; others were trained as evaluators and supported fieldwork across the APP, including conducting interviews and analysing the findings. A third group of students are working as creative artworkers to visually disseminate findings through zines and social media content. This approach not only ensured the student voice as part of the APP but also created developmental opportunities for students to influence institutional practice and build skills in research, evaluation design and dissemination. The talk will offer insights into our co-creation model, share lessons learned and invite discussion on how student supported dissemination can shape meaningful impact. This work aligns with widening access, supporting retention as well as informing inclusive policy and practice.

Alison Cullinane (University of Edinburgh), Sarah Gretton (University of Leicester), Ruth Deighton (University of Edinburgh), NiccoloTiango (University of Edinburgh) and Nigel Page (Kinston University London)

Data-driven insights and cross-comparisons into student perceptions of reflective practice

This presentation will explore the use of credit-bearing reflective portfolios in four undergraduate science programmes across three UK universities: Edinburgh, Leicester, and Kingston. Reflective practice literature highlights that engaging in reflection enhances learning, professional practice, metacognition and critical thinking, while also fostering a commitment to effective actions. Reflective portfolio initiatives can further support student retention by providing a deeper understanding of goals and aspirations, and by helping students connect their learning to employability beyond university. We present a year-long case study that offers insights and cross-comparisons into how students value reflective practice. This study also examines the affordances and challenges faced by students undertaking reflective portfolios in undergraduate bioscience programmes. Using pre- and post-questionnaires and interviews, we gained an in-depth understanding of students' experiences of accomplishing portfolios. The presentation will outline data insights into various reflective approaches and provide recommendations for adapting reflective practice in the future.

16:55-18:30

Rest Time – Optional Visit to UEA Art Trail - Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts

18:30-19:00

Drinks Reception

Modern Life Café – Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts

19:00-22:00

Conference Dinner and Networking

Modern Life Café – Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts

Programme – 5 September

08:30-09:30

Registration and Refreshments

New Science Building (NewSci) Foyer – NewSci 0.01

09:30-10:30

Research Presentations – Parallel Sessions – Improving Outcomes

Room: NewSci 0.02 – Chair: Kay Yeoman

Zhongzhi He (Macau Millennium College)

Home virtuality and suspension (xue fu): the sense of home among Chinese international students in the West

The proliferation of Chinese international students has garnered significant scholarly attention. Nevertheless, the examination of their homemaking practices remains scant. Conducting ethnographic research in the UK, Canada, and Australia, this study elucidates the dual-layered perceptions of home experienced by these students. It investigates the processes through which a home-scape has been crafted within these student communities. I argue that the students' conceptualization of home is synthesized through an online-offline nexus, populated with a wide range of latest Chinese digital products and services. This home virtuality – materializing a home environment through digital means – has crafted a comfort, familiar, and intimate environment. Moreover, the concept of home extends beyond the material to signify a strategic realm for social class maintenance. The period of overseas study is seen as a suspension of time, where interactions in the Western world are viewed as transient. Home is perceived as future-oriented and anchored elsewhere.

Lauren Flannery and Dr Elizabeth Scholefield (University of East Anglia)

Embedding relational pedagogy in higher education: a global professional development initiative

Relational pedagogy places human connection at the core of effective teaching, asserting that meaningful teacher–student relationships are essential for learning (Bovill, 2020; Di Miceli, 2023). Yet, in many HE contexts, current practices risk alienating students rather than fostering trust (Mann, 2001). This presentation introduces an innovative, research-informed professional development course for HE professionals, hosted on a global platform. Co-designed by experts in healthcare and education, the free 5-week, 20-hour online training promotes inclusive, student-centered practice grounded in kindness, empathy, and mutual respect. Participants explore theoretical frameworks, practical strategies, and lived experiences—drawn from both educators and students—to support relational and inclusive pedagogy. Ethical approval has been secured, and data from mixed-methods evaluation will be presented to demonstrate the course's international reach and pedagogical impact. This session will be of interest to educators, developers, and institutions seeking to rehumanise learning through relational practice.

09:30-10:30

Research Presentations – Parallel Sessions – Supporting Retention

Room: NewSci 0.03 – Chair: Fabio Aricò

Nicola Watchman Smith (Teesside University) and Joe Mahon (evasys)

Using AI to unlock actionable insights from student free-text feedback

Vast volumes of student free-text comments collected through surveys like NSS, module evaluations, and other touch-points hold invaluable insights, yet their sheer scale often overwhelms manual analysis. This session will present a practical case study from Teesside University on their innovative approach to harnessing these qualitative datasets. Demonstrating how leveraging AI capabilities to analyse PTES data can transform raw comments into a powerful source of actionable intelligence. The presentation will focus on how the evasys-Student Voice AI identifies critical themes, emerging trends, and specific areas of concern within this data, and how this methodology is being applied across other feedback sources such as NSS, module evaluations, and internal surveys. This enables the university to proactively address challenges, improve outcomes for students, enhance retention strategies, and more effectively identify students at risk. Attendees will gain insights into how advanced analytical techniques can lead to more data-driven and responsive institutional practice.

Mark Heazle and Julia Robathan (University of East Anglia)

From sidelines to headlines: sport and physical activity's role in student and institutional success

The benefits that regular participation in sport and physical activity have on the physical and mental wellbeing of individuals has been widely acknowledged for a long time but there is growing recognition of the role that our programmes and facilities play across several key strategic themes important to the universities. Building on the 2020 British Universities and Colleges Sport (BUCS) Position Statement, UEA has been at the forefront of developing research into the value and impact of sport and physical activity programmes delivered for students. The Sport, Health and Education Research Group in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning has published data that cross references students involvement in sport and PA, with key outcomes sought by the university. Direct correlations in engagement have been found to positively influence student recruitment, retention, conversion to postgraduate study, and graduate outcomes; contributing to the overall success of the institution.

10:30-11:00

Coffee Break, Sponsor Stands and Networking

Room: NewSci 0.01 & Foyer

11:00-12:00

Keynote 2 – Valerie Harvey

Graduate outcomes in Irish higher education: enhancing the evidence base

Room: NewSci 0.07/8 – Chair: Ritchie Woodard

Valerie Harvey is Head of Performance Evaluation with the Higher Education Authority (HEA), and is responsible for the development of institutional and system performance data reporting for the Irish higher education system. Valerie oversees two national surveys in Irish higher education, as managed by the HEA: StudentSurvey.ie, the national survey of student engagement and the Graduate Outcomes Survey. Over the last 10 years, Valerie has expanded the national evidence base for higher education by developing data linking infrastructure between the HEA and other data holders within higher education. Particularly, Valerie has led on the development of long-term graduate tracking infrastructure in collaboration with the Central Statistics Office, and developed new insights into under-represented

groups' outcomes from higher education. Valerie's academic background is in mathematics, statistics, computing and public policy.

12:00-13:00

Lunch, Posters, Sponsor Stands and Networking

Room: NewSci 0.01 & Foyer

13:00-13:50

Lightning Talks

Room: NewSci 0.07/8 – Chair: Helena Gillespie

Steph Copsey and Julie Smith (University of East Anglia)

Make it count - metacognition and access

Make It Count (MIC) Year 7 is a metacognition programme designed to help young people understand and enhance the ways they learn. Through a series of eight interactive workshops, participants develop problem solving strategies, build resilience, and grow in confidence as learners. A distinctive feature of MIC is its emphasis on reflective practice, with students regularly documenting their learning journey in personal journals. The project uniquely integrates the theme of climate change as a real-world context, encouraging students to apply their learning to a pressing global issue with local relevance. By fostering both cognitive and civic growth, MIC not only promotes metacognitive awareness but also inspires young people to consider their role as changemakers within their communities. The programme was robustly evaluated in a variety of ways, all showing significant positive impact on learners. This presentation will share project insights, student reflections, and the programme's impact on learning and engagement.

Julie Blackwell Young and Luke Millard (Abertay University)

Creating a new university student success strategy

This lightning talk will outline how Abertay University has reframed its new Learning and Teaching Strategy as a Student Success Strategy in order to support the institution in improving student outcomes and supporting retention. Abertay is an Adobe Creative campus and the talk will also showcase our use of Adobe products to act as an asynchronous consultation tool. The consultation tool includes consultation timelines, keynote provocations and the use of Padlet to encourage the reader to become engaged in the consultation process. We will show how we have used sector resources such as the Jisc Beyond Blended framework and the sparqs Student Learning Experience model as catalysts and prompts for our consultation work (both synchronous and asynchronous) and how we have then used the data from the consultation to shape the new strategy.

Janet Horrocks (Abertay University)

Empowering postgraduate students who teach: the impact of a bespoke programme of support

Supporting and developing postgraduate students who teach (PGWT) ensures that the experiences of both the undergraduate students and the PGWT are positive. At Abertay University we have developed a programme to support PGWT. To explore the impact of the ILTA programme on our PGWT we used the conversational approach of Heron (2019) focused on the prompts of: reflection, confidence, empathy and innovation. We found the programme both developed capability with the craft and mechanics of teaching as well as a shifts in thinking around the value of reflection on teaching. A benefit of the programme was the development of a community of practice and a support network among the postgraduate students. Are these outcomes shared across the sector by others who have designed programmes to support PGWT? We would like to start a discussion and find collaborators to extend this project to other institutions.

Evan Hancock (University of East Anglia)
The UEA's progression partnership

The Progression Partnership is a high-profile and impactful initiative led by the University of East Anglia (UEA) as part of its Access and Participation Plan (APP). It supports graduates with disabilities, neurodiversity, and mental health conditions in making a successful transition from university into employment. The UEA serves as a catalyst for systemic change in the regional labour market, aiming to improve individual outcomes which directly contributes to local and regional economic growth. From the outset, the network has embedded research and impact analysis to ensure meaningful, evidence-led progress. Driven by enthusiastic collaboration across Norfolk, the partnership brings together organisations committed to tackling barriers to employment through the exchange of ideas, best practice, and joint projects. It provides networking opportunities for non-profits, employers, and service providers. UEA warmly welcomes collaboration with other regionally rooted universities to amplify collective impact and foster inclusive and sustainable graduate employment.

Marta Almeida Hill (University of Kent)
Widening participation through partnership: The University of Kent's role in sponsoring a multi-academy trust

This lightning talk will explore the University of Kent's role as lead sponsor of the University of Kent Academies Trust, demonstrating how long-term partnerships between higher education and schools can enhance student attainment and progression. Through a five-level engagement model—governance, student activities, academic support, role modelling, and teacher development—the University works closely with Brompton Academy and Chatham Grammar to raise aspirations and outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged and underrepresented students. The talk will highlight key impacts on attainment and HE progression, showcasing the broader potential of university-led school sponsorship models. Over the past 10 years, this partnership has not only supported students in the schools but also provided the University with valuable insights into the challenges faced by its future undergraduate cohort. This collaboration has strengthened educational outcomes for school students while helping the University better understand the region's educational landscape, creating lasting benefits for both institutions and the wider community.

13:50-14:00
Comfort Break

14:00-15:30
Panel Session: Sunday Blake, Ann Cotterill, and Rhona McCormack
Student access, retention and outcomes: perspectives from England, Ireland and Scotland
Room: NewSci 0.07/8 – Chair: Kelly Edmunds

Sunday Blake is the Education and Parliamentary Engagement Policy Manager at GuildHE. She has previously worked as an associate editor for WonkHE where she worked on policy issues focusing on areas including gender-based violence, widening participation, and learner engagement and published research on student belonging, engagement, part-time work, and the cost of living. Prior to this she was President of University of Exeter Students' Guild where she supported the design and implementation of the UK's first No Detriment Policy during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Ann Cotterill has worked in higher education (HE) for over 30 years including research, university lecturer, head of HE at a large FE college and HE consultancy. At QAA Ann leads QAA's membership network for independent and specialist providers and its College HE Policy and Practice Networks in addition to undertaking a range of quality assessments, training and project work. Following from leading

QAA Scotland's micro-credentials project, Ann manages the QAA Cymru tertiary education micro-credential network and has recently delivered projects on student transitions in Wales and RPL.

Rhona McCormack is the Director of Student Affairs at the University of Limerick. She has leadership responsibility for a broad portfolio of student support services, across the areas of Access and Widening Participation, Student Health and Wellbeing and Student Support and Development. She has held a variety of practitioner and management posts in Irish higher education over 30 years, including in Careers and Educational Guidance, Project Management, and Access and Widening Participation. She also worked for a few years as an overseas volunteer in a vocational education training centre in Central America. She is currently leading an institutional review group on student retention and represents the University of Limerick on the HEA Policy Forum on Student Progression in Higher Education. Rhona is completing a Professional Doctorate in Higher and Adult Education, researching teacher experience of mature student access courses through a relational pedagogy lens, framed within current higher education policy contexts.

15:30-15:45

Closing Remarks – Announcement of HEIR 2026

Room: NewSci 0.07/8

Poster Presentations

Nigel Page (Kingston University London)

Using data to enhance personal tutoring, mentoring and teamwork

Personal tutoring, mentoring, and peer teamwork are crucial for students' emotional well-being, engagement, and sense of purpose. These practices foster lasting connections and support overall academic success. However, our data analysis revealed structural racism within our personal tutoring scheme and highlighted the need for dedicated mentoring schemes for certain groups of students. Our research illustrates how data has been utilised to enhance our personal tutor scheme, introduce greater peer support, increase transparency and support teamwork. Additionally, we have implemented targeted mentoring schemes informed by data insights. We will present pre- and post-intervention results that showcase the effectiveness of our strategies in closing awarding gaps and boosting student engagement.

Jen Coleman and Alice Bush (University of East Anglia)

Prioritising conversations with and between students to build community & belonging in large undergraduate cohorts: a collaborative podcast initiative

Student-staff collaboration is increasingly recognised as a powerful way to enhance the student experience, fostering a sense of belonging and authentic engagement that can positively impact academic success. This poster showcases a podcast initiative in the School of Psychology at UEA. The fortnightly podcast hosted by lecturers, features students discussing their university experiences with the aim of providing peer-led insights and support to other students. This podcast aims to create a space where students can be honest about their experience; through speaking about challenges that they face, and dispelling myths of perfection, students can help others to understand that they are not alone in their experiences and can be empowered to overcome barriers. In creating this podcast in partnership with students, we have witnessed the forging of meaningful connections between staff and students, leading to enhanced feelings of belonging and mattering, and increased engagement with learning experiences.

Evan Hancock, Caroline Stewart and Josh Gray (University of East Anglia)

UEA's Careers marketing personas

UEA's Careers Service, CareerCentral, has launched an innovative, persona-based engagement strategy to support students in their career journeys. By analysing data on student confidence and preparedness, we identified that many students were struggling in the decision-making and planning stages, hindering their progression to graduate-level employment or further study. To address this, we implemented a data-driven communication strategy, creating five distinct student personas based on their career readiness. Tailoring our messages to these personas, we provided targeted support at the right time. The approach has led to significant improvements in engagement, with increases in resource usage, event participation, and online hub interactions. This strategy directly supports UEA's broader goal of equipping students with the skills they need for successful careers and impactful futures. By prioritising student insights and tailoring communications, we've fostered stronger connections, helping students feel confident and prepared for their next career steps.