

Durham University Access and Participation Plan: Core Theories of Change (2025–2029)

Corresponding Author: Karen Jones
Affiliation: Durham University
ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9578-9873>
Email: karen.jones@durham.ac.uk

Abstract

This article outlines the Core Theories of Change (TOCs) underpinning Durham University's Access and Participation Plan (APP) for 2025–2029. TOCs provide strategic frameworks that map how specific interventions are expected to lead to desired outcomes and long-term impact. Using TASO's model, nine Core TOCs are presented, aligned with seven intervention strategies targeting pre-16 and post-16 outreach, transition support, disability inclusion, mature learners, ethnicity heritage-specific programmes and belonging. These TOCs offer strategic clarity, guidance for programme design, and support robust evaluation. They are not static and evolve over time with emerging evidence. As the APP progresses, these Core TOCs will evolve into Enhanced TOCs with detailed causal mechanisms and 'if-then' logic statements, forming the basis for rigorous evaluation frameworks. This article marks the first formal output of the APP evaluation plan and contributes to sector-wide evidence building on equality of opportunity.

Keywords

Access and Participation Plan; Theory of Change; Higher Education; Widening Participation; Evaluation Framework; TASO TOC Model; Equality of Opportunity.

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Introduction

Durham University's Access and Participation Plan (APP) presents details of one of the university's key strategic aims - to enhance equality of opportunity at Durham, and across the sector. It includes details of analysis highlighting the key risks to equality of opportunity in our context at Durham, our strategic aims and objectives, and associated targets. It also presents a programme of activities/interventions, along with rigorous evaluation plans aimed at investigating their impact. The full plan details seven intervention strategies to be rolled across the academic years of 2025/26 to 2028/29. A copy of the plan can be found here:

<https://www.durham.ac.uk/visit-us/schools/access-engagement/access-and-participation-plans/>

This report is the first output from the APP Evaluation Plan. It sets out the Core Theories of Change that underpin the interventions in our APP. The first sections of this report will present a definition of a Core Theory of Change, explain the key elements of our TOCs and how we use them to inform our ongoing development, evaluation and reporting. The main section of the report presents nine Core Theories of Change that underpin our APP's seven intervention strategies. The penultimate section of the report explains how we will develop these Core Theories of Change further into Enhanced Theories of Change across the span of this current APP and how these are then linked to our Evaluation Plans/Frameworks to test the effectiveness of our interventions. The final section includes the references for citations included in the report. Theories of Change are not static but are constantly changing and adapting as further evidence and literature comes to light. This report is a snapshot in time as we begin the new APP round.

Definition of a Theory of Change (TOC)

TASO, an independent organisation that supports the higher education sector in evidence building and evaluation aimed at reducing equality gaps, defines a Theory of change as:

"A visual representation of how an intervention's activities contribute to the intended outcomes and impact" (TASO)

A "Core" Theory of change is an overarching, high-level summary of an intervention and its activities and the change we want to see. An "Enhanced" Theory of Change is a more detailed TOC outlining individual assumptions, mechanisms and logic models that link each element of the intervention to the change we want to see. At this stage in the APP we present our initial Core TOCs. This is the first version of these live documents that change throughout the APP process and will develop to become more detailed over time. They may also adapt as evidence informs what aspects of the interventions work well or not well. There are many models for presenting TOCs, but common key elements are listed below.

Key elements of a Theory of Change

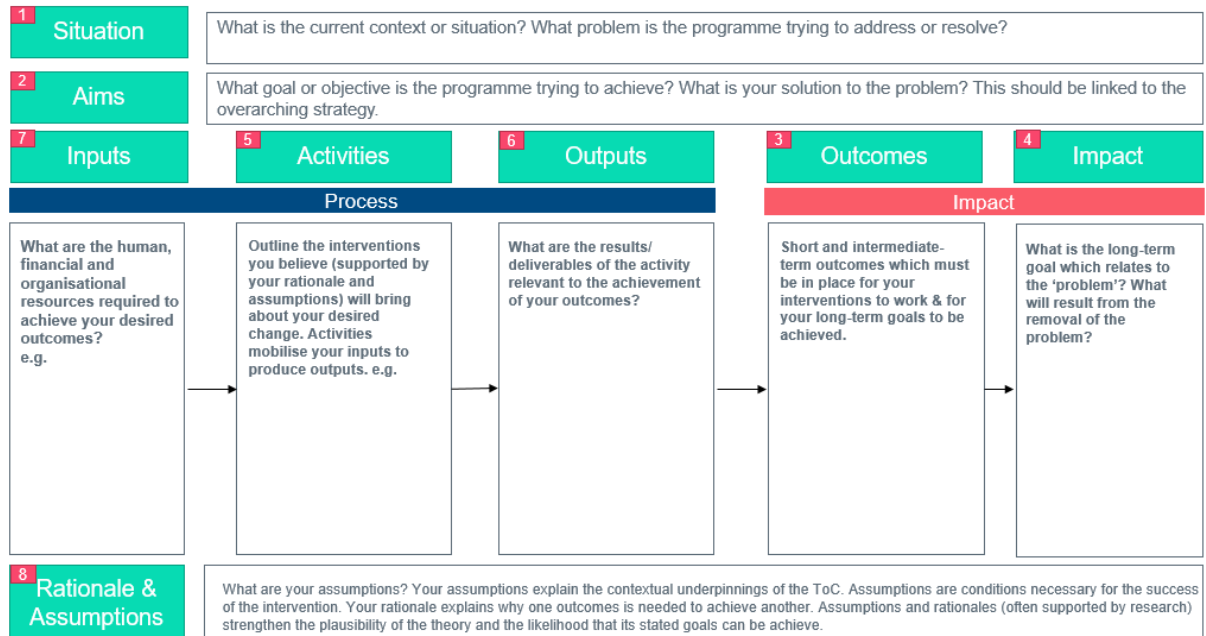
We have used TASO's Core Theory of Change template to present our TOCs, set out in the format illustrated *Figure 1* below. This model presents the following key elements*:

1. *Situation*: A problem statement that describes specific issue or inequality that the intervention is aiming to address.
2. *Aims*: The goal or objective the programme is trying to achieve. What a solution to the situation would look like.
3. *Outcomes*: The changes you hope or expect to see as a result of the activities, including changes in behaviour, attitudes, skills, engagement, or attainment.
4. *Impact*: The long-term goal or systemic change you are hoping to bring about, or contribute to, through your intervention. The targets you want to reach.
5. *Activities*: The specific actions or activities that will be delivered through the intervention. The activities mobilise the inputs to produce outputs.
6. *Outputs*: The results/deliverables of the activity relevant to the achievement of the outcomes.
7. *Inputs*: The resources (human, financial and organisational) that are required to carry out the activities, and reach the outcomes, as intended.
8. *Rationale and Assumptions*: The logical mechanisms underpinning why we expect an intervention to work and the conditions necessary for success. These mechanisms are often supported by research and indicate the likelihood that an intervention will be successful. (Where possible, at Durham University, we will write these as "if - then" statements based on literature i.e. If this event happens, then we expect to see this outcome)

(Based on TASO's Core TOC Guidance and Resources available at:
<https://taso.org.uk/libraryitem/core-theory-of-change/>)

Figure 1: TASO's Core Theory of Change Template

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The Role of Theories of Change in Ongoing Development and Evaluation Reporting

1. *Strategic Clarity*: To help stakeholders understand the purpose of activities/interventions and the evidence supporting them.
2. *Practical Planning*: To inform programme design, including activity selection, data collection methods, and sample size considerations.
3. *Evaluation and Feedback*: To inform and work alongside evaluation designs and plans.
4. *Annual Reporting*: Insights from yearly reports guide adjustments in future iterations (for example the Pre-16 MIP pilot informed Year 1 rollout).
5. *Evidence generation*: Where possible, final impact reports aim to establish causal and/or rigorous evidence of the effectiveness of interventions, with the potential to influence national and international practice through publications in HEEL and peer reviewed journal articles (e.g. the Boliver and Jones (2024) paper on contextual offers).

List of Theories of Change and how they relate to the intervention strategies in our APP

This section of the report presents the nine Core Theories of Change related to our APP's seven intervention strategies. Any citations used in the Core Theories of Change are presented in the Reference Section. They are as follows:

Figure 2: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 1a - Pre-16 Multi-Intervention Programme (MIP)

Figure 3: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 1b - KS5 Multi-Intervention Programme (MIP)

Figure 4: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 1.2 - Transition Support

Figure 5: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 2 - Asian Heritage Multi-Intervention Programme (MIP)

Figure 6: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 3 - Black Heritage Multi-Intervention Programme (MIP)

Figure 7: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 3 - Investing in Understanding (Black Heritage)

Figure 8: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 4/5 - Bespoke pre-arrival days (Disability)

Figure 9: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 6 - Dedicated mature learners' coordinator

Figure 10: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 7 - Increasing Belonging

Figure 2: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 1a - Pre-16 Multi-Intervention Programme (MIP)

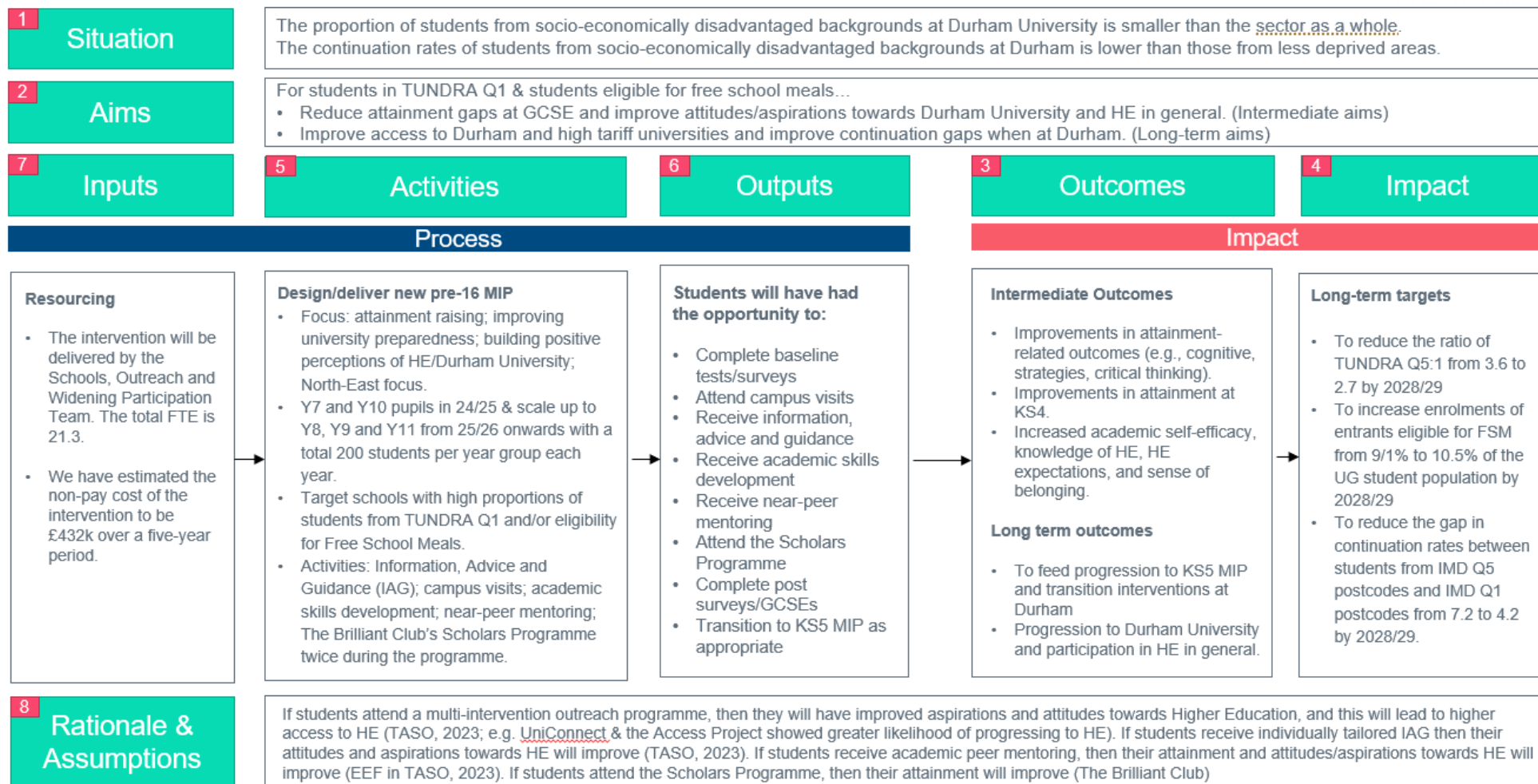


Figure 3: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 1b - KS5 Multi-Intervention Programme (MIP)

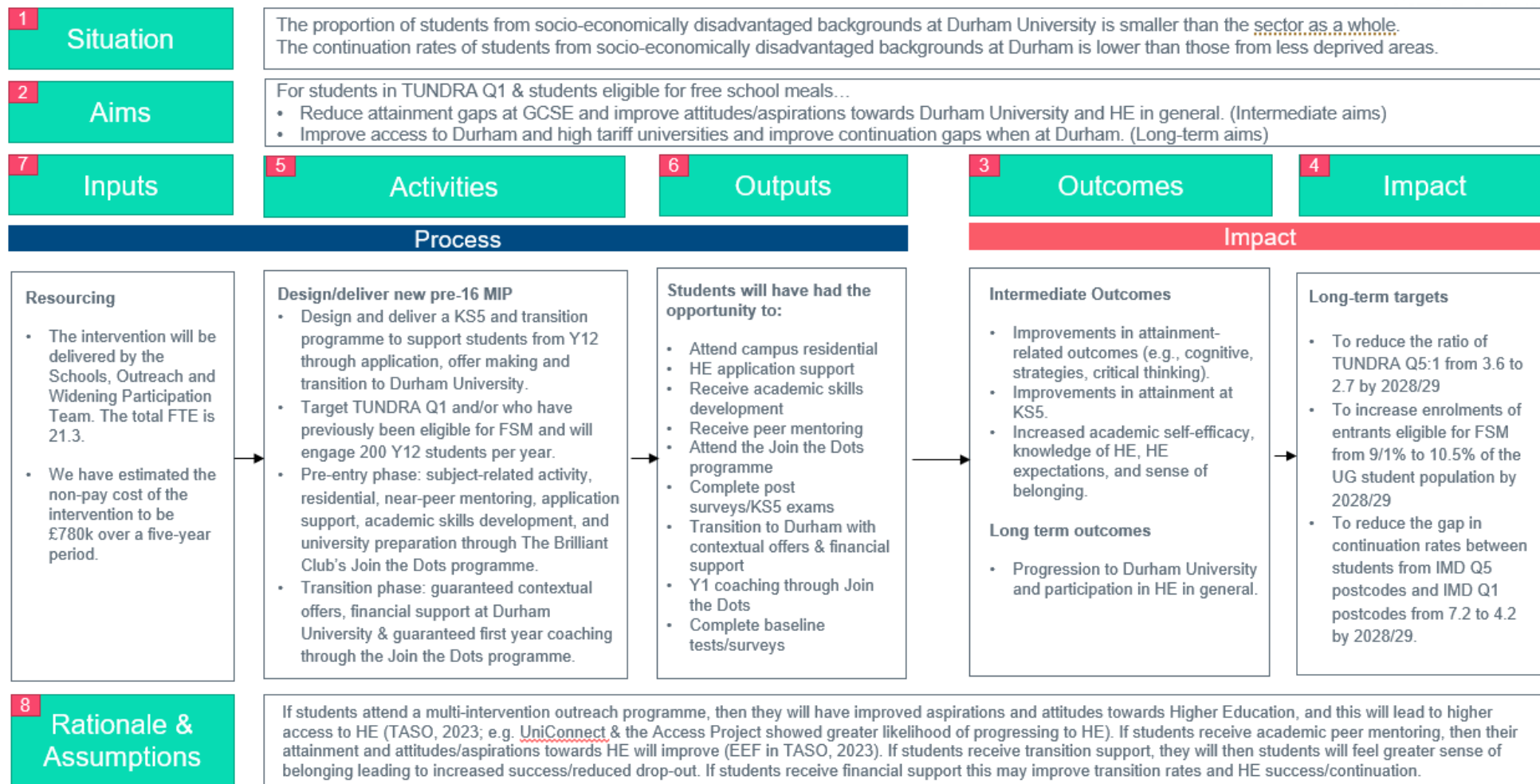


Figure 4: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 1.2 - Transition Support

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IS1.2: Durham University Transition Support: Theory of Change

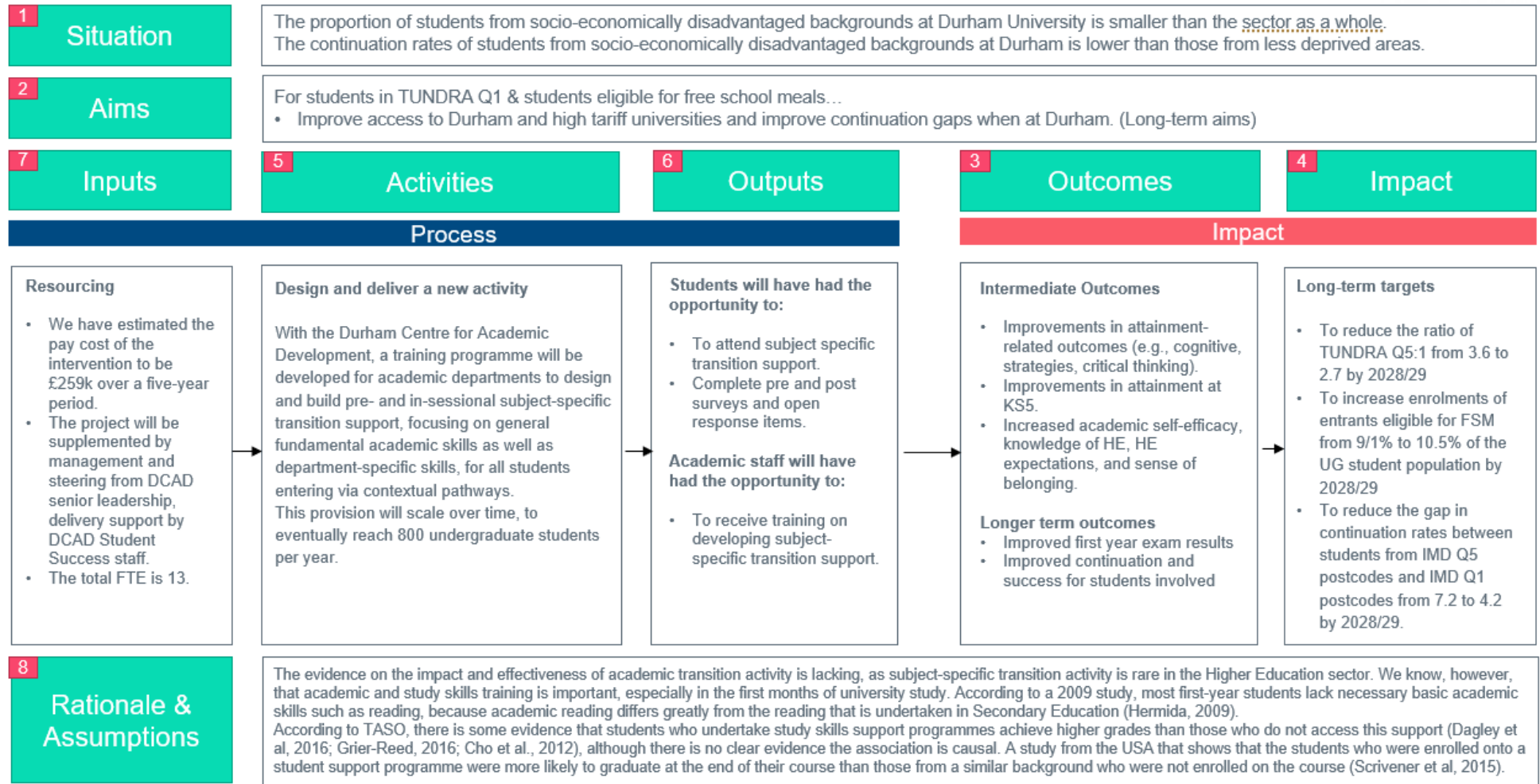


Figure 5: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 2 - Asian Heritage Multi-Intervention Programme (MIP)

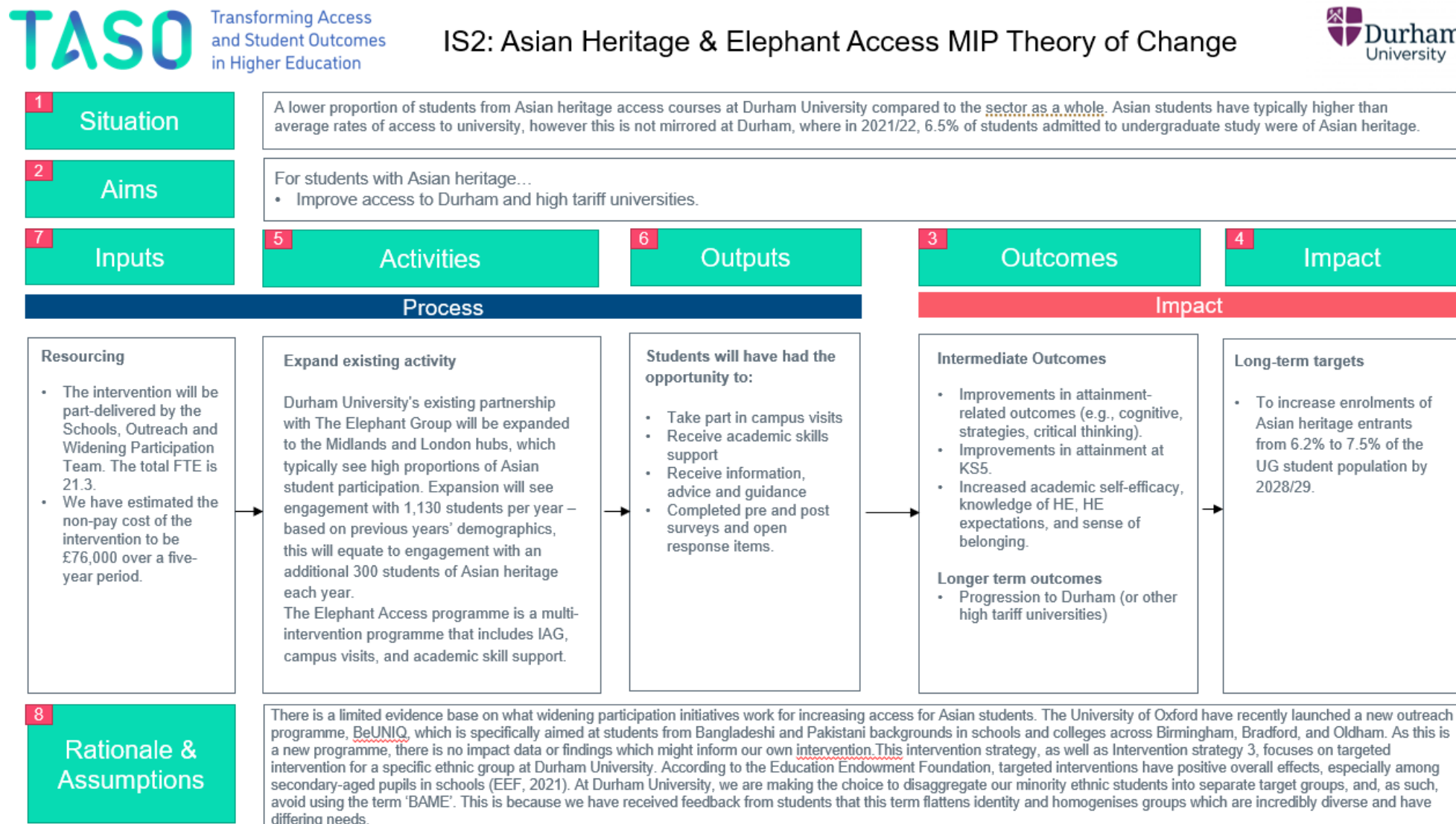


Figure 6: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 3 - Black Heritage Multi-Intervention Programme (MIP)

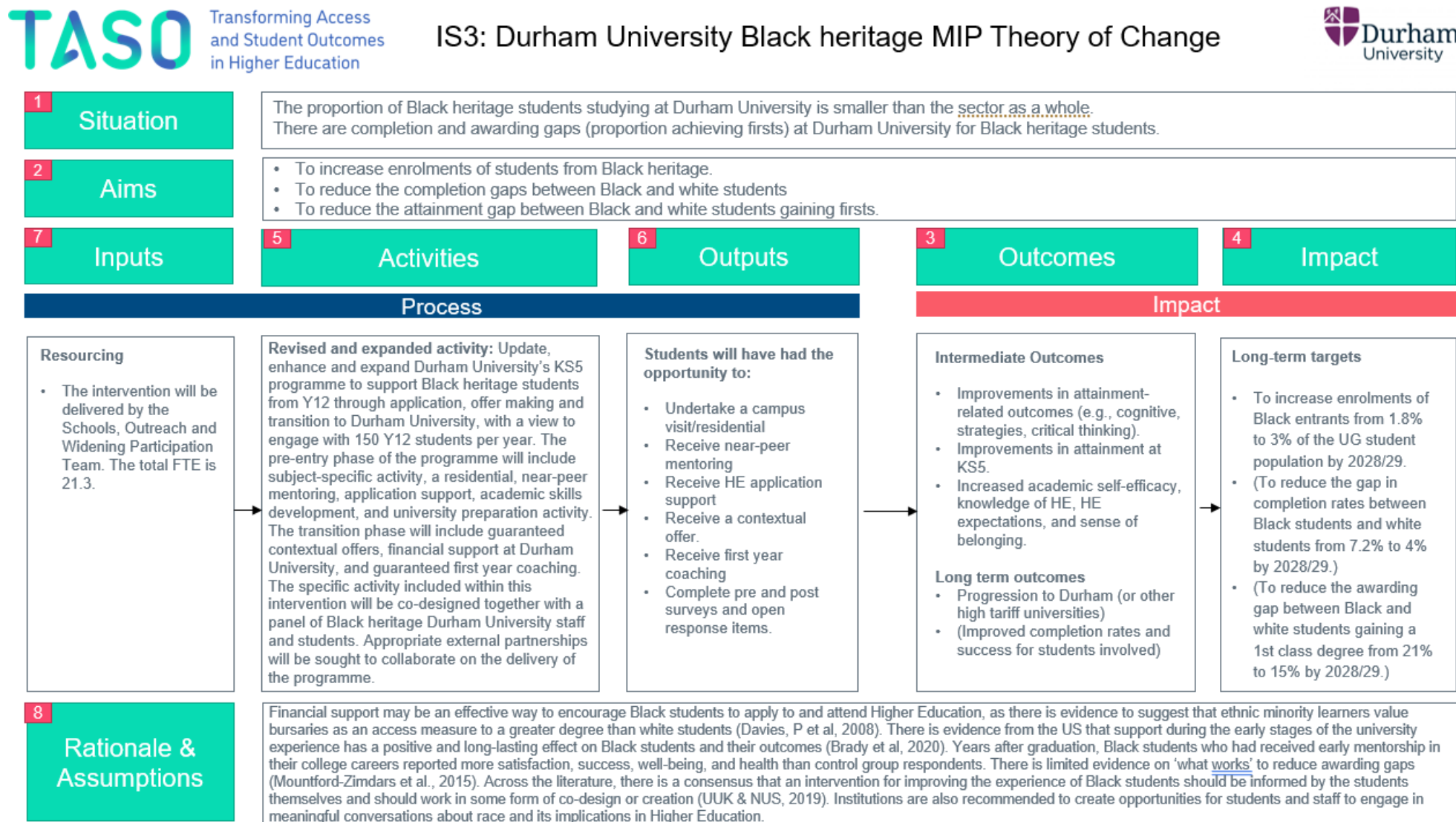


Figure 7: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 3 - Investing in Understanding (Black Heritage)

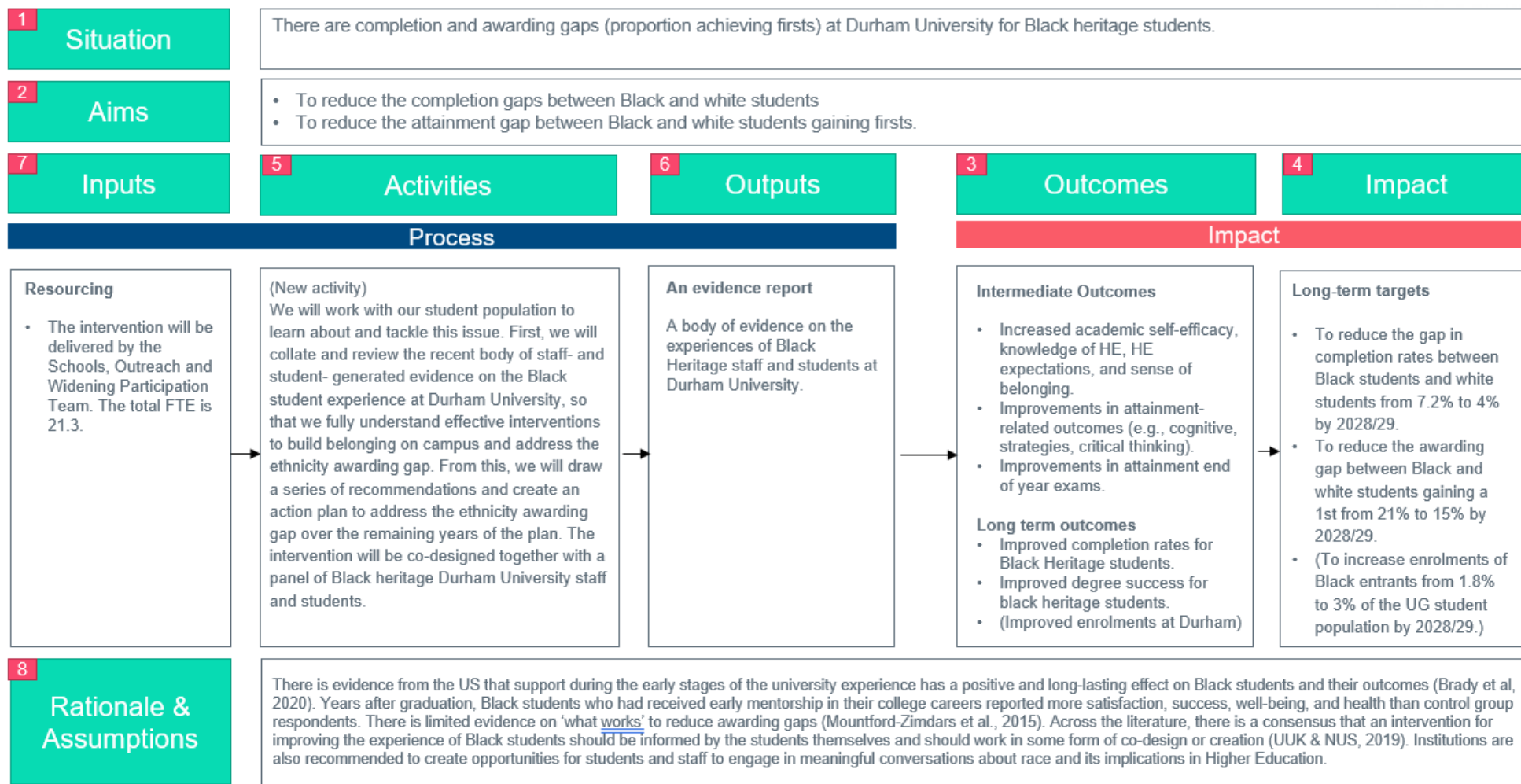


Figure 8: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 4/5 - Bespoke pre-arrival days (Disability)



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IS4/5: Pre-arrival Days (Disability) Theory of Change

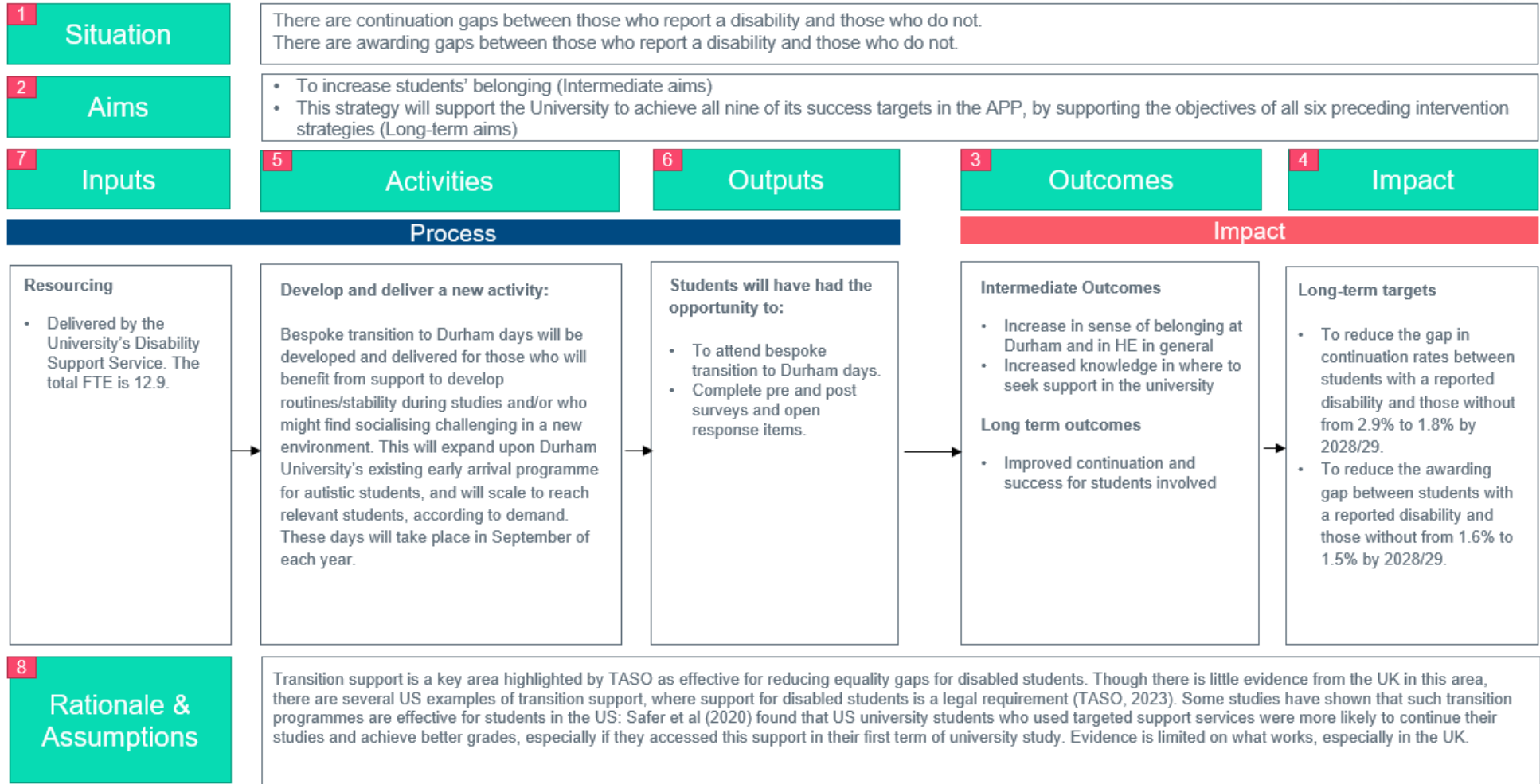


Figure 9: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 6 - Dedicated mature learners' coordinator

IS6: Mature Learners' Coordinator Theory of Change

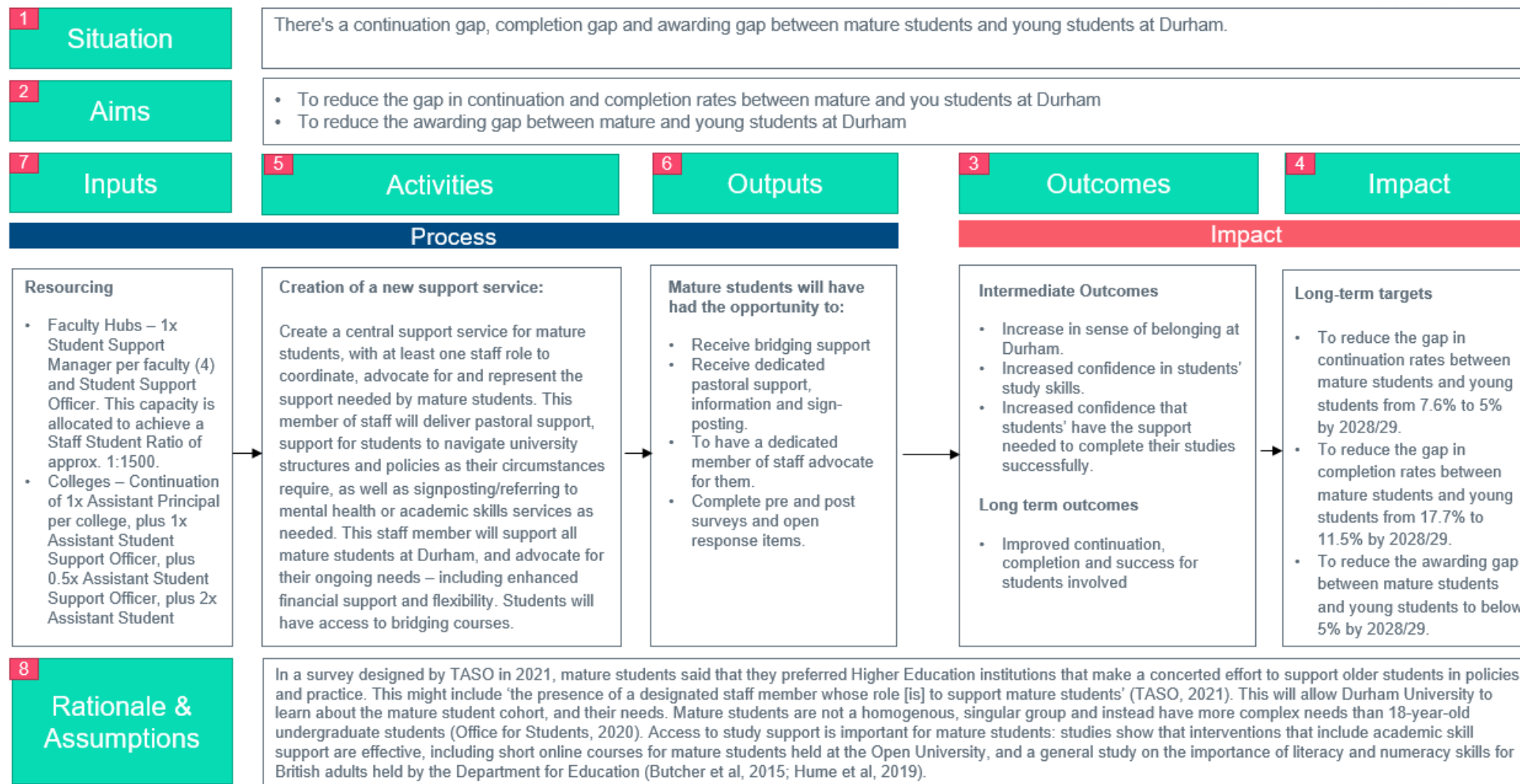
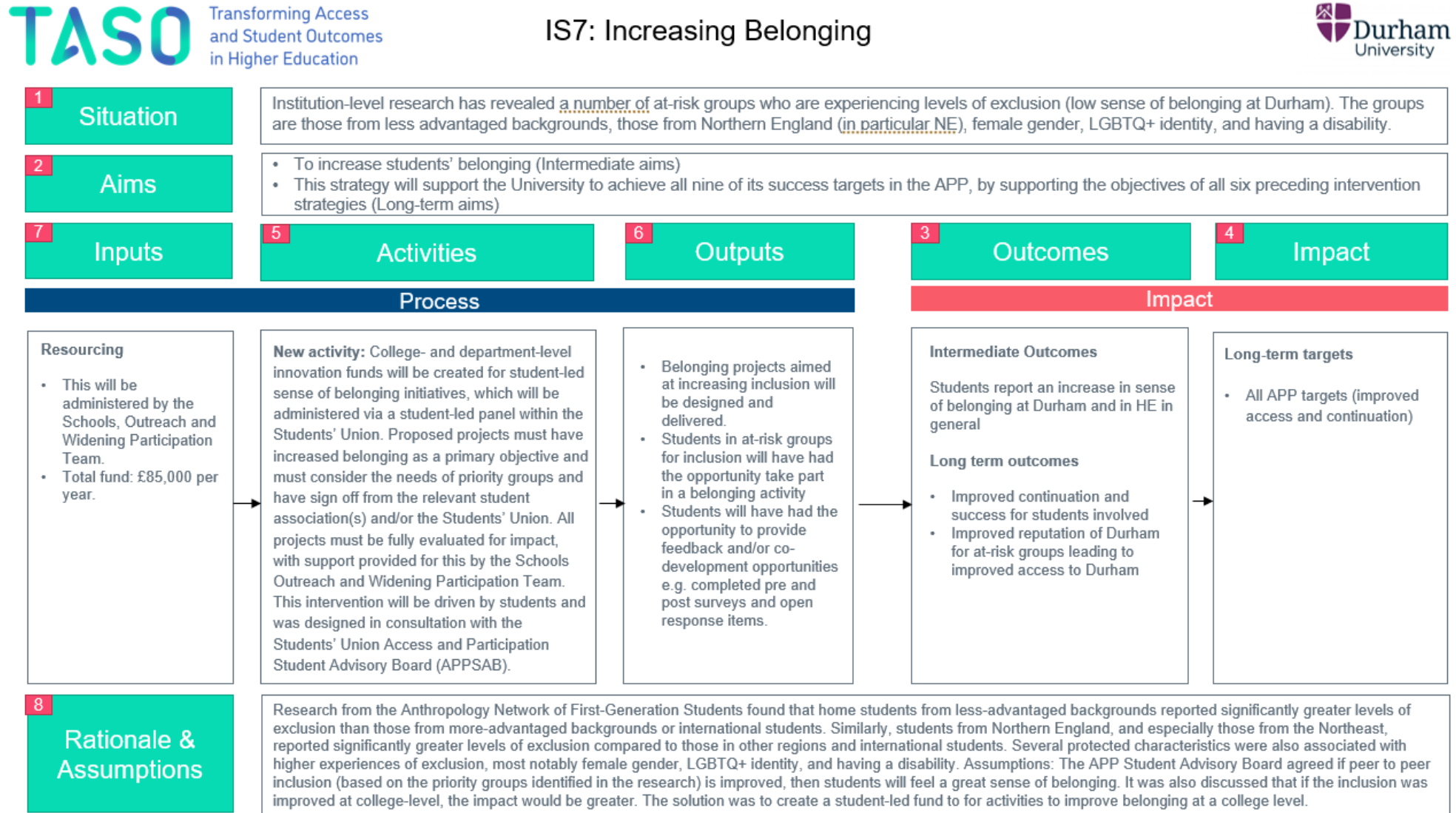


Figure 10: Core Theory of Change for Intervention Strategy 7 - Increasing Belonging



What next? Evaluation Plans and Enhanced Theories of Change

As the programmes develop throughout the APP period, the assumptions and rationale section will be developed further into more detailed mechanisms and causal pathways. These refinements aim to strengthen the programme’s logic and evidence base. The mechanisms will be articulated using simple, testable “if–then” statements to clarify the expected causal relationships. For example:

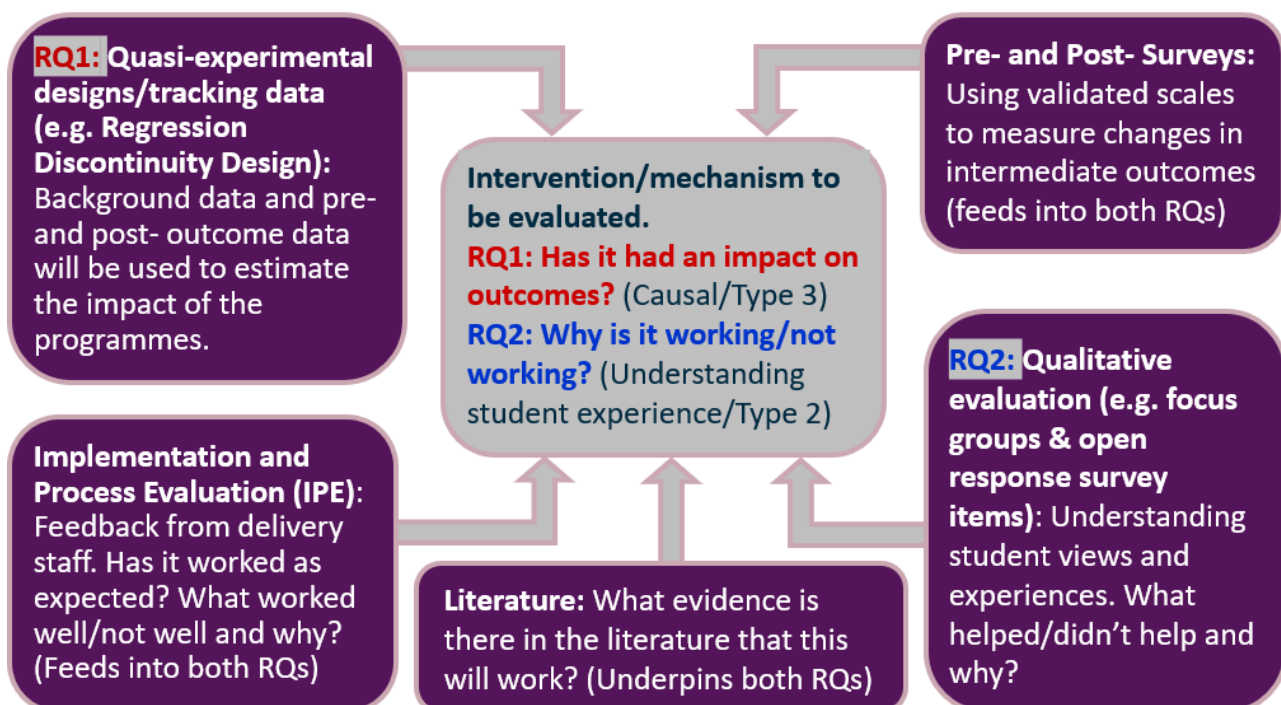
“If students receive academic peer mentoring, then their attainment will improve.”

The collection of these mechanisms and causal pathways will form an Enhanced Theory of Change, offering a more granular and evidence-informed understanding of how programme activities lead to desired outcomes.

To assess the effectiveness of the intervention or mechanisms, an ambitious evaluation plan has been developed. This plan includes a range of evaluation designs that will be used to inform future iterations of the interventions and to provide evidence of what does and doesn’t work.

An overview of the Evaluation Plan adopted by Durham University for the APP is shown in *Figure 11* below. Central, in grey, is the intervention and associated research questions (RQs), surrounded by evaluation methods/designs in dark purple. The methods will be adapted to each intervention/mechanism. Some interventions will be more focused on literature and qualitative evidence on the understanding of student experience (e.g. the Investing in Understanding - Black Heritage), whilst others will focus on establishing causal evidence (e.g. the Pre-16 MIP).

Figure 11: The APP Evaluation Plan Overview linked to Research Questions (RQs)



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