What Works in social mobility and student success?
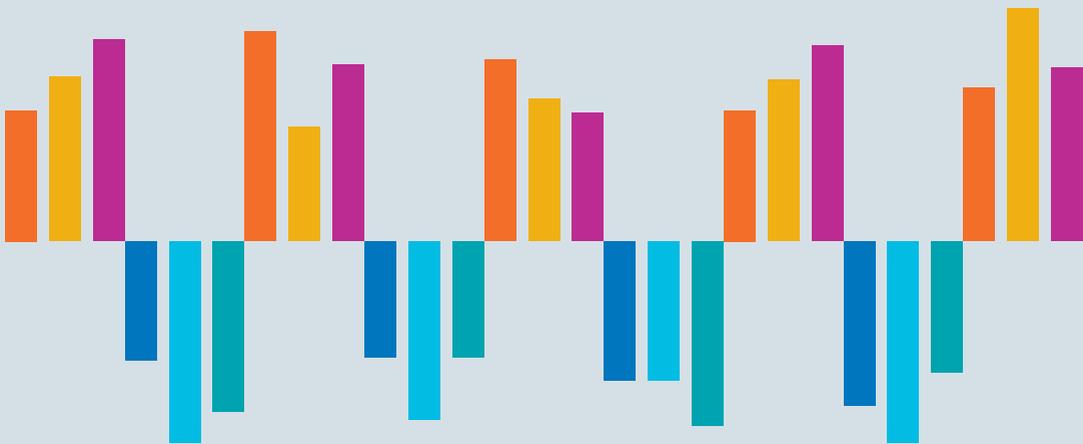
Evidence-led practice in social mobility and student success

Social Mobility and Student Success is a new division in King's College London, which draws together Widening Participation, Student Success and What Works.

The King's College London strategic plan, Vision 2029[1], outlines the university's mission to drive interdisciplinarity, think of ourselves as members of a local and international community that reaches beyond the campus gates, and hold civic responsibility and service at the heart of everything we do.

Consistent with this, King's College London takes a whole lifecycle approach to social mobility and student success.[2] We seek to support students to succeed at school and access university, to experience university life equally and fairly, and to enjoy the labour market benefits they have earned.

We have a practical and ethical imperative to understand what constitutes effective practice at each stage, using all the tools at our disposal to understand how we can most effectively support students. Programmes and initiatives require time, from students, educators and widening participation staff, and the decision to do one thing comes at the cost of an alternative foregone.

From a practical standpoint, we want to know our resources are going towards the best things they can be. From an ethical standpoint, we want to know that we are delivering to students the maximum benefit in return for the time and attention they have given us.

There are a wide range of methods of evaluation, so it is often a matter of choosing the right approach for the research question, and of challenging ourselves on those questions: do we wish to know whether the students appreciated the programme, or do we want to understand whether or not it made a difference to their outcomes? Fortunately, the move towards digitisation and online forms of communication have reduced the costs and complexity of some forms of evaluation that were, in the past, prohibitively difficult; for example, the use of Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) and panel surveying, which we used in our flagship KCLxBIT project (see page 6).

THE WHOLE LIFECYCLE APPROACH

Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4	Stage 5
Pre-16 outreach	**Post-16 outreach**	**Fair admissions**	**Student experience**	**Successful graduates**
Aspiration-raising activities for local students that encourage higher education participation. King's outreach programmes will support informed choice making through impartial guidance.	Targeted outreach work with students in London and beyond to improve access to King's College London and other universities. Activities will seek to enhance attainment and preparedness for higher study.	King's recruitment, selection and admissions processes are fair, transparent, and identify the talent and potential of students from all backgrounds.	Excellent student and education support services that seek to address the on-course needs of students from widening participation backgrounds.	Tailored support to improve the employability and career outcomes of students from widening participation backgrounds.

1 https://www.kcl.ac.uk/aboutkings/strategy/Kings-strategic-vision-2029.pdf
2 www.kcl.ac.uk/governancezone/GovernanceLegal/Widening-Participation-Strategy.aspx

What Works Department

Objectives for the What Works Department

1. To contribute to understanding of what works in enabling people to access and succeed at university.

2. To promote empiricism and innovation in widening participation.

3. To support the sector to think differently about designing and evaluating initiatives.

To continue to embed evidence-based practice and innovative approaches into King's ways of working, the What Works Department has been established within Social Mobility and Student Success.
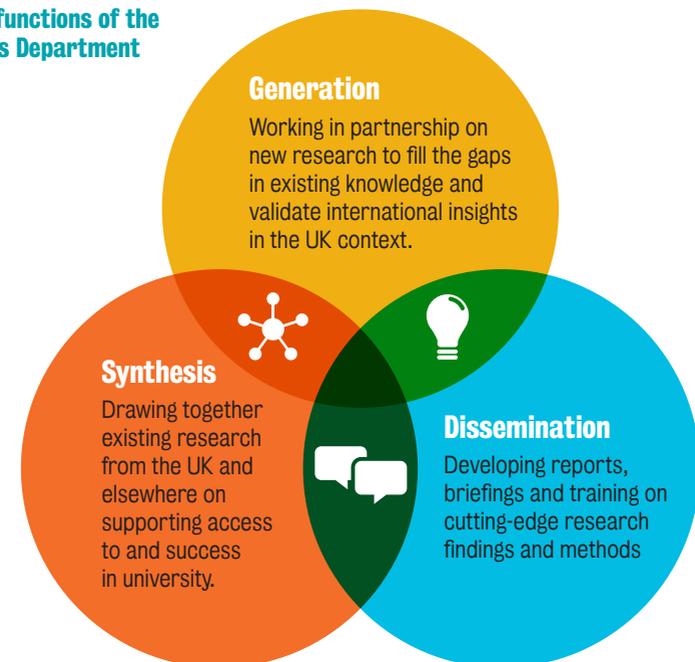
What Works has three objectives, outlined in the box to the left. To support these objectives, What Works has three functions, as outlined in the diagram on the next page.

These functions reflect our spiritual alignment to the broader What Works movement, which is dedicated to understanding and spreading effective practice across areas as broad as educational attainment, wellbeing and policing.

Our work programme will draw a broad range of sources and inputs into three strands focusing on behavioural insights, research and evaluation, and data science. Examples of lines of enquiry we seek to pursue are:

- How can we build student belongingness, particularly among non-traditional students and those who do not live near campus?

- How can we enhance the role of King's in building social and civic capital?

- Can we identify students who may need additional support from how they interact with King's in their first month?

The three functions of the What Works Department

Generation
Working in partnership on new research to fill the gaps in existing knowledge and validate international insights in the UK context.

Synthesis
Drawing together existing research from the UK and elsewhere on supporting access to and success in university.

Dissemination
Developing reports, briefings and training on cutting-edge research findings and methods

In order to address these questions, we will draw on student voice techniques, including both seeking information from students about their experience and making them part of the conversation around solutions; cutting-edge quantitative and data science approaches; and partnerships with academics within and beyond King's to ensure we are drawing on the latest academic expertise, and making this accessible to interested practitioners.

We will also seek partnerships and collaborations with other interested universities and organisations to contribute to the evidence base in what works in promoting social mobility and student success in settings more broad than King's.

The KCLxBIT project

The undergraduate student experience is highly stratified and student disadvantage does not melt away at the doors of our university. We wished to ensure widening participation learners had as full and enriching experiences as their peers.

We partnered with the Behavioural Insights Team (BIT) to explore new ways of supporting widening participation students at King's. The behavioural insights approach, pioneered by BIT, takes insights from the social and behavioural sciences and operationalises them into the design of policies, programmes and services. A tenet of these literatures is that behaviour is complex and difficult to predict, and that even individuals themselves may struggle to accurately predict or explain their own behaviour. Robust empirical research methods, particularly the use of Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs), is a cornerstone of the behavioural insights approach.[3]

The KCLxBIT team was committed to evidence-led practice and continuing research. Because we were implementing approaches that had not been tried in King's before, we wanted to know whether they were having the desired effect; and, if not, to have enough information to learn and adapt the approach.

Understanding student experience

We wished to understand how students both experienced and recalled their first year. To this end, we ran a set of student journey workshops with students in their second year. We also ran a Pulse Survey (PS), which covered a range of topics over six waves, with some topics asked repeatedly (in all six waves or across two time points), while others provided a one-off snapshot. It was conducted to the highest feasible standard, including staged recruitment and weighting with the aim of a final sample that was demographically representative of the first year population, applying behavioural insights to participant retention, and the use of academically validated question scales where available.

Developing and testing initiatives

We trialled a range of initiatives, from the King's Community Ambassador's scheme to SMS and email communications to encourage engagement with opportunities and support. All interventions were evaluated through RCTs, to understand with confidence whether they were effective in improving student experience.

The KCLxBIT Project Report is available at **kcl.ac.uk/whatworks**

Project timeline

DEVELOPING AND TESTING INITIATIVES

- Student Journey workshops

- PS Wave 1: Personality, family and external support, expectations
- PS Wave 2: Wellbeing, activities, social connections

- PS Wave 3: Wellbeing, interactions with faculty
- PS Wave 4: Wellbeing, activities
- PS Wave 5: Wellbeing, activities, academic motivations
- PS Wave 6: Wellbeing, activities, social connections, expectations

September 2015	January 2016	September 2016	January 2017	September 2017	January 2018

UNDERSTANDING STUDENT EXPERIENCE

- SMS to encourage exam attendance
- King's Community Ambassadors, Year 1
- SMS to encourage attendance at Study Abroad 101 sessions

- SMS to encourage:
  1. Welcome Fair attendance
  2. Study Abroad applications
  3. access to student support services
  4. taking an online online study skills module
- What I Wish I'd Known: emails and events for bursary students
- King's Community Ambassadors, Year 2

- SMS to encourage sign up to be paired with a King's Alumni mentor

- What Works Department established

- KCLxBIT Project Report released

3 www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/62529/TLA-1906126.pdf

Want to know more?
Want to collaborate?
Want to stay in touch?

Email: **whatworks@kcl.ac.uk**
Tweet: **@kclwhatworks**
Website: **kcl.ac.uk/whatworks**