University of Kent

Evaluation Report
Arguing with Confidence

2024/25

WE STAND FOR AMBITION.

Contents

Executive Summary

Overview

Statistics from the Office for Students (2022) outline that, “the gaps in development and attainment between advantaged and disadvantaged children are evident from the early years and widen throughout school.” (p. 2). The national disadvantage attainment gap has fluctuated little over the last few years although this has begun to narrow slightly over recent years to 3.91. This is still large given that the gap index reached 4.07 in 2011/12, indicating that this has not changed a great deal (Department for Education, 2025). This gap negatively impacts disadvantaged students to a considerable extent, causing them to achieve lower grades and have less likelihood of attending Higher Education than their more advantaged counterparts.

The Office for Students (2022) notes that this gap is not necessarily due to a lack of disadvantaged students' desires to attend University but instead are "unable to acquire and demonstrate the same levels of knowledge and skill as their more advantaged peers in relevant areas of learning" (p. 2). Differences in pedagogical approaches and activities involved in the delivery of the curriculum between selective and non-selective schools may also be a contributing factor. Activities that bolster specific skills such as debating prove to be beneficial. Yet are far less likely to be offered in schools with higher proportions of disadvantaged students (Almeida Hill, Plom & O'Brien, 2022).

Debating as an extra-curricular activity is believed to improve several key skills including critical thinking, communication and student confidence (Venkovits, 2018). Longitudinal research conducted in the USA, by Mezuk (2009) found that between 1997 and 2006, students who participated in the Urban Debate League (UDL) had overall higher grades, specifically in English and reading comprehension and were more likely to graduate high school.

The Arguing with Confidence programme was designed to offer students in non-selective schools the opportunity to take part in an extra-curricular debating activity with the aim of improving attainment outcomes. This programme was first piloted in four schools across Kent and Medway in the 2023/24 academic year with several positive outcomes achieved. Therefore, the programme was extended in 2024/25 academic year. This report presents the outcomes of the second cohort to participate in the intervention. In the 2024/2025 academic year, five schools took part in Arguing with Confidence. In line with anonymity measures outlined in the approved ethics submission, the schools that took part will be referred to as A, B, C, D, and E in the analysis. The analysis is for the most part conducted at aggregate level, except for the focus group discussion data which is split by school to preserve the nuances in experiences between the different schools and to better inform the future approaches of the delivery team.

The first part of this report presents the rationale behind the development of the programme and its aspirations to raising KS4 attainment as a long-term outcome. The second part discusses the findings, current limitations and recommendations for greater efficacy in the next iteration of this programme.

Project Aims

The aim of the intervention is to improve literacy attainment through the development of key learning skills: oracy, critical thinking and self-efficacy. The objective of the research is to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme by measuring whether students have made improvements or gained confidence in using the key learning skills identified. This is anticipated to lead to improved literacy attainment in the long term.

Participants

This intervention worked with Year 9 students who are currently predicted to achieve a 3-4 (C-D) grade boundary for GCSE English Language and meet multiple widening participation criteria. Students were targeted for the programme by the school's, using attainment, eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM) and area-based indicators such as Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and Tracking Underrepresentation by Area (TUNDRA) Quintiles).

Data Collection Methods

A mixed-methods approach has been adopted for this research, with tools designed to capture qualitative and quantitative data. To try to mitigate the challenge of incomplete pre-post data, avoid disengagement from survey fatigue, as well as over-reliance on or difficulty obtaining external attainment data; collection tools were embedded within the intervention activities. Methods used for assessing the programme's effectiveness looked to assess improvement in participants' key learning skills and provide an overview of the programme's short-term effectiveness. These included: i) a comprehensive student handbook that encapsulated every activity delivered as part of the programme, with specific sections used as evaluative tools through tasks and reflective activities and data collected for pre- and post-evaluation collected at the beginning and the end of the programme, ii) records of time taken to speak in debates across the programme, and iii) semi-structured post-intervention focus group discussions. Additional data will also be discussed in this report.

Methodological Limitations

The analysis presented in this report is based entirely on internally assessed metrics and self-reported measures as external, more objective measures of student achievement were not available, limiting the validity of the data provided. As with many interventions which gather data directly from students, some activities recorded far more missing data than others, with few students completing the entirety of the activity handbook and attendance at sessions being inconsistent. As a result, thresholds were implemented for analysis which has been conducted based on participants who completed a minimum number of sessions.

The pilot of this intervention in 2023/24 trialled a novel assessment of critical thinking which unfortunately yielded results believed to be misleading. This measure was subsequently removed for this year's intervention and as can be seen in the findings of this year's programme, critical thinking was not assessed throughout the intervention.

Findings

Qualitative feedback received from the student handbook and focus group discussions indicated that the overall response to the programme was very positive. Both students and staff commented on the impact it had on improved confidence in speaking publicly and increased engagement in class. Suggestions of improvements primarily centred around a desire for the programme and/or specific sessions to be longer to allow for more debate practice, suggesting a high level of engagement and interest from the students. The campus visit was continually mentioned as a particular highlight of the programme, indicating that this element of the programme not only allows students to practise their skills, but to also immerse themselves in a higher education setting. For some, this even inspired future aspirations. Quantitative data gathered from the student handbooks revealed increases in scores between the beginning and end of the programme, with many of these reaching statistical significance. These results tell us that confidence in key skills of oracy, critical thinking and self-efficacy improved over the course of the programme.

Overall, evidence from the results of this analysis indicates that Arguing with Confidence leads to positive short-term outcomes relating to literacy and academic attainment. However, further data is required to be able to assess the long-term impact of the programme.

Recommendations

There are some areas of improvement that have been recommended based on student feedback and findings from this academic year's programme. These are noted below and further detailed at the end of the report.

1. Work with schools to expand debating opportunities following the completion of the programme.
2. Collect Key Stage 4 data to assess longer-term impacts of the programme and collaborate with schools to evaluate overall school performance.
3. Consideration of appropriate and sensitive topics for debate while maintaining a range of real-world issues for discussion.
4. Develop a more effective way for students to fill out the skills and debate reflections.
5. Liaise with schools to try and mitigate student absences.

1. Introduction

Arguing with Confidence is a widening participation debating intervention delivered to Year 9 students from low socio-economic backgrounds, who require additional support to reach a passing grade in GCSE English Language. The programme aims to improve literacy attainment through the development of key learning skills including oracy, critical thinking and self-efficacy.

During the 2024/2025 academic year, the programme was implemented in five schools across Kent and Medway. It was specifically designed for students who are currently predicted to achieve a 3-4 grade boundary for GCSE English Language and are identified as students who meet widening participation criteria. Students were targeted to participate using in school assessment data and a range of socio-economic indicators, including eligibility for FSM and area-based measures such as IMD and TUNDRA. Following feedback from participants in the 2023/24 pilot cohort, which worked with Year 10 students, the programme was delivered to Year 9 students in its second year to support skill development earlier in the secondary school lifecycle.

The primary objective of this evaluation is to assess the extent to which participation in Arguing with Confidence contributes to measurable improvements in- or increased confidence in using- the targeted learning skills. These outcomes are examined as intermediate indicators of potential impact on GCSE English Language attainment, reflecting existing research which positions oracy and self-efficacy as key mechanisms through which attainment gains may be realised.

This programme is funded by the Kent & Medway Progression Foundation (KMPF), which falls nationally under the UniConnect funding umbrella. UniConnect partnerships are required to deliver and evidence the effectiveness of collaborative approaches to raising attainment at Key Stage 3 and through Key Stage 4 in local state secondary schools (Office for Students). Accordingly, this research seeks not only to assess the programme's effectiveness, but also generate evidence to inform ongoing delivery, refinement and reporting of attainment-raising interventions for disadvantaged learners.

2. Programme Rationale

Context

For the academic year 2022/23, 77.7% of students who were eligible for Free School Meals or had been looked after by the local authority for at least one day progressed to sustained education after school, compared with 88.1% of students who were not considered disadvantaged (Department for Education, 2025). These findings also show that 97% of students who achieve grades 9-4 in English and Maths GCSE continue onto sustained education, employment, or apprenticeships, compared to 81% of those who do not achieve these grades. Given that the gap between disadvantaged and non-disadvantaged students was the highest in 2023 since 2011 (Education Policy Institute, 2024), the inequalities in progression to HE can be explained by attainment at the end of KS4. Prior attainment has been identified as the most significant contributor to widening the disadvantage gap, showing that disadvantage gaps persist across school (Hunt et al., 2025). Attainment at GCSE is a key predictor of progression to HE and longer-term benefits (Starr et al., 2023), so supporting increased attainment at GCSE can be key to increasing the participation of economically disadvantaged students in HE.

Looking at regional attainment data, data shows that in non-selective schools across Kent and Medway only 47% of learners achieve 5 good passes at GCSE including English and Maths, and this figure drops to 32% when considering those classed as disadvantaged (Department of Education, 2025).

Key areas identified

Evidence suggests that debating contributes to the development of key skills associated with academic performance, such as critical thinking, oracy, and self-efficacy (Mirra et al., 2016). Despite this, state-funded schools (particularly those in Kent and Medway) have fewer opportunities to participate in and develop key debating skills (Almeida Hill, Plom & O'Brien, 2022). The following sections discuss academic literature which evidences the correlation between key learning skills and debating. The sections will also define these skills and outline how these skills are developed within the context of Arguing with Confidence.

A. Critical Thinking

Critical thinking refers to the “cognitive skills needed to interpret, analyse, synthesize, reason, and evaluate information as well as the attitudinal tendency to apply these abilities" (Xu et a., 2023, p. 2). Critical thinking also underlies the development of other key skills. Wulandari et al. (2021) argue that “individuals need to think critically about new information as a basis for making decisions so that they can solve problems constructively, draw reasonable conclusions and make appropriate decisions” (p. 3).

Pearson Talent Lens developed the R.E.D model, which separates critical thinking into three constituent parts. They argue that these areas are essential building blocks of critical thinking. The R.E.D model of critical thinking is depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Critical Thinking Model - Pearson Talent Lens

Based on the R.E.D model, the University of Kent believes that there are 4 key components that can support the development of critical thinking. These are detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Key Components of Critical Thinking

Key Components of Critical Thinking	Link to Critical Thinking Skills
Understanding and synthesising information	Understanding refers to the ability to grasp the meaning, significance, or implications of information or concepts. It involves making sense of the details, relationships and context within the information. Synthesising information is the process of combining and integrating various pieces of information or ideas to create a new, cohesive understanding. It involves drawing connections, identifying patterns and generating insights from different sources.
Evidence-based reasoning	Evidence-based reasoning involves making logical and informed decisions or conclusions by relying on credible and relevant evidence. It emphasises the use of factual information, data, or observations to support claims, arguments or judgments.
Problem solving	Problem solving involves resolving issues or challenges to achieve a desired outcome.
Decision making	Decision making is the process of making a choice from multiple alternatives to achieve a specific goal or resolve a problem. It involves assessing available options, considering relevant information and making choices that align with desired outcomes.

Why does critical thinking matter for widening participation?

It can be argued that critical thinking is an essential skill for success within a university environment (Nold, 2017). Students are expected to move beyond fact and fiction and analyse the information. It has been more recently recognised as an independent academic discipline. Cambridge Assessment argues "explicitly focuses on the processes involved in being rational" (p. 125, Black, 2012), "it is a skill which can be explicitly and purposefully taught and learnt" and is a discipline that "can be applied in all contexts in which reasoning occurs" (Cambridge Assessment, 2006).

Despite this, students at all levels can struggle with critically evaluating and analysing texts (Clifton, 2012). Additionally, research indicates that individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds have lower critical thinking capabilities than their more advantaged peers (Chau-Klu et al., 2001). Therefore, developing students' critical thinking skills should be prioritised within widening participation contexts.

How can critical thinking increase attainment?

Development of critical thinking skills has been shown to increase attainment in a range of subjects. Ren et al (2020) found that critical thinking "made unique contributions to academic performance even when general cognitive ability was controlled for" (p.1). Additionally, Ghanizadeh (2017) found that critical thinking ability helps students make informed decisions about their future and supports their success at university, should they choose to progress.

When considering GCSE English in particular, students would also benefit from increased critical thinking skills as, both in language and literature papers, students are expected to critically evaluate texts by comparing ideas and perspectives in a clear and relevant way (AQA, 2014).

How does debating support the development of critical thinking skills?

Stockdale (2020) explains, "debating provides a space for students to confidently and critically explore, consider and challenge ideas and concepts with their peers" (p.286). Debating supports the development of critical thinking skills by getting the students to analyse both sides of the argument, asking to build an awareness of their own thinking and to identify where they may become vulnerable in a debate (Tumposky, 2004). Following from Tumposky's point, debating forces participants to choose a side and voice an opinion, but also potentially argue for something that they do not necessarily agree with. This forces students to consider different perspectives to their own.

B. Oracy

The English Speaking Union (ESU), defines oracy as "having the vocabulary to say what you want to say and the ability to structure your thoughts so that they make sense to others" (English Speaking Union). The University of Kent believes that there are four key components that support the development of oracy. These are detailed in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Key Components of Oracy

Key Components of Oracy	Link to Oracy
Articulating an opinion or point	This involves expressing thoughts, beliefs, or viewpoints in a clear, coherent and well-organised manner. When someone articulates their opinion, they are effectively communicating their perspective on a particular subject or issue. Articulating an opinion often involves more than just stating a viewpoint; it may include offering insights, presenting arguments and addressing counter arguments.
Organising and structuring arguments	Organising and structuring arguments involve arranging and presenting ideas in a logical and coherent way to effectively communicate a point of view. Organising arguments refers to the arrangement of ideas and information in a way that makes them easy to understand. Structuring arguments involves building a framework that supports the main point, including the organisation of individual components within the argument.

Speaking and delivery skills	This is the ability to communicate effectively and persuasively through spoken words, considering various elements of presentation, expression and engagement. Key components include clarity, pitch and tone, body language, confidence, engaging the audience and adaptability.
Listening skills	This is the ability to effectively receive, interpret and understand verbal and non-verbal messages during communication. Active listening involves more than simply hearing words; it involves giving full attention to the speaker, comprehending the message and responding appropriately.

Why does oracy matter for widening participation?

Voice 21 reports that children from disadvantaged backgrounds begin school with poorer spoken language communication skills than more advantaged students and that these gaps increase throughout the school experience (Voice21, 2025). The English-Speaking Union (ESU) report that approximately 50% of students from certain areas of deprivation have delayed language by the time they start school (Doherty, 2023).

How can oracy increase attainment?

Research has found that students who engage in oracy-based learning in the classroom perform better in a range of subjects and this in particular has positively impacted students eligible for FSM (Voice 21's Journal, 2025).

Oracy is assessed in GCSE English Language through a spoken language assessment. This assessment can be on a topic of the student's choosing. Debating can help support this element by providing students with knowledge and experience talking about social issues, which they can discuss as part of their assessment.

How does debating support the development of oracy skills?

Competitive debating addresses each of the oracy components, as described in table 3.

Table 3: Programme's Link to Key Components of Oracy

Component of Oracy	Development of Oracy Skills through Debating
Articulating an opinion or point	Participants are required to create logical reasons for or against a statement and clearly articulate these points to the opposition.
Organising and structuring arguments	Given that participants have limited time to get their point across, participants must organise their time effectively and consider how to order their arguments to maximise their impact.
Speaking and delivery skills	Debating promotes confidence in public speaking and provides opportunities for participants to be creative and convincing with how they articulate a point.
Listening skills	Participants are required to listen carefully to their opposition in order to effectively respond and counter their arguments. This might include understanding the argument they are putting forward and identifying weaknesses and gaps in the argument they have presented.

Additionally, debating presents an opportunity for students to make connections between what they are learning in school and real-world social issues (Healey, 2012). This allows individuals to improve their general social

engagement and reap social, emotional and employment benefits (Hawksworth, 2023).

C. Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to "an individual's evaluation of their capacity to do something successfully in a given situation" (Waddington, 2023, p.237). According to social cognitive theory, there are four main sources of information that develop students' self-efficacy. These are detailed in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Key Components of Self-Efficacy

Key components of self-efficacy	Link to self-efficacy
Mastery experiences	Mastery experiences have a stronger link to self-efficacy than other factors allowing individuals to believe that they genuinely have the capability to succeed at a task (Kleppang et al., 2023).
Vicarious (observed) experiences	Students adapt their beliefs about their capabilities by observing others particularly peers who offer suitable possibilities for comparison by which they can learn (i.e. Bartsch et al., 2012; Capa-Aydin et al., 2018).
Social persuasion	Social (verbal) persuasion from individuals known to students provides them with feedback which can develop beliefs of self-efficacy. This is particularly effective when the source of the message has higher credibility (Nob, 2021).
Physiological and psychological states	Students can interpret physiological and psychological states, whether positive or negative, as indicators of self-efficacy or a lack of, respectively (van Dinther et al., 2011).

According to Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO), self-efficacy "is always defined in relation to a task, goal, or domain" (p. 20) and is therefore more specific than general confidence in ability (Thomson et al., 2022). They also distinguish between performance self-efficacy and academic self-efficacy, specifying that the former is more specific whereas academic self-efficacy refers to academia more generally which can be more difficult to report. For the purposes of this Arguing with Confidence report, we will follow TASO's recommendation and assess self-efficacy in regard to performance self-efficacy.

Why does self-efficacy matter for widening participation?

Research has found that academic achievement of economically disadvantaged students is significantly higher when self-efficacy was higher, even at a young age (Mensah, 2013). Merolla (2016) explains how living in impoverished neighbourhoods can impact self-efficacy through a general sense of powerlessness within the community, resulting in little self-belief that their achievements can ameliorate their future success.

How can self-efficacy increase attainment?

Self-efficacy is widely understood to correlate with academic achievement (e.g. Hwang et al., 2015). It has been found that "students who believe they can learn or complete an activity are more likely to accomplish the implementation of academic self-efficacy, study harder, persevere longer when faced with problems and succeed at a better level than students who question their ability" (Al-Abyadh & Azeem, 2022).

3. Programme Design

Project Aims

Arguing with Confidence is a debating programme specifically designed to develop key learning skills linked to literacy with the aim of raising students' academic attainment, particularly their performance in KS4 English. These key learning skills include oracy, critical thinking, and self-efficacy. The University of Kent has drawn upon academic research to identify how these key learning skills can support attainment and how these skills will be addressed and measured within the programme (see previous section). These skills have been considered throughout the Arguing with Confidence debating programme and have been embedded into the activities that are delivered during each session.

The desired long-term outcome for this programme is to increase GCSE English Language attainment and increase progression to HE for disadvantaged participants taking part in this outreach intervention. Evidence-based, short-term outcomes underpin the design of this debating programme to achieve this. At the core are these overarching objectives:

1. **Increase non-selective participation in debating**: To provide opportunities for students who would not otherwise participate in debating to do so.

2. **Develop academic skills**: To provide opportunities for students to develop key learning skills, such as critical thinking, self-efficacy and oracy.

3. **Increase confidence**: To increase students' confidence in skills attributed to debating.

4. **Improve attainment**: To improve students' attainment in literacy and subsequently GCSE English Language.

All the above are believed to have positive knock-on effects for raising aspirations and motivating students from widening participation backgrounds to progress to HE.

Programme Overview

The programme consists of five two-hour, in-school workshops and a visit to the University of Kent Canterbury campus. Each group has a maximum of 20 students who have been identified by the school as meeting the targeting criteria discussed previously. The schools will choose the most appropriate lessons for the students to miss to attend the programme, to ensure they minimise the negative impact of missed lessons on students.

The structure of the programme Is described in Table 6.

Table 5: Arguing with Confidence Format

	Aim	Description
Session 1: Reimagining Society	Build students' confidence in voicing their opinion and engaging with the programme. ➢ Boost self-efficacy, ➢ Build confidence to articulate an opinion, ➢ Find out more about student interests.	Students make choices on key social issues to help design their own utopian society. After deciding what to prioritise, they choose how much their chosen government would spend on each issue and then design their city. After this, they reflect on which social issues they feel are most prominent in today's society and consider how their society tackled those issues. This session is designed to gauge student interests, build rapport and develop confidence in students sharing their opinions.
Session 2: Making Your Point	Practise techniques for making confident presentations. ➢ Boost self-efficacy, ➢ Build confidence to articulate an opinion, ➢ Learn about how to come up with unique arguments, ➢ Start developing presentation skills.	Students are introduced to debating through games. These games support the students in coming up with ideas and articulating their opinions. They will think outside the box and try to link different topics to the one they are discussing for a debate.In this session, students will engage in their first of five debates.
Session 3: Structuring Arguments	Learn techniques to personalise and structure strong arguments.	Students will consider how to effectively structure their arguments to be clear, concise and get their message across.
Session 4: Utilising Evidence Effectively	Learn how to incorporate reasoning and evidence into their arguments. ➢ Identify different types of evidence, ➢ Incorporate reasoning and evidence into their arguments.	Students are introduced to different types of evidence and encouraged to undertake research to find this evidence. Students will collate evidence to enhance the points they raised the previous week.
Session 5: Being Convincing	Create an awareness of the different strategies that can be used in effective persuasive writing and speaking. ➢ Build awareness of the different strategies that can be used in effective persuasive writing and speaking, ➢ Practise incorporating persuasive language into presentations,	Students begin to think about being persuasive and using different persuasive language techniques to support their arguments.
Session 6: The BIG Debate	Students draw together everything they have learned in the past six weeks and have a structured debate, ➢ Incorporate skills into a final structured debate.	To finish the module, students complete a big final debate, with an increased time of four minutes each. Here students are encouraged to incorporate all the skills they have learned over the past five weeks. This debate takes place on the University of Kent Canterbury campus in the moot court room. Whilst on campus, students also explore the university archives and take a campus tour to have an immersive university experience.

4. Methodology

Research Aims and Questions

The aim of this research is to evaluate whether students have made any significant improvements in key learning skills through participation in the Arguing with Confidence programme. As such, the research questions are as follows:

1. Is Arguing with Confidence effective in supporting the development of students' key learning skills?

2. Does Arguing with Confidence support schools' efforts in raising literacy levels which may subsequently influence attainment in GCSE English Language?

Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was adopted for this research study, with tools designed to capture qualitative and quantitative data to allow for a broader overview of students' responses and outcomes. All evaluation tools were in-built as part of the programme and looked to assess short-term improvements in the key learning skills. Methods are described in greater detail in the "Data Collection" section below.

Participants

The intervention worked with Year 9 students.

Up to 20 students from each of the five schools were selected to participate and students were selected by the schools, given that schools would have the greatest knowledge as to which students would benefit most from the intervention.

The targeting criteria which were used, is detailed below:

1. Identified as being on track to achieve a 3-4 grade boundary for GCSE English Language.

2. Live in an area deemed to have lower than expected participation in Higher Education, as specified by Uni Connect Wards.

3. Live in an area deemed to have lower than expected participation in Higher Education, as specified by area measures including TUNDRA, IMD, and IDACI.

4. Eligible for FSM.

5. Are currently, or have previously been, in local authority care.

As the activity is focused on debating and requires students to feel comfortable speaking in front of each other, the session number was restricted. Schools were also asked to avoid selecting students who may experience heightened social anxiety by public speaking related activities.

Data Collection

The following tools were used to collect data and evaluate the programme:

Student Handbook

Throughout the duration of the programme students are asked to complete a series of different tasks designed to support the development of key learning skills. This handbook also contributes to assessing students' development of these skills. Included within the handbook are some reflective tasks, which are designed to specifically measure participants' abilities or confidence in these skills. Table 7 below summarises the corresponding sections, their evaluative purpose and the timeline for data collection.

Table 6: Built-In Measurement Tools and Data Capture Intervals Within the Student Handbook

Section(s) of Handbook	Purpose	Time interval of collection
Self-efficacy, oracy, and critical thinking skills self-evaluation (baseline and endline)	Designed to measure students' self-efficacy, they are asked to reflect on their skills and respond to statements relating to expressing opinions, speaking in front of others, listening, critical thinking and building confidence. This is done using an agreement scale.	• Baseline: Students complete the task at the beginning of the first session of the programme. • Endline: Students repeat this exercise at the end of the last session of the programme as part of the "Reflection" segment.
Debate reflections and self-evaluation	Students fill out a table recording their time spoken during the debate and record their open-ended reflection on their progress under different headings. They are required to fill out the table at the end of each debating session.	• Students complete the table four times during the programme (Sessions 2-5). For the analysis, data from the last session is used for comparison. In the case of students who did not complete every session, analysis was conducted on data from students who completed at least three sessions.
Skills reflection	This activity involves students reflecting on the whole programme and recording their thoughts on their skills and confidence relating to speaking, listening, structuring & organising, sharing an opinion and critical thinking skills. Students comment on how and when they used the respective skill(s) over the course of the programme. This prompts some of the themes to be covered in the focus groups and provides further qualitative data for triangulation purposes.	• Single point: This is part of the "Reflection" section of the handbook and only captures data at the end of the last session, ahead of the focus group discussion.

Questions in the student handbook are designed to specifically reflect on tasks they have completed and how they contribute to their key learning skills. Students' progress is tracked by comparing their responses and reflections in

Session 1 to the corresponding ones in Session 5. In the cases where students may have missed one or more sessions, this progress is tracked along the sessions they did attend. For example, students are asked about their confidence in and ability to speak publicly in the first and last sessions and this aims to inform us as to whether participants saw an improvement in their oracy skills based on the differences between their first and last results.

Focus Groups

Small focus group discussions were held with students during the last session of the programme. These were facilitated by student ambassadors and audio recordings of the focus groups were sent to UK Transcription to anonymously transcribe preceding analysis. The participant groups from each school were split into three groups of no more than six students. In total, there were 14 focus groups across the five schools.

The focus group discussions asked students about their experiences of the programme and were semi-structured. Students were asked questions such as what they enjoyed about the programme, how they feel it could be improved and how they believe their skillset was affected having taken part. This ensured that student voice was incorporated into the programme evaluation.

School Staff Surveys

An online survey was sent out to various staff members from schools to assess their perspective of the programme. While this evaluation procedure was less in-depth, it nevertheless still provides valuable insight as to how teachers felt about the programme. The rationale behind running this survey was that teachers interact with their students daily and are therefore excellent judges as to whether any improvements or changes occurred in students following the programme.

Data Analysis Methods

Average scores were calculated for each survey item where a scale was used. Participants were asked how strongly they agree with a series of statements, with 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree. They were also asked how well they thought they did in the session, with 1 = Not Great and 5 = Excellent. The average score for each survey item was calculated from all responses.

The Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test was used to statistically analyse the quantitative findings. This test compares two related groups to assess whether the population mean ranks differ, when assumptions such as statistical normality are not met. The test results determine whether two groups differ to a statistically significant degree and therefore whether the programme elicits a meaningful change in participants' skills from the beginning of the programme to the end. RStudio was used to conduct this analysis.

For qualitative analysis of the focus groups, thematic analysis using deductive and inductive approaches was applied. Since the handbook and focus group questions were semi-structured in nature. Some pre-existing themes were available for exploration, such as self-confidence, improvement of key skills and suggestions for improvements to the programme. Analysis was not restricted to exploring only themes produced by focus group questions. However, an inductive approach was used to examine additional, contradicting and elaborating responses that may alter the emerging themes. This analysis was conducted using NVivo 14.

5. Findings

Number of Participants

A total of 76 participants took part in the programme, operationalised as having taken part in at least 2 sessions. With 62 students completing at least 4 sessions and 51 of these including the pre- and post-evaluation sessions. The minimum number of participants registered against a school was 11 and the maximum was 19 students. To give an adequately large sample for a meaningful statistical analysis, the data for all four schools have been aggregated in this study. Unfortunately, School E's participation levels were disappointingly low and as programme facilitators advised that there was a minimum requirement of attendance for students to attend the campus visit day (Session 6 and the post-evaluation), this partially contributed to the lower proportions of attendees from this school.

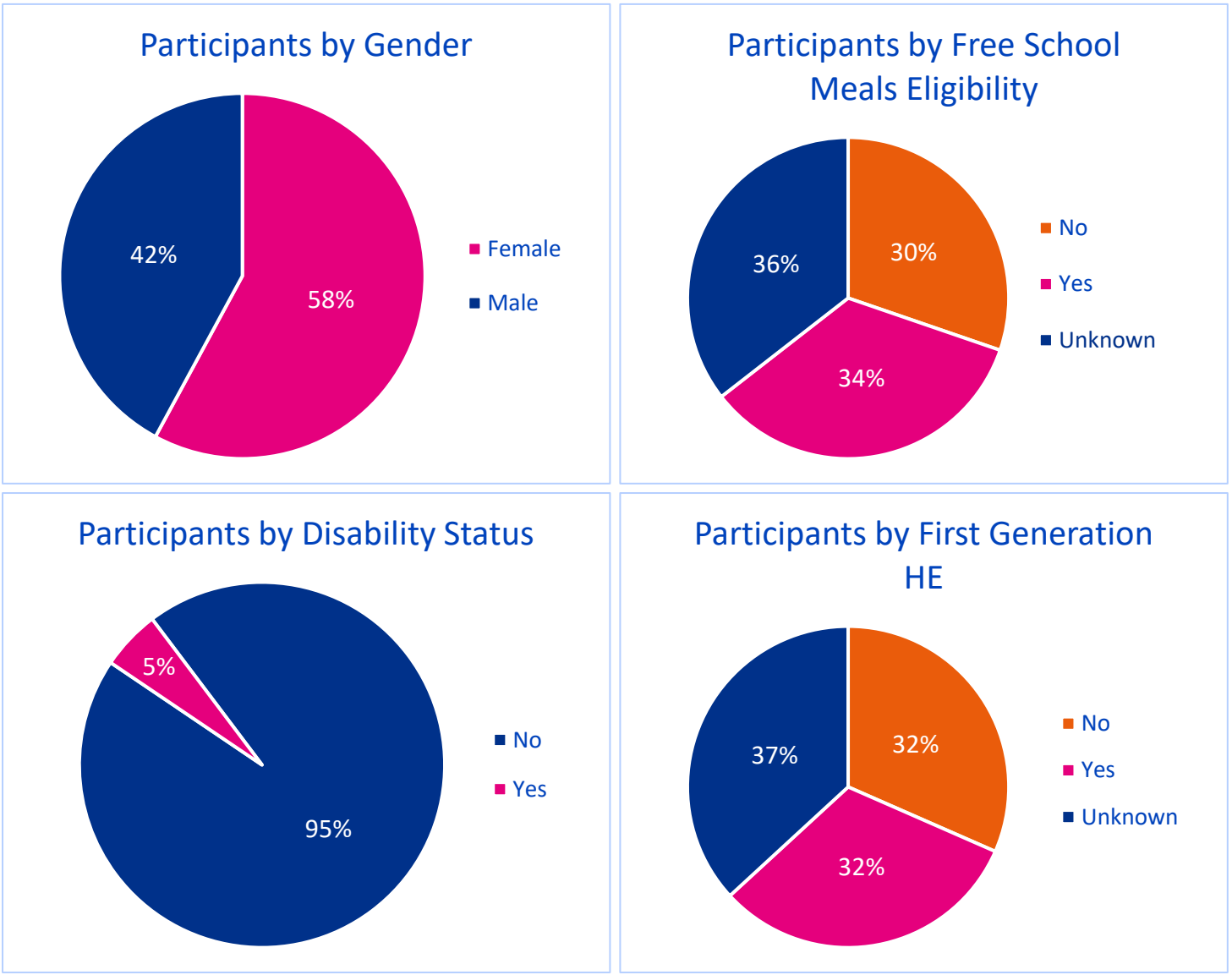
Table 7: Number of Participants per School

Participating Schools	Number of Students	Proportion of Students Completed Pre- and Post-Evaluation	Proportion of Students Completed 4+ Sessions
School A	19	8 (42%)	14 (74%)
School B	15	12 (80%)	14 (93%)
School C	14	14 (100%)	14 (100%)
School D	11	11 (100%)	11 (100%)
School E	17	6 (35%)	9 (53%)
Total Participants	76	51	62

Demographic Data

Demographic data was gathered, as well as socioeconomic indicators such as eligibility for Free School Meals (FSMs) and formal area-based indicators of socioeconomic background, including TUNDRA, IMD and IDACI quintiles and Uni Connect Target Wards. This data will be stored using the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) and used in the future for longitudinal tracking. Demographic data has been gathered from students who took part in at least 2 sessions and a summary of participant demographics is depicted in figure 2.

Figure 2: Participants by Socioeconomic Indicators and Other Demographic Data



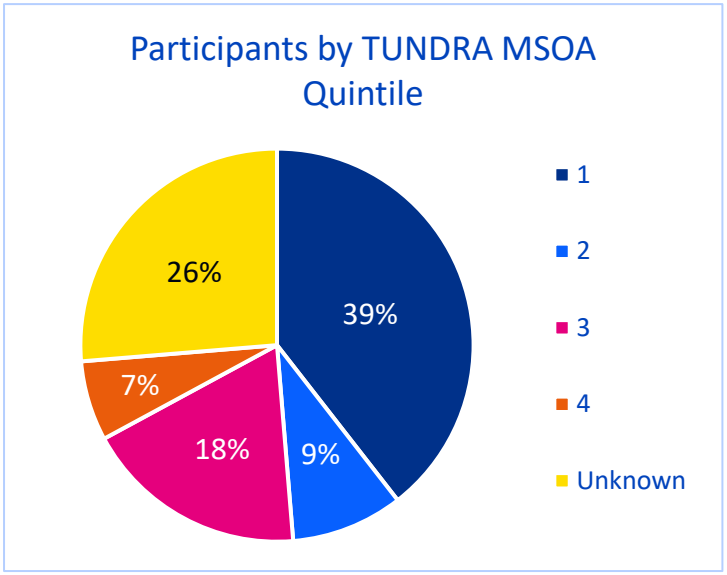
In addition to the above, 22 participants self-reported being from groups underrepresented in Higher Education. This included 9 young carers, 3 service children, 5 estranged from their families and 5 students in care.

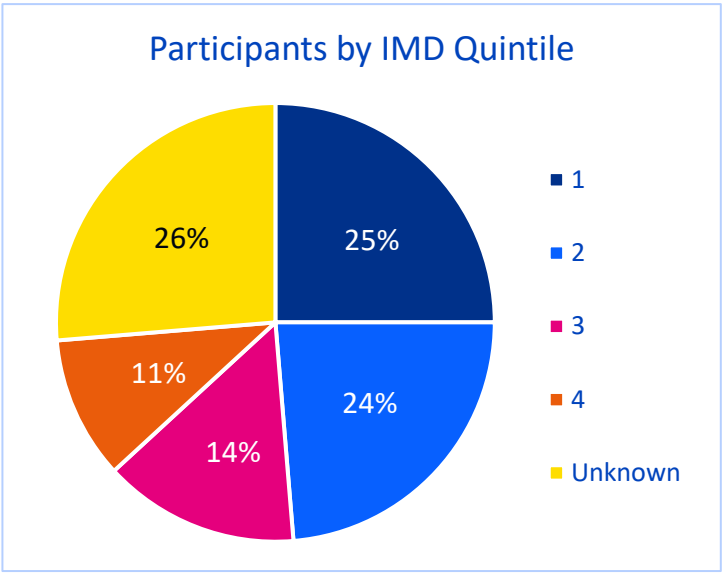
Area-Based Indicators of Socioeconomic Background

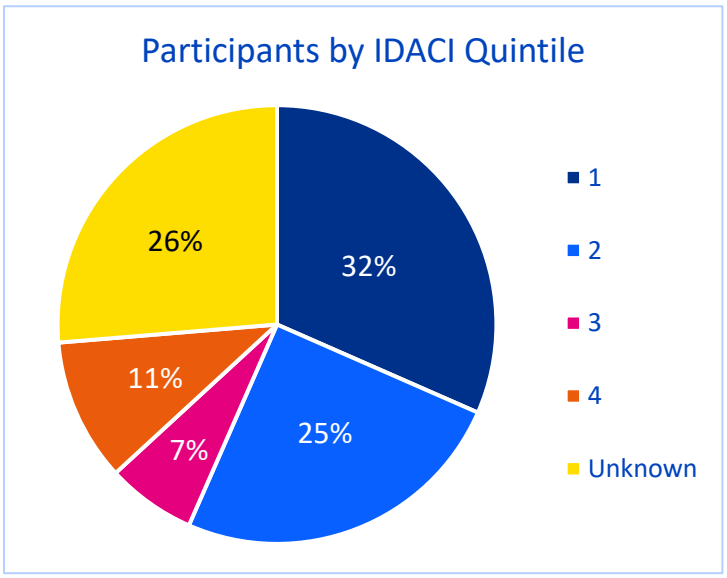
Figure 4 illustrates demographic indicators of socioeconomic background based on postcode. As this information is self-reported, some students either did not provide their postcode, or the system was unable to register it, so these have been assigned as "Unknown". As there are a large proportion of unknown postcodes, it is difficult to accurately depict the representation of the group.

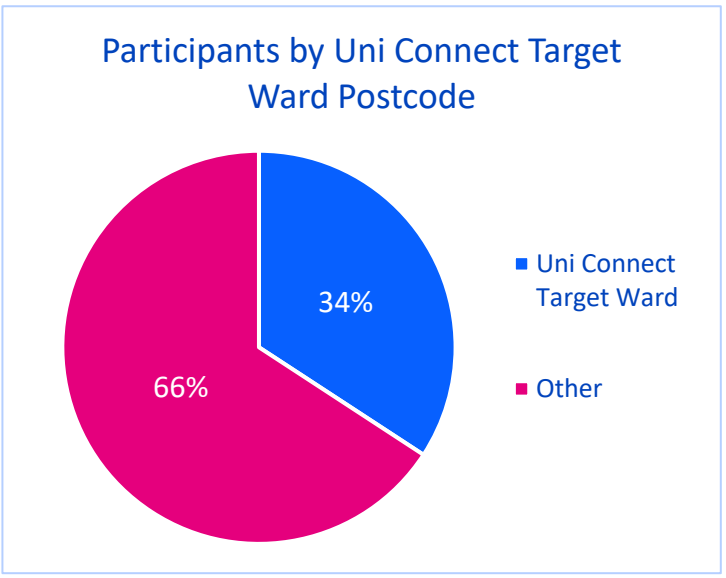
TUNDRA Quintiles refer to local areas across England stratified by rates of participation in higher education, with 1 indicating the lowest rates of participation and 5 indicating the highest. The majority of participants came from TUNDRA Quintile 1, with almost half of the group coming from the two lowest areas of participation in higher education. IMD Quintiles refer to degree of deprivation in local areas across England according to factors such as income deprivation, barriers to housing and services and education, skills and training deprivation. Again Quintile 1 represents the most deprived areas, and within this group, the majority of participants came from Quintiles 1-2. Similarly, the majority of participants lived in IDACI (Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index) Quintiles 1-2 and if we exclude the unknown data, these comprise 77% of participants' backgrounds. Finally, 34% of students came from Uni Connect Target Wards. While this number is lower than desired, it is important to acknowledge that UniConnect uses the oldest postcode profiling metric and therefore targeting using the above metrics is likely to provide more accuracy and account for discrepancies. Additionally, postcode data was unavailable for all students so this may not represent the true proportion of students from areas of low participation in Higher Education. Overall, these demographics suggest that disadvantaged students, in terms of area-based indicators of socioeconomic background, were successfully targeted.

Figure 4: Participants by Area-Based Indicators of Socioeconomic Background









Quantitative Analysis

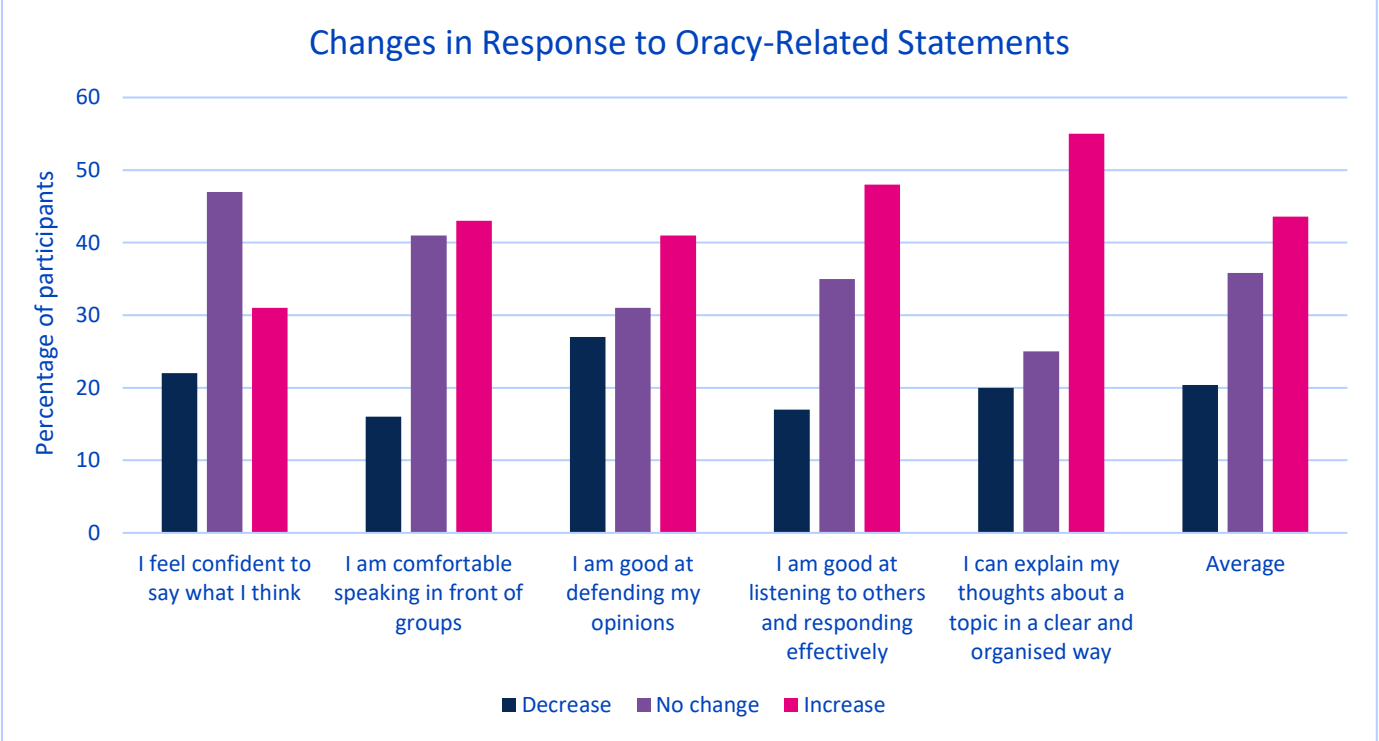
Oracy, Critical Thinking Skills and Academic Self-Efficacy

At the start and end of the programme, students were asked to self-evaluate themselves against the main skills of the programme. Participants reflected on 10 statements in sessions 1 and 6, with a 5-point Likert scale indicating their level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). All statements elicited increases in average scores between sessions 1 and 6, indicating greater confidence in the areas identified as main outcomes for the programme.

Each section will be outlined in terms of statements posed to students, along with any change in responses of 4 (agree) or 5 (strongly agree). A summary of overall changes in scores can be found in Figures 5, 6, and 7. The data presented in this section refers to the 51 students who completed the pre- and post-evaluation questionnaires along with at least 2 other sessions.

The oracy section contained five statements, with speaking skills ("I am comfortable speaking in front of groups") and listening skills ("I am good at listening and responding effectively") producing the largest increases in "agree" and "strongly agree" responses of 29pp and 21pp respectively. The other three statements, relating to articulating an opinion ("I feel confident to say what I think"), listening & speaking skills ("I am good at defending my opinions") and organisation ("I can explain my thoughts about a topic in a clear and organised way") produced increases in "agree" and "strongly agree" responses of 12pp, 10pp and 18pp, respectively. The lowest average score was in response to the pre-survey statement relating to public speaking (2.75) and the highest was in response to the post-survey statement about listening and responding effectively (4.04).

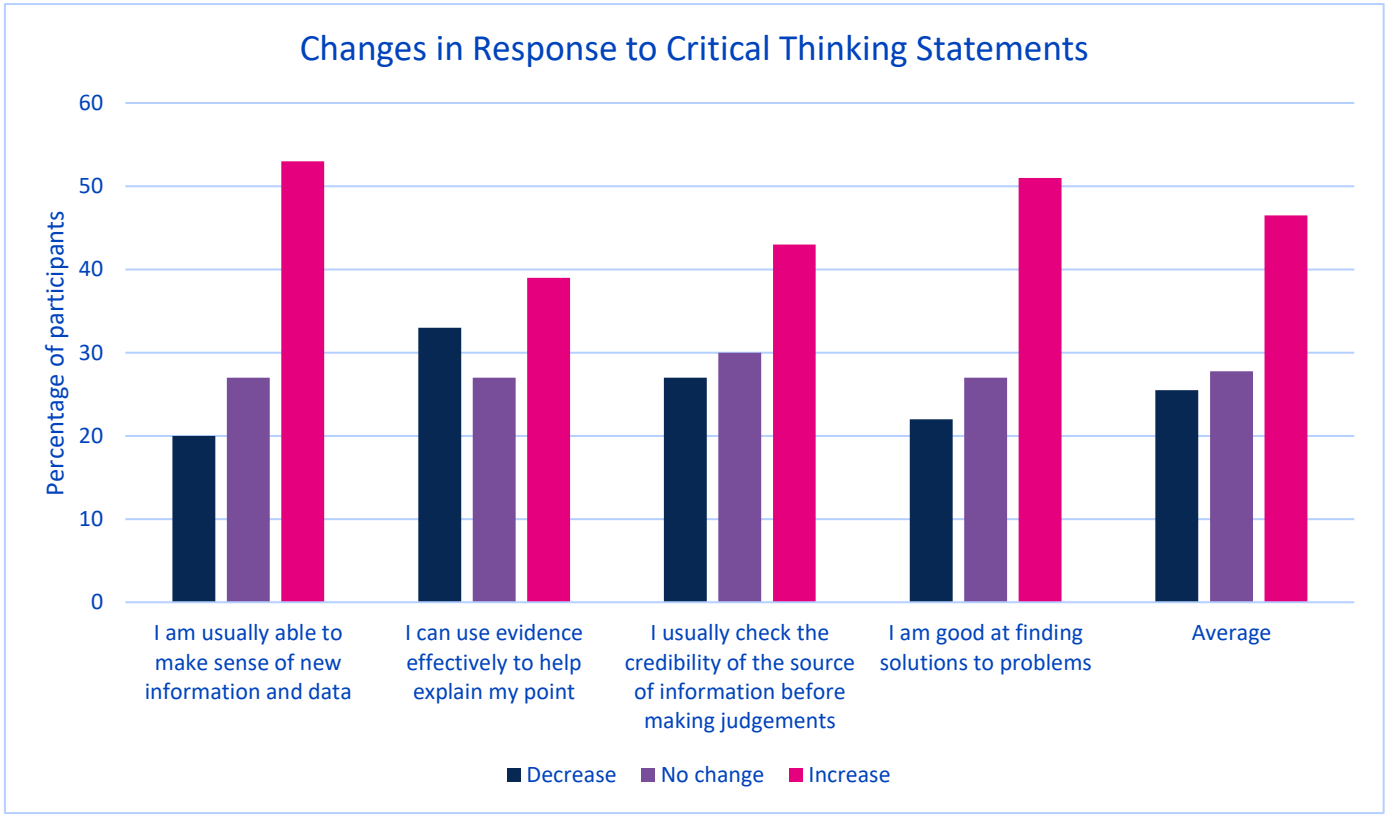
Figure 5: Changes in Participant Response to Oracy-Related Statements



When applying the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank Test, oracy-related statements statistically significantly differed from pre- to post-evaluation ($p < .001$) and specific items that were statistically significant alone were "I am comfortable speaking in front of groups" ($p < .01$), "I am good at listening to others and responding effectively" ($p < .01$) and "I can organise my thoughts about a topic in a clear and organised way" ($p < .005$).

The critical thinking section contained four statements, relating to ability to process new information and data, ability to use evidence to support reasoning, judgement relating to credibility of sources and problem-solving abilities. Again, these data represent responses from 51 students who completed both pre- and post-evaluations, although there was a substantial reduction in response rates to one statement, with only 30 responding to both pre and post statements for "I usually check the credibility of the source of information before making judgements" due to this being unavailable in the pre-survey part of the handbook for some students. Analysis reveals that the largest increases in "agree" and "strongly agree" responses related to the statement "I am good at finding solutions to problems" (29pp), followed by "I am usually able to make sense of new information and data" (22pp). The statement relating to evidence-based reasoning had an increase of 14pp, and the statement about using credible sources saw twelve students respond positively in the post-evaluation compared to nine in the pre-evaluation. The lowest average score was in response to the pre-evaluation statement about checking credibility of sources (2.9) and the highest average score was in response to the post-survey statement about problem solving (3.8).

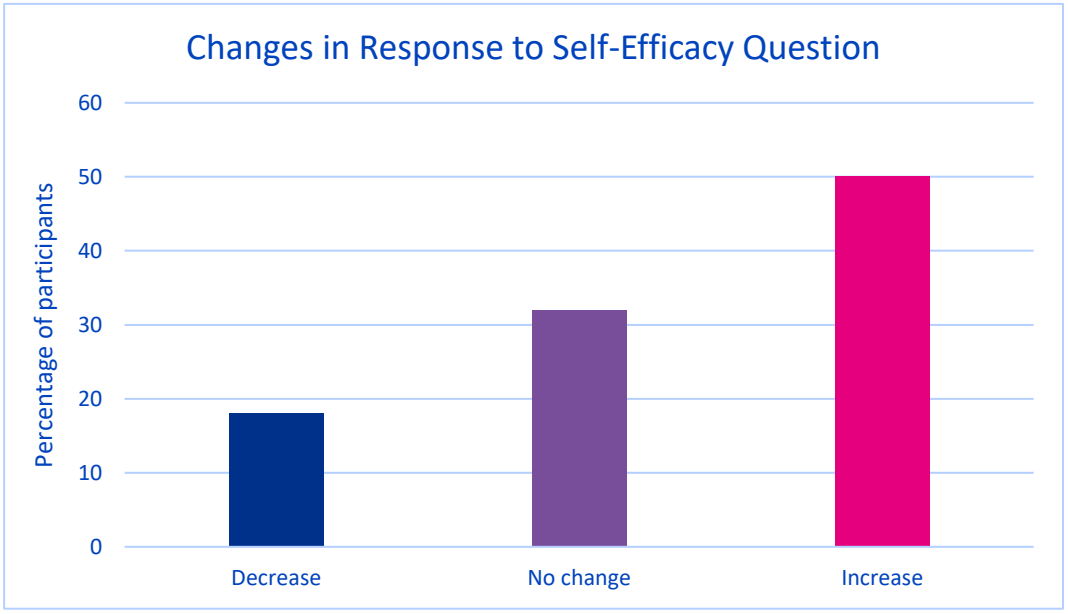
Figure 6: Changes in Response to Critical Thinking-Related Statements



Critical thinking statements collectively reached statistical significance when comparing responses before and after the programme ($p < .001$) and individual items: "I am usually able to make sense of new information and data" ($p < .05$) and "I am good at finding solutions to problems" ($p < .05$).

The self-efficacy section consisted of just one statement, "I am confident in my ability to do well in my GCSE English exam". While the increase in "agree" and "strongly agree" responses was only 12pp, 50% of participants increased their scores from pre- to post-evaluation, taking the average score from slight disagreement to slight agreement. Here, the average score changed from 2.8 (pre-survey) to 3.4 (post-survey). The self-efficacy statement showed a statistically significant difference between pre- and post- scores ($p < .005$).

Figure 7: Changes in Response to Self-Efficacy Statement

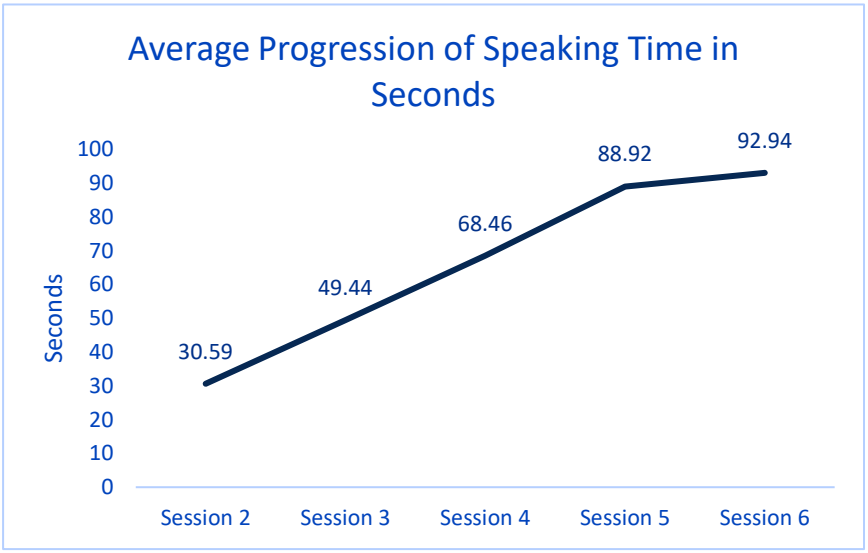


Debating Skills Progress

An exercise designed to track progress in students' debating skills and oracy skills required students to record their time spoken during each of the debate activities. A progressive increase in time spoken would signal an increase in confidence and ability to speak publicly. Students were included in this analysis if they participated in at least four of the debate sessions in the programme, resulting in a dataset of 62 students. For those who missed the first and/or last debate session, progress was measured as the difference in time between the first and last session they did attend.

Analysis at an individual level revealed that only one student recorded a decrease in time spoken between their first and last attended sessions of -2 seconds. However, this regression is minimal and does not account for the fact that the student spoke for a longer period of time in the second session. All other participants demonstrated an increase in time spoken between the first and last attended sessions, with an average increase of 55.3 seconds.

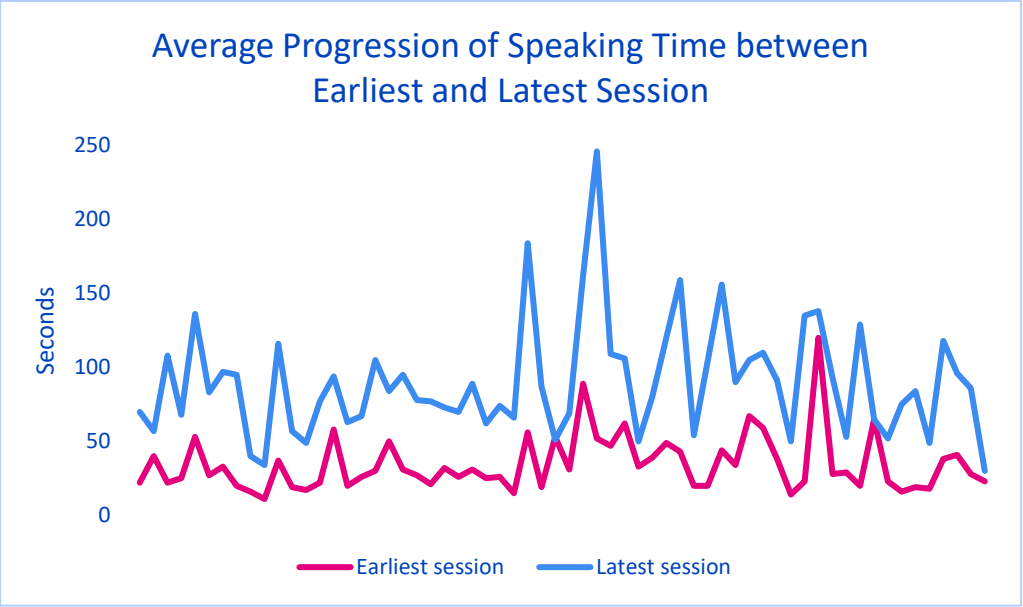
Figure 8: Average Participant Progression of Speaking Time Across Sessions



As shown in Figure 8, average speaking time per student increased across the programme. Rising from 30.59 seconds in the initial debate session (Session 2) to 92.94 seconds in the final session (Session 6). This represents a substantial increase in sustained spoken contribution over time. As illustrated in Figure 9, there was considerable variation in individual speaking times and the data presented therefore reflect cohort averages rather than uniform change across all participants.

Such variability is to be expected given differences in students' starting points, levels of confidence and prior experience with structured speaking activities. In addition, performance in any individual session may have been influenced by contextual or situational factors. Despite this variation, the overall upward trend suggests that the measure functioned as intended, capturing increased student engagement and capacity to contribute verbally within a formal debate setting. Taken together, these findings provide indicative evidence of improvements in students' confidence and ability to speak in public over the course of the intervention.

Figure 9: Progression of Participant Speaking Time between First and Last Session Attended



Qualitative Analysis

Debate Reflection

Debate reflections were included in the student handbook following each debate session, to allow students to evaluate their own performance during the debate in terms of how well they feel they did, why and what they might improve for next time. They were also provided with a list of key skills (speaking, listening, structuring and organising arguments, critical thinking, analysing evidence, decision making, problem solving and sharing an opinion) that they were able to circle to indicate which ones they believed they practised during the session.

Students tended to record their speaking time during the debate, which comprised the initial part of the debate reflection section, but were less detailed in providing qualitative feedback. Students rated how well they thought they did in the session's debate using a scale from 1 (Not great) to 5 (Excellent). Although differing quantities and combinations of students completed this each time, there was a general trend of a slight increase from an average score of 3.12 in the first debate session, to 3.92 in the final session.

Due to the conciseness of qualitative responses this proved difficult to analyse and evaluate. The sections asking students what they believe they did well and what they believe they could improve for the following session were perhaps the most useful, but there was naturally a variety of responses which were specific to each individual, therefore trends cannot be easily obtained from the data.

This section could be adapted for conciseness and ease of completion. Following the 1-5 rating of their performance, students are asked why they gave themselves the score they had done, followed by one thing they did well and one thing they would like to improve. Arguably, students will be able to provide one thing they did well and one thing to improve more easily than these alongside a general explanation as to why they gave a certain score, as it is likely that the reasons for the scoring will be repeated in the subsequent two sections. When asking students about skills they practised and how, this often led to vague and apparent responses which provide little insight for evaluation. See more in the following "Skills Reflection" section for a more detailed criticism of this and similar measures.

Due to the difficulties evaluating this section of the student handbook, adaptations could be considered to facilitate evaluation, as the debate reflection is considered as not only an evaluative tool but also an important pedagogical tool for reflection, developing students' metacognition and critical thinking skills.

Skills Reflection

This section of the handbook was created to capture some brief qualitative data reflecting on how students used a set of 7 key skills throughout Arguing with Confidence and how they can implement these skills into their studies. The 7 skills were speaking, listening, structuring and organising arguments, critical thinking, evidence-based reasoning, problem solving and decision making: comprising of skills included within debate reflections at the end of each session.

While some students were able to specify instances in which they would be able to apply the skills in other aspects of their studies e.g. by naming certain subjects and elements of schoolwork such as revision and structuring written assignments, many did not elaborate on this section of the handbook. Largely, participants included basic or apparent responses. Such as stating that a certain skill was implemented in Arguing with Confidence "during the debate".

Several potential reasons could be put forward as to why this section provided disappointing results. It is possible that this section of the handbook is seen as repetitive, having already asked students about these various skills several times. Therefore, appearing as additional, uninteresting work for students. It could also be the case that students do not have a comprehensive knowledge of the differences between the key skills and provide vague answers out of a lack of clear understanding. Finally, it may simply be the case that this section of the handbook is difficult to answer. Participants may well have grasped the concepts of the different skills and known when and where they were applied during the programme and how they might be implemented externally, but this cannot necessarily be recalled when asked to relate this onto paper after completing the programme.

Last year's Arguing with Confidence report strongly advised that this section of the student handbook be reviewed and that this skills reflection could perhaps be integrated into the focus group interview schedule. This was implemented this year, allowing students to discuss this in greater detail. This report reiterates the potential need for this section to be reviewed so that students are more engaged with this part of the student handbook as it is recognised as an important pedagogical tool, although continuing to integrate skills reflection elements into focus groups is something that will be continued.

Focus Group Discussion Reflections

This part of the analysis was conducted with all schools to gain a broader understanding of the experiences of students and to ensure that student voice was included as a key part of the evaluation methodology. For evaluation purposes, transcripts grouped by school can be used to match the feedback to the cohort so that the delivery team can link potential differences in programme delivery to the feedback provided.

The main questions included in the focus group schedule were:

- What have you enjoyed about the programme?
- What would you like to remember about the programme?
- What could be improved in the programme?
- Can you give an example of something you've learnt from taking part in Arguing with Confidence that you didn't know before?
- What will you utilise from this programme in your school studies?

Thematic Analysis

Themes related to key learning skills

Self-Efficacy

The majority of students from all focus groups reported having increased confidence as a result of the programme and cited this as a positive outcome.

"I didn't like speaking in front of people, as well, like, every time I'd sort of stand in front of the classroom, I'd, like, shake. But as I was in the courtroom today, I was, like, just chill. I was, like, really just calm on the stage, and stuff like that."

This student explains how their confidence gradually improved over the course of the programme and notes their calmness while speaking in the final session.

In terms of applying their new-found confidence to their studies more broadly; students reported feeling as though they would be calmer and more confident when engaging in public speaking or raising their hand in class, as well as feeling more able to express their opinion.

"It would just help me out to actually answer the questions instead of waiting for people to answer them."

Critical Thinking

When discussing critical thinking, students generally spoke about their enjoyment of and increased understanding of the importance of undertaking research and using evidence to support their arguments.

"Before doing this, I didn't really understand, like, backing up a question, but now I've done it, I understand it, because when I give something, I always have to back it up, as in, like, to explain it."

Students also acknowledged improvements in their perspective-taking skills, having at times been assigned a side of the debate to argue. This includes the ability to compose an argument more spontaneously.

"How to make something up on the spot, that goes with what you're saying."

However, this was not always seen positively, with some students finding it difficult to construct an argument for a belief they did not hold.

"I understand that it's an important part of it, to understand both sides of an argument, but sometimes when you really do disagree with something, yet you get put on the agreeing side or vice versa, it's a bit hard to actually structure something like that."

This relates to one improvement suggested by a student, to occasionally have less serious debating topics, as "some of them could hit really close to home and just get people emotional". However, not all students shared this opinion. With some participants citing freedom of speech and discovering new debate topics as key advantages of the programme. Therefore, it may be useful to examine future debate topics regarding whether they might impact certain students negatively and make adjustments for this.

Oracy

Students discussed various components of oracy in their feedback, including improvements in speech clarity, listening to others, presenting a logical argument and persuasive speech.

"It's good to know how you get used to listening to other people's opinions and then waiting your turn to debate."

One concept that was brought up frequently was students' ability to structure and plan their arguments better and this was often linked to how they could apply this skill to other school subjects.

Students were generally familiar with the PEE/PEEL (point, evidence, explain, [link]) method of structuring arguments from their school studies, but some highlighted how Arguing with Confidence helped them to utilise this more effectively.

"I couldn't do, like, the PEE paragraph, which is point, evidence, explain, I'd only be able to make a point, but the rest wouldn't, like, do it. But now, in here, everything I just said, it all goes together, and just makes a perfect, like, paragraph or sentence."

Appraisal of the programme

Positive Feedback

While some positive feedback was non-specific. Some themes that arose were students' increased confidence in debating, ability to safely discuss opinions and enjoyment of the programme.

"It's actually gone from being okay, and not being able to do something, to great, and being able to do it, within a certain, like, amount of time, and it didn't take that long to do, either."

When participants provided specific positive elements of the programme, these were primarily regarding praise towards the facilitators and student ambassadors, and the campus visit to the University of Kent for the final session. Almost all students said how they enjoyed the experience in the moot court ("*I liked how we got to go in the judge's room, the courtroom*.").

Enthusiasm regarding the campus visit led to some students discussing their thoughts about their future and Higher Education. While thoughts about future career weren't discussed in detail, students liked how they "*got to experience the life of a lawyer*" and recognised how debating experience could translate into useful skills in the workplace.

Some students from two schools mentioned specifically how the campus visit inspired them to consider Higher Education, specifically the University of Kent as a future endeavour.

"Where [we were also able to] have a tour of the university, also possibly gives me and others' ideas for maybe this is an option for where I want to maybe go in the future."

Along with these positive appraisals, a few students expressed interest in taking part in the programme again in future if possible, including in a mentoring capacity for younger students (Student A: "We could help year 9s or 10s", Student B: "Yeah. We could be, like, kind of, like, mentors […] because we've done it").

Constructive Feedback

Some students proposed increasing the variability of the programme, in terms of activities, evaluation tasks and setting. Particularly regarding students' desire to have different questions and activities as part of the programme. This could reflect a sense of monotony within the student handbook and a need to make materials more engaging for students. Without this, there is a risk that participants could complete the evaluative measures without genuine engagement.

The most common suggestion given by students related to having more time to engage in debates within and across sessions. Within sessions, some students felt that the time restrictions did not allow the debates to take place as smoothly and naturally as they could: "*because sometimes we do run out of time, because a lot of people do point of information's, and then it, kind of, collides with the time, I guess*".

Others felt as though a greater number of sessions would be beneficial to them. Unfortunately, most students did not expand on the reasoning behind this, but one student said, "because it's quite a fun thing to do" and another said, "some other children might need a couple more sessions to get better". These justifications suggest that some participants found the programme enjoyable and beneficial in terms of improving their key skills and feel as though the length of the programme currently doesn't allow them to reach their full potential. Whilst it is positive that students would like to continue, it is recognised that a balance must be made between the value of the programme and the number of in school lessons that would be missed. As such, it is worth considering working with the schools to create further debating opportunities or debate clubs to allow students to continue to pursue this Interest without missing further curriculum content.

Conclusions

From the focus group discussions, there is strong evidence that the programme is evaluated positively by participants who demonstrate that the programme develops and improves the key skills or oracy, critical thinking and self-efficacy.

Increased confidence in their ability to speak and construct arguments was evidenced, relating to the concept of self-efficacy. This was mentioned on numerous occasions, supporting the notion that engaging in debating activities increases students' ability to speak publicly.

Despite the removal of the specific assessment measure of critical thinking following last year's pilot of the programme. Participants alluded to several components of this skill, including argument planning and construction, listening to and interpreting others' arguments and use of evidence to support arguments. The latter was a particularly salient point, indicating that students are interested in engaging in research to support their arguments: a necessary skill for those considering higher education and certain careers. The capability of this programme to improve these critical thinking skills therefore aids students to not only succeed in the short-term with GCSEs but extends to establish a foundation of essential skills that they can carry forward.

Suggestions for improvements will allow facilitators to consider these and potentially implement any that are deemed valuable. However, the most frequently reported suggestion appeared negative but in fact reflects a positive experience of the programme, where students asked for the programme to progress for a longer period. This suggests that students enjoyed and benefitted from the programme and considering how to extend the opportunities will be considered and implemented, if this is feasible.

Additionally, it is clear from the focus group transcripts that students enjoyed the opportunity to visit a university

campus and experience a moot court setting, enabling them to apply their debating skills in differing environments. For some, it increased aspirations to attend HE; an indirect but valuable impact. Making HE a more desirable option is a potential outcome for this programme, which would feed into its longer-term outcome of increasing progression to HE. Alongside this, increasing critical thinking skills could contribute to participants making better-informed HE progression decisions when the time comes.

In conclusion, there is satisfactory evidence to show that the positive short-term outcomes of developing the identified skills were met.

Staff Surveys

Online staff surveys were sent to teachers to gather their perceptions of the programme and how it may have benefitted the students, along with any drawbacks they may have noticed.

Due to a very small sample size and limited capacity to truly capture opinions given the format of the surveys; thematic analysis has not been conducted on these data, but general findings will be reported.

Staff members were generally overwhelmingly positive about the programme and the impact it had had on their students: a list of key themes are mentioned below:

- Students' confidence in their abilities to not only debate but to engage in school more generally had increased because of the programme.
- Activities were well-delivered; student ambassadors allowed students to feel at ease and engage with the programme. Any who did not engage to the same extent as their peers did not do so out of lack of interest, but generally because of contextual support needs that were unrelated to the programme.
- Confidence in public speaking and critical thinking were two skills mentioned to have improved.
- The campus visit was noted as a positive part of the programme, with one staff member suggesting allocating more time for a campus tour.

These findings reinforce the qualitative findings from the student focus groups. Confidence appears to be a key theme mentioned by both staff and students. With school staff noticing that in some students, this has extended far beyond the programme to other areas of life. The campus visit was also noted by both groups to have been an important and positive highlight of the programme, with suggestions largely reflecting a desire to extend this if possible.

It is interesting to note that one member of staff specifically mentioned how contextual circumstances had prevented some students from continuing with the programme and is a factor that ought to be taken into consideration more broadly as part of a systematic approach to narrowing the attainment gap. However, this staff member also noted that one student who had withdrawn from the programme later regretted this decision and would be more confident to commit to the programme in future to step out of his comfort zone.

One school additionally reported that 58% of students increased their English grades by 1 level or more, as a result of taking part in the Arguing with Confidence programme. While we do not have attainment data from other schools, this is a very positive result and a first step in hopefully gaining further data from all participating schools in future.

6. Discussion

Research Questions

Is Arguing with Confidence effective in supporting the development of students' key learning skills?

The analysis and findings suggest that Arguing with Confidence has had an overall positive impact on students' key learning skills. The quantitative data found that evaluative scores increased over the course of the programme. Indicating an improvement in each of the key learning skill areas, along with increases in speaking time. These improvements were also apparent from qualitative results; where students and staff both emphasised the role the programme had played in boosting their confidence and ability, particularly regarding public speaking and having the confidence to express opinions and thoughts. Some students suggested that the programme could be longer or dedicate more time during sessions to debating: this provides evidence that students felt the programme and its incorporation of practical engagement in debating were beneficial.

Does Arguing with Confidence support schools' efforts in raising literacy levels which may subsequently influence attainment in GCSE English Language?

Students reported higher scores to all evaluative questions at the end of the programme, including confidence in taking their GCSE English exam. This indicates an increase in self-efficacy specifically regarding English, along with skills that relate strongly to English as a subject (oracy and critical thinking). While the most effective way to measure literacy levels and subsequent attainment would be to assess GCSE English results. This was beyond the scope of this report, as the university will need to wait for KS4 results in subsequent years to assess this properly.

However, interim attainment data was available for analysis in one of the participating schools. This school reported an increase in English assessment grades for students involved in the programme, with 58% of participants demonstrating improvement in their in-school English assessments. While these findings are indicative rather than conclusive, they provide early signals of potential academic impact.

It is anticipated that future iterations of the programme will enable more systematic use of in-school attainment data across participating schools to strengthen evaluation of impact on English outcomes. In the longer term, tracking GCSE English Language attainment will allow for a more robust assessment of the Arguing with Confidence programme's effectiveness in supporting sustained academic progress.

Methodological Limitations

Self-Reported Data

All data collected, except for speaking time during each debate session, were self-reported and are therefore limited in terms of objectivity. Self-reported measures are inherently subject to bias and may be affected by inaccurate or incomplete responses. In this context, factors such as time constraints, repeated exposure to evaluation questions and reduced engagement associated with a perceived obligation to complete the student handbook may have influenced the reliability of responses.

Future iterations of the programme should consider incorporating in-school assessment data as a comparative measure to strengthen the robustness of the evaluation. Although previous reports have acknowledged the practical challenges associated with accessing and standardising such data across schools, the potential value of triangulating self-reported outcomes with objective attainment measures should not be underestimated.

Missing Data

As is common in the collection of self-report data with student cohorts, attendance was inconsistent across sessions and not all participants completed the relevant sections of the student handbook to a sufficient standard. These issues limited the completeness of the dataset and presented challenges for analysis and evaluation of programme outcomes. Furthermore, incomplete participation may have introduced response bias; with the findings disproportionately reflecting the experiences and perceptions of students who were more consistently engaged and potentially more motivated or enthusiastic about the programme.

7. Recommendations

Based on student feedback and findings from the current academic year, some recommendations have been identified. These are outlined below.

1. Work with schools to expand debating opportunities.

Considering high levels of student satisfaction, increased confidence in key skills and expressed demand to extend the programme. Opportunities for embedding in-school debating provision should be explored in partnership with participating schools. Developing in-school debating opportunities would enable students to further consolidate and refine these skills without requiring withdrawal from curriculum lessons, which has been identified as a key consideration when extending the programme.

This approach could be supported through the development of a structured resource bank to equip schools with materials and guidance to sustain debating activities independently, thereby enhancing the programme's longer-term impact and scalability.

2. Collect KS4 data to assess longer-term impacts of the programme and collaborate with schools to evaluate overall school performance.

To date, it has not been possible to access sufficient attainment data to robustly supplement the evaluation of the Arguing with Confidence programme. The inclusion of data such as predicted GCSE English grades and confirmed GCSE outcomes (once available through tracking databases) would significantly strengthen assessment of the programme's impact on English attainment.

While the programme's key learning skills are primarily intended to support English-related outcomes, these skills are transferable across a range of curriculum areas; as outlined in the introduction to this report. Closer collaboration with participating schools would therefore enable a more comprehensive understanding of the programme's broader impact on students' academic performance. As previously noted, one participating school reported that 58% of students improved their in-school English assessment grade by at least one level. In light of this positive interim finding, there is a strong rationale for developing a more formalised approach to the collection of attainment data from schools.

Establishing systematic data-sharing processes would enable future iterations of the programme to report more objective and longer-term outcomes, strengthening both evaluative rigour and accountability.

3. Consideration of topics for debate

Although some students mentioned how they enjoyed the fact that the programme gave them a sense of freedom of speech and chances to discuss real-life issues, others noted how topics were at times too serious and emotionally charged. Therefore, particularly given that the programme aims to work with students whose backgrounds may make them more vulnerable. Consideration ought to be taken when considering debate topics so that a set of topics can be created that considers this, while still allowing them to explore sophisticated topics of discussion.

4. Devise a more effective way for students to fill out the skills and debate reflections.

Programme developers will need to consider how best to implement the skills and debate reflection tools so that students do not view this as a repetitive or unnecessary tool but engage with it fully as part of the skills development progress. These have been recognised as important pedagogical tools, yet students often completed these sections very minimally. This suggests a lack of understanding or interest which could potentially be remedied. Debate reflection tools could be altered to improve conciseness and additional support provided when completing these activities.

5. Liaise with schools to try and mitigate student absences.

There were substantial variations in attendance across participating schools, with some experiencing high levels of persistent absence. It is recommended that the University work more closely with schools to promote more consistent attendance, alongside developing a clearer understanding of the contextual factors that may be contributing to non-attendance and identifying strategies to mitigate these barriers.

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