# Understanding IntoUniversity's impact on attainment:

**A qualitative research study**

**Report by Renaisi, September 2019**

# Executive Summary

## Introduction

**Into**University is a charity that aims to advance the education of children and young people living in areas with high levels of social and economic disadvantage and increase participation in Higher Education or support students towards another destination of their choice.  The charity primarily operates through 30 local learning centres and extension projects, and works with over 42,000 students each year aged 7-20.

The main programmes consist of **Academic Support** sessions (in the local centres); **Mentoring**; and **Primary and Secondary FOCUS** (multi-year workshop packages delivered in centres and at partner schools). **Additional programmes** involve building employment skills, enrichment opportunities, holiday programmes, and hands-on work and leadership experiences.

## Aims of this research

In order to progress to university or another chosen pathway, **young people need the required grades** at Key Stage 5.  **Into**University knows that the students with whom they work are **more likely to progress to university** than their similarly disadvantaged peers, but it is harder to establish to what extent these improved progression rates are the result of an impact on attainment.

A further challenge is that the programme is **multi-year** and **complex,** which means there are different student 'journeys' and wide variation in the amount of contact students have and the length of their engagement.

> **Into**University commissioned Renaisi to undertake a research project to:
> - Understand the impact that **Into**University's work has on students' attainment
> - Develop a theoretical model to underpin this and the work of the charity more generally

The link between attainment and young people's subsequent progression to Higher Education is **an important question** for the Widening Participation sector as a whole. This research explores **Into**University's particular approach to this challenge.

## Approach and methodology

An **evidence review** of studies on educational attainment and progression to Higher Education helped to inform the research. This drew on a wide range of sources to help understand the potential for increasing attainment in each part of **Into**University's work, taking into account that the evidence base is still developing and some studies are small scale and exploratory.

The research involved **qualitative fieldwork** with eight **Into**University centres, engaging with 319 people including young people, parents, teachers, **Into**University staff and volunteers, and other local stakeholders. This provided the opportunity for an in-depth exploration of people's experiences, drawing on their knowledge and insight into the difference **Into**University makes for young people.
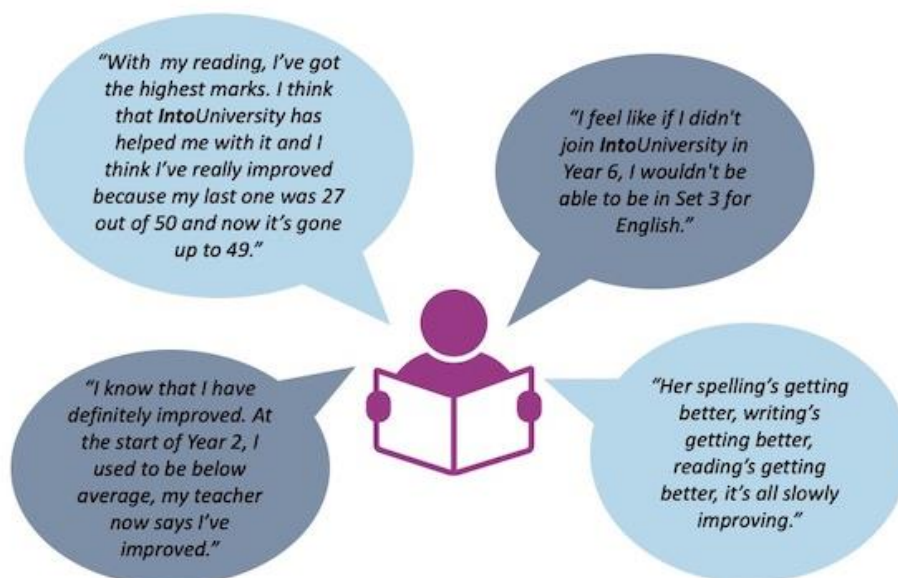
A **draft theoretical model** was developed, tested and revised throughout the project. This helped to articulate **Into**University's **goals**; the **barriers** young people face in progressing to university; the **outcomes** that young people achieve through engaging with the charity; and the ways that different **activities**, programme **design** features, and a distinctive **culture** might be linked to increased attainment.

> The research has helped to advance **Into**University's **theoretical understanding** of their approach, what is essential in how their programme operates, and how people **experience** it – culminating in a **holistic theoretical model** that validates the way that **Into**University addresses a range of needs, and an **attainment theoretical model** which focuses on how the charity's work supports increased attainment.

## Does IntoUniversity have an impact on attainment?

Throughout the qualitative research young people and parents provided **many examples of increased attainment** which they attributed in part to their engagement with **Into**University. Examples included: moving up levels of sets in school; receiving better marks; gradual improvements in core academic skills; and catching up when they were behind. Importantly, the research found that in some cases impact on attainment can be achieved over a relatively **short period** of time.



"With my reading, I've got the highest marks. I think that **Into**University has helped me with it and I think I've really improved because my last one was 27 out of 50 and now it's gone up to 49."

"I feel like if I didn't join **Into**University in Year 6, I wouldn't be able to be in Set 3 for English."

"I know that I have definitely improved. At the start of Year 2, I used to be below average, my teacher now says I've improved."

"Her spelling's getting better, writing's getting better, reading's getting better, it's all slowly improving."

## The relationship between outcomes and attainment

At the outset, **Into**University identified the **main barriers** that disadvantaged young people face in progressing to university, recognising that there are individual, home and community factors that can all impact on disadvantaged young people in different ways. These were accompanied by a cluster of **high-level outcomes** that cut across **Into**University's programmes and support young people to mitigate the impact of the barriers. The relationship between these outcomes and attainment was then explored through the qualitative fieldwork and existing literature.

| | Key findings from the research | Link to attainment |
|---|---|---|
| **Attitudes to learning** | Positive **attitudes to learning** are important for progression to Higher Education. **Into**University addresses this barrier in ways that help young people to value education more and by equipping them with metacognitive and other core skills that support their learning. | There is some evidence of a link between attitudes to learning and attainment. **Metacognition** and **self-regulation** have a high level of impact on attainment, as do approaches that help young people think about what they learn |
| **Lacking softer skills** | **Softer skills** such as confidence, resilience and communication have a positive link to future educational outcomes. **Into**University supports the development of social and life skills, builds young people's confidence and opens up opportunities to enriching experiences. | There is a stronger link between **confidence, happiness and wellbeing** and attainment compared to some other soft skills. There is some evidence that engagement in **extra-curricular activities** also play a role in attainment. |
| **Motivation and aspiration to go to university** | **Motivations and aspirations** play an important role in determining whether a young person progresses to university. Not all disadvantaged young people lack aspiration – the barrier is often more to do with the challenges of living in deprivation. **Into**University supports young people to have greater optimism about the future. | The role played by motivation and aspiration in influencing attainment has been more difficult to establish, but the evidence suggests that **aspiration-raising** interventions have the most impact on attainment when **combined with academic support**. |
| **Knowledge of HE progression and pathways** | **Knowledge of Higher Education and pathways** is a key barrier to university access. **Into**University supports young people to acquire this knowledge and gives them the skills to make more informed choices, and navigate opportunities. | Increased knowledge of Higher Education can help to **reinforce aspirations and expectations** in terms of what young people may view as achievable. However, there is little evidence of this having an impact on attainment. |
| **Supportive and aspirational familial and community contexts** | It is important to ensure that parental knowledge of Higher Education and pathways grows alongside their children's. **Into**University was seen as helping to increase this knowledge and also help with some wider positive aspects of family life. | Evidence of the relationship between parental aspirations and attainment is mixed. However **securing and maintaining parental involvement** in a child's education has been shown to have a positive link to attainment. |

The research confirmed that the **key outcomes that Into**University **focuses on are all important** for helping young people to progress to Higher Education. However, stakeholders found it harder to isolate which outcomes made the most difference to young people's grades. The discussions focused on the **interrelated nature of the changes young people experience** - reflecting the holistic way in which the programmes operate. As a result, a recommendation from the research was to cluster the outcomes into **three main groupings** that mirror the key features of **Into**University's programme – developing **social and emotional skills; improving academic and learning experiences;** and **support for the future.**

The research has helped to develop **Into**University's understanding about which changes for young people might have most impact on attainment. The revised attainment theoretical model identifies:

- **Essential outcomes:** these are vital for academic success. **Into**University supports development of metacognitive skills, literacy and numeracy skills, and confidence in academic abilities.

These essential outcomes are supported by:

- **Motivational support:** this enables young people to link learning to future success, increases their expectations of what can be achieved in the future, and bolsters enjoyment of learning.

- **Foundational outcomes:** these play an important role in attainment but are also key outcomes for young people more generally. These require ongoing reinforcement, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. These outcomes include confidence and wellbeing, and resilience to persevere and cope with difficult circumstances.

## Relationship between programme activities and attainment

**Into**University provides a **range of different activities** for students across their standard and additional programme strands. **Supporting academic learning** is fundamental in some of the activities, enhancing core academic skills; whilst others are more focused on **raising aspirations** or developing key **life skills.**

> The research explored which **combinations of programme strands and activities** were viewed as making the most significant contribution to attainment.
>
> The evidence from the literature and the fieldwork both support the value of **Academic Support** and the model of small-group tutoring outside of school.
>
> Stakeholders also felt that th**e combination of Academic Support and Mentoring** can enhance impact – especially when the mentor is chosen for a student based on their academic needs.

The research identified other aspects of **Into**University's work that might have less impact on attainment but **open doors to a range of opportunities** that young people might not otherwise have – particularly **extra-curricular activities** through the additional programmes.

In order to capture the different ways in which young people experience **Into**University's support (for example the Secondary FOCUS programme reaches the highest number of students but is less focused on attainment), the attainment model that was produced as part of this research
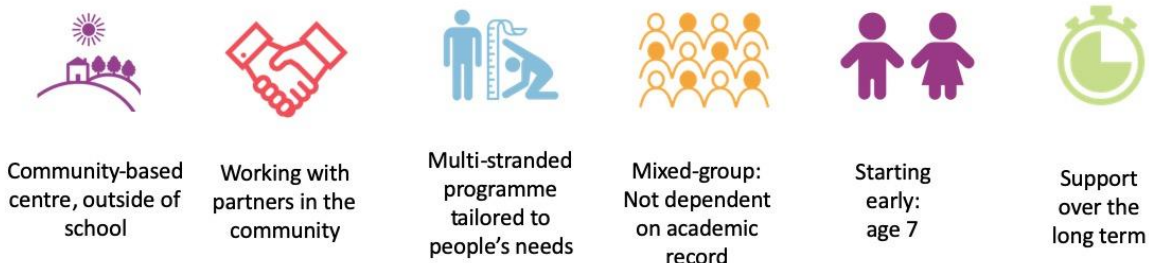
focuses on the **components and activities *within* strands** that support attainment, capturing the cross-cutting elements with which young people come into contact with during their journey:

- Having **1-2-1** attention and tailored support from highly trained practitioners – helping with revision, coursework and exams

- Direct **practical support** at critical moments – e.g. preparing for SATs, GCSEs, and the transition to university

- Opportunities for **self-directed learning** – e.g. independent learning projects

- Opportunities to be **curious about learning** with activities that bring the curriculum to life and practical groupwork tasks

- Being **pushed outside of comfort zones** with a variety of enrichment activities

## The other features of IntoUniversity's work and the relationship to attainment

There are a number of **conscious design choices Into**University has made, to approach their work in a particular way, as well as a **distinctive culture and ethos.** These features are viewed as unique compared to **Into**University's competitors.

### Programme design features

| Community-based centre, outside of school | Working with partners in the community | Multi-stranded programme tailored to people's needs | Mixed-group: Not dependent on academic record | Starting early: age 7 | Support over the long term |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

### Culture/ethos features

| Settings: safe and encouraging environment | People: Positive and trusting relationships with peers and role models | Approach: positive feedback and praise | **Into**University's core organisational values |
|---|---|---|---|

The following aspects of **Into**University's **programme design** emerged in the research as most likely to play a contribution in closing the gap in attainment:

- **Early and long term:** Young people's aspirations and motivations start to form at a relatively young age. Interventions that start early help to normalise participation in university. Stakeholders in the research also felt that it is important to spark an early interest in education and provide much-needed continuity and stability in young people's lives.

- **Differentiated/adaptable:** This aspect of the model gives staff a range of tools to refer young people between different strands and hone in on what young people need. Students in particular valued the adaptability of **Into**University's model and described how the programme 'grows with them' throughout their journey.

- **Non-selective or mixed-ability student cohorts:** This has been shown to have positive effects on raising attainment, especially for those with low prior attainment. Teachers were especially positive towards **Into**University's decision not to exclude students based on prior attainment as doing so often leaves out those who have the potential to flourish but fail to meet criteria associated with high achievers.

Evidence on the impact of place-based or partnership working on attainment is more limited. However, the way that centres are **developing partnerships**, and **responding to their local context** is reflected in the literature as good practice and fundamental to **Into**University's offer.

**Into**University's **culture and ethos** are integral to the way they work with young people and intertwined with other features of the programme. Stakeholders felt that the following were essential in indirectly helping to support attainment by creating **conditions where young people can thrive and develop a commitment to learning:**

- **A friendly, safe and welcoming space:** Young people highlighted that centres were places to which they liked to come at the end of the day where they felt more relaxed, were free from distraction, and where they could concentrate on their school work.

- **Support and encouragement from peers, staff and volunteers**: The high staff-to-student ratio in centres enables relationship building in a meaningful way. It was apparent that a focus on wellbeing is a key part of **Into**University's culture and this weaves through many aspects of the programmes, with the pastoral aspects of support being particularly valued.

- **Interactions based on trust and respect:** The **Into**University approach is based on positive action which runs through its behaviour management and culture. Students regularly receive positive feedback and praise, and staff and volunteers avoid negative judgement. This helps to foster a sense of self-belief and builds academic confidence.

Isolating the impact of **Into**University's unique approach to working with young people on attainment is difficult, as the research suggests that these features are at the core of how the charity operates. The research has drawn out **key ingredients** and **experiences** that bolster the impact that **Into**University's work has on attainment and supporting young people's engagement.

## Implications and recommendations

The key message of this research is that **Into**University delivers a holistic and supportive programme and can be confident that there are many ways in which this supports increased attainment. The holistic model is explored in more detail and presented in the full report.

The attainment model, presented below, captures the "attainment story" and begins to address the complex relationship between all of **Into**University's work and its impact on attainment. The attainment model presents the **main outcomes and activities** that are well supported by evidence from existing literature and the insights generated from the qualitative research, as well as the **key ingredients that** stakeholders highlighted as being important.
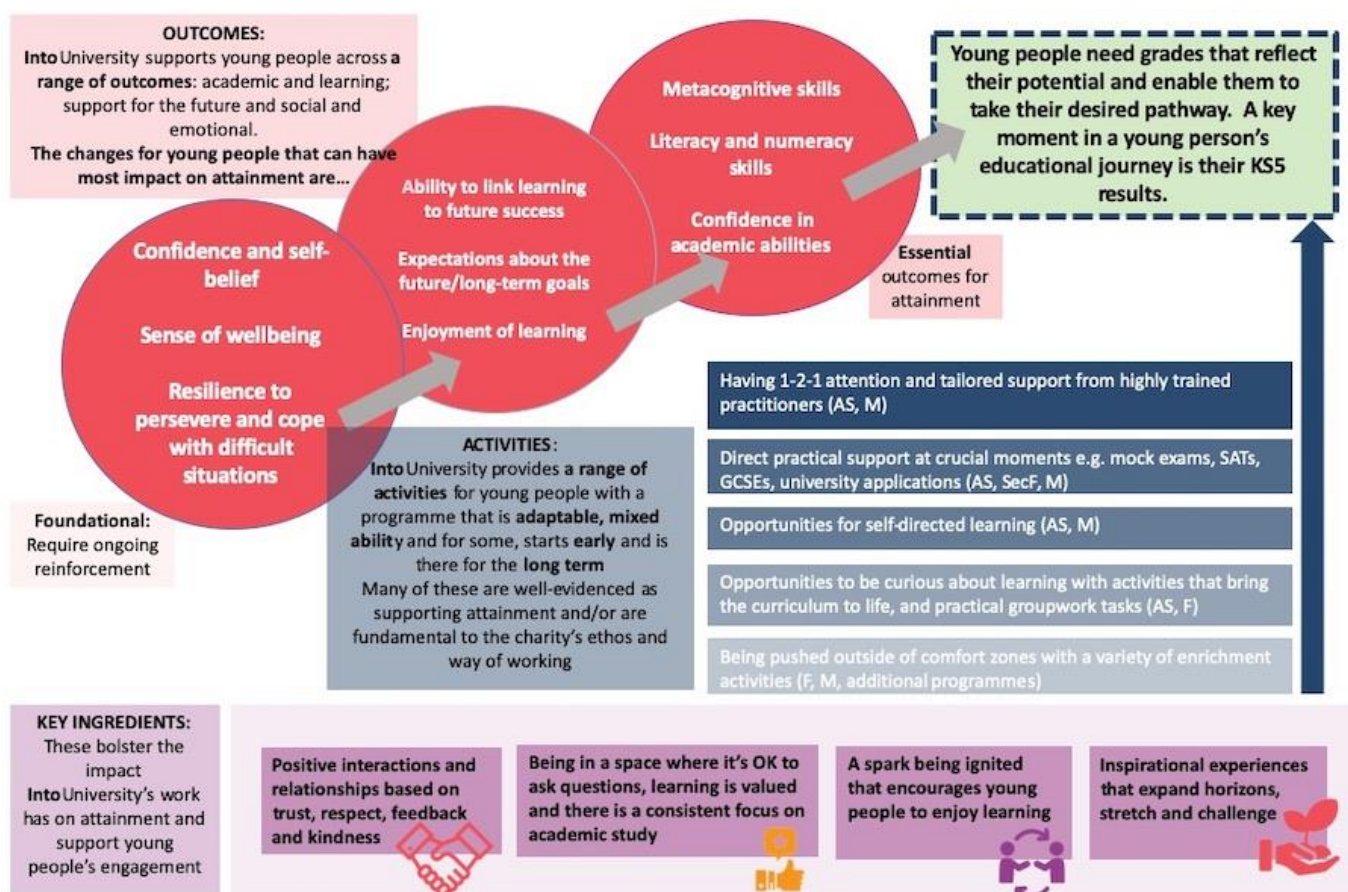
Based on the findings, the report makes a number of recommendations for aspects of **existing programmes that could be adapted** and areas that **Into**University could develop with future resource in order to potentially increase their impact on attainment. These include:

- Provide **more opportunities for group-based learning** in Secondary Academic Support in order to develop key learning skills and techniques in combination with focused and 1-2-1 academic support.

- Include more **direct and targeted support** at Academic Support and FOCUS for key academic milestones such as mock exams, GCSEs, A-Levels, and SATs.

- Adapt **Primary and Secondary FOCUS programmes** to include more content that targets the development of metacognitive skills. Where possible, hold more Secondary FOCUS workshops **out of schools** and in centres.

- Develop the **specialisms of staff and volunteers** across both Academic Support and mentoring – for example, in English and STEM, EAL, SEN, and A-Level subjects.

- Deliver programmes that aim to **increase parental engagement** in their children's learning given the importance of this for young people's attainment and progression, and **Into**University's goal of creating a supportive community.

The report also recommends that **Into**University could do more to understand their **reach** and identify **strategies** that might help them engage more excluded young people.