

Centre for the Evaluation of Access Participation
and Student Success (CEAPSS)

APP evaluation of Thrive festival 2024-25

Lead author: Dr Tamara McNeill, Impact Evaluation and Insight
Team

Evaluation report: process insights

August 2026

Approved for external circulation

Table of contents

Table of contents	2
Background and introduction	2
Aims and objectives	3
Methodology	3
Findings	4
Recommendations	5
Conclusions	5

Background and introduction

Thrive is a week-long annual enterprise festival held as part of Global Entrepreneurship Week held by Brookes Enterprise Support. It was included within the Progression Intervention Strategy in the Oxford Brookes Access and Participation Plan (APP) 2025 to 2029 to deliver events focused on developing broader skills and aspirations rather than specifically encouraging business start-ups.

Primary risks identified in the APP	Other risks	Relevant APP Objectives
R2: Knowledge, skills and experience R4: Belonging and shaping	R5: Student support	O5: To improve progression to further study or higher-level employment for students from IMD Q1+2 postcodes. O6: To improve progression to further study or higher-level employment for students from Asian, black, mixed and other ethnicities (ABMO).

Thrive was anticipated to support these objectives by helping participating students to develop a better understanding of the career pathways available to them; providing exposure to positive role models with relevant backgrounds; and supporting the development of skills to aid post-graduation progression. Participation was also expected to contribute to increased sense of belonging and greater self-efficacy (confidence) in relation to employment, enterprise or further study, alongside the development of more informed post-graduation intentions.

The festival comprised a programme of 13 in-person and online events open to students, staff and the public. It should be noted that Thrive is an established annual event and not developed specifically as an APP activity. The initial phase of evaluation was designed to develop a fuller understanding of the potential for Thrive, in its current form, to contribute to APP objectives. It also aimed to establish a baseline and generate learning to inform decisions about the future evaluation and development of the activity.

Aims and objectives

The evaluation focused primarily on implementation and process rather than the measurement of outcomes, although the data collected and findings generated provided some insight into the nature of potential outcomes. The study also adopted a broadly formative approach, with the intention of generating learning that could inform the future development of the activity.

A participatory and co-creative approach was taken, working with six student partners, employed as APP Consultants and recruited through the Oxford Brookes' students as partners initiative, operated through the Oxford Centre for Academic Enhancement and Development. All Student Partner roles are paid at the Living Wage rate.

The study employed a predominantly qualitative, participatory methodology, combining participant observation with analysis of management information.

The evaluation questions for Thrive in this first year of the 2025 to 2029 APP were:

- To what extent does Thrive in its current form have potential to contribute to the achievement of APP objectives?
- How might future iterations of Thrive or similar activities contribute to the achievement of APP objectives?
- What can be learned from Thrive and this evaluation to inform the wider delivery of the APP and support the achievement of its objectives?

Methodology

Two experienced APP Consultants worked as members of the evaluation team to co-create the methodology and data collection tools. The evaluation team also worked collaboratively with the Thrive organisers to design and implement the evaluation.

The study employed a predominantly qualitative, participatory methodology, combining participant observation with analysis of management information where available. All 13 Thrive events were attended by at least one APP consultant with some sessions also attended by members of staff. Each APP Consultant observer attended a minimum of two sessions, resulting in a total of 23 individual observations.

Following the observation period, an online debriefing and focus group session was held with the APP Consultants to consider Thrive's potential to contribute to the APP objectives and aspirations. The session was recorded and automatically transcribed using Google Meet.

Qualitative data from the observations and debriefing session was analysed thematically and considered in relation to the outcomes for Thrive articulated in the APP. Good practice in qualitative research was followed throughout the study, including checking and discussing emerging findings with the participant observers.

Findings

In combination, Thrive's extra-curricular format and its focus on enterprise, entrepreneurship and industry provide opportunities for students to engage with industry, explore and develop some relevant skills, and consider their mindsets and aspirations beyond the academic programme environment. Thrive was also experienced as enjoyable, inspirational and formative. Some aspects of students' experiences and the potential impacts they described aligned with the outcomes and objectives of the APP.

Reflections from participant observers:

"I felt that the session was very inspiring because the speaker was talking about how their work has 'failed' in the past but they are now doing well with their own business. It inspired me to not give up on what I want."

"From now on, I feel more prepared to confront challenges, which has increased my willingness to put myself out of my comfort zone. I feel more capable of adapting to new environments."

"I will definitely be thinking more actively about who I want to get in contact with regarding my career."

It is clear that Thrive adds value to the University's wider ecosystem of student support and extra-curricular activity. Our evaluation suggests that its potential to make a substantial contribution to APP objectives in terms of closing progression gaps is likely to be limited.

Although the festival was popular, reasonable assumptions about the likely number of participating students from groups identified within the APP suggested that any resulting effects would be modest. Discussions with the organisers, informed by the findings and analysis, also helped to clarify the festival's broader focus and the range of audiences it serves. These discussions indicated that sufficiently aligning Thrive with APP aspirations - particularly in relation to providing more specific and substantive opportunities for skills development - would require significant changes to the festival's purpose, objectives and format.

In addition to the Thrive-related findings, the evaluation generated valuable learning about working with students as partners, particularly in the context of conducting APP-related evaluation. Key lessons include the importance of:

- **Recruitment, onboarding and training:** ensuring recruitment processes comply with equality legislation, providing appropriate induction and training, including APP-specific material and supporting student partners to draw appropriately on and share their lived experience.
- **Consideration of equality and data protection requirements:** ensuring transparency with stakeholders and giving appropriate consideration to issues including anonymity, particularly where participant numbers are small.
- **Realistic resourcing:** recognising the time required from staff, student consultants and other stakeholders, in addition to associated costs, including payment for APP consultants (student partners).

Recommendations

Following consideration of the findings with the Thrive organisers, it was jointly agreed that Thrive should not be considered as a specific APP activity going forward. This reflects the finding that substantially increasing its contribution to APP objectives would require significant changes to the festival, while potentially compromising its value and appeal as an open, extra-curricular event.

Learning from Thrive and this evaluation should instead be used to inform the design and delivery of other activities intended to contribute to APP aspirations. A further recommendation is to embed learning from the study about working with students as partners into future APP evaluation and wider University activity.

Conclusions

This evaluation of a relatively small-scale pre-existing activity has been informative and influential in a number of ways.

The study sought to assess the potential of Thrive, in its current form, to contribute to the achievement of APP objectives. While the evaluation identified areas of value and some alignment with APP aspirations, it also highlighted limitations in the festival's potential to make a substantial contribution to the specific objectives identified. The findings informed the decision not to continue with Thrive as a specific APP activity, while recognising its wider value to the University and its contribution to the broader student experience. This has enabled time and other resources to be focused on alternative approaches with greater potential to contribute to APP aspirations.

The process of conducting the study also highlighted the value of working with students as partners in evaluation through a paid consultancy model. Learning from this approach is being used to inform both the student partnership model and the wider evaluation approach.

More broadly, the study has demonstrated the value of evaluation as a tool for organisational learning and change. In addition to generating evidence about the activity under consideration, the evaluation helped to clarify priorities, inform decision-making and generate learning with relevance beyond its immediate focus.

Centre for the Evaluation of Access Participation and Student Success (CEAPSS)

The Centre for the Evaluation of Access, Participation and Student Success (CEAPSS, pronounced keeps) supports the development of impact evaluation and practice across Oxford Brookes University (OBU) with specific focus on supporting the aims and commitments set out in our institutional Access and Participation Plan. CEAPSS is the home of the Impact Evaluation and Insight Team, Student Outcomes, who work to support colleagues involved in delivering the Access and Participation Plan with evaluation practice, and to understand the impact of activities and practice on students across all stages of their journey to and through higher education.

This report has been developed and published under the auspices of CEAPSS and forms part of its programme of evaluation and evidence dissemination. Reports, case studies and other documents published under the Centre's banner are expected to follow the Centre's protocols and approval processes.

The named authors are responsible for the accuracy and integrity of the report's content, including its analysis, interpretation and conclusions. The Centre provides a platform for the development and dissemination of evaluation findings, but does not independently verify all data, analyses or interpretations contained within individual reports.