



# Join the Dots

## Impact report

### 2022-2023



March 2023

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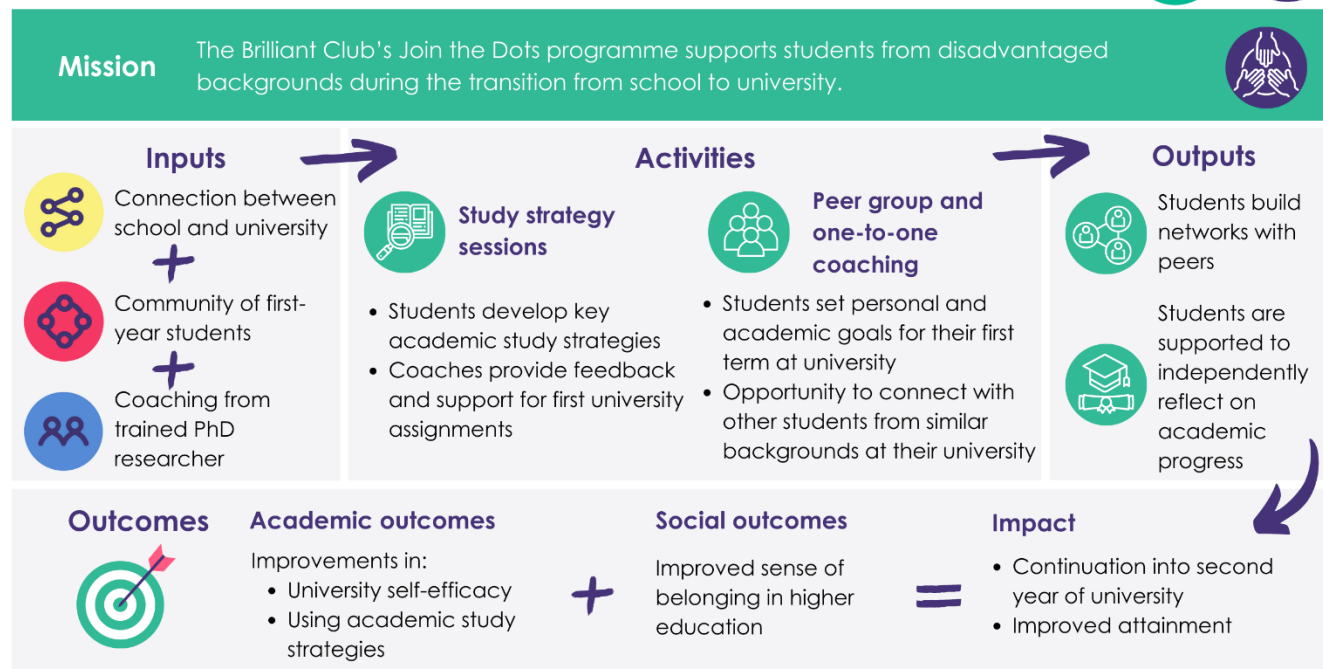
## Welcome

Welcome to the Join the Dots impact report for 2022-23. Join the Dots is a national university transition programme run by The Brilliant Club, built on the principles of community, connections, and coaching. It is targeted at students who are most likely to face barriers in making a successful transition to university, and who are at risk of missing out on the life-changing opportunities that come from successfully earning a degree from a competitive university.

Join the Dots **connects** schools, universities, and students to share knowledge and set goals for a successful transition. It builds **communities** of students to identify, discuss and address shared challenges. Through 1:1 and peer group **coaching** by a PhD researcher, it helps students to develop key university study strategies and be a link for students to access university support as needed. By joining these dots, we are building networks that support students to thrive in higher education study.

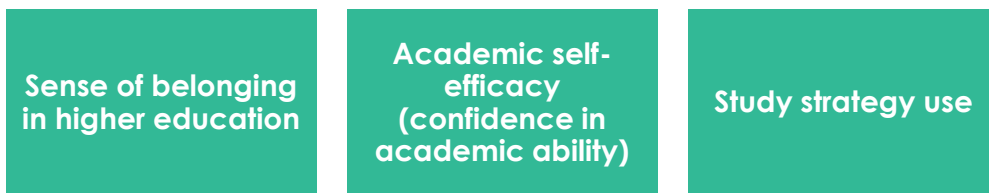
In 2022-23 we ran the pilot of Join the Dots, in partnership with The University of Manchester, King's College London, Kingston University, The University of Sussex, The University of Southampton, and Royal Holloway, University of London. In total, 85 students took part.

## Join the Dots - Theory of Change



## Evaluation approach

Gathering evidence to understand the impact of Join the Dots is a fundamental part of the programme. The programme's impact is assessed by measuring intermediate and long-term outcomes. In the long term, we hope that Join the Dots will increase participants' likelihood of progressing into the second year of university and completing their degree, and lead to improved degree outcomes. In the shorter term, we hope to improve three intermediate outcomes, which are the behaviours, attitude, knowledge, or skill that an intervention aims to influence. The outcomes were selected based on their centrality to boosting university success<sup>1</sup>:



In this report, we share the evaluation findings from the programme and discuss how we are using these insights to shape the programme moving forward. We will need to wait until data on the long-term outcomes is available to report on these, therefore we only show the impact of the programme on intermediate outcomes. More broadly, we hope this report is useful to other organisations who are delivering and evaluating student success programmes.

October 2022	November 2022	January 2022
Intermediate outcomes survey 1	Intermediate outcomes survey 2	Intermediate outcomes survey 3
Focus group 1		Focus group 2

<sup>1</sup> [Thomson et al. \(2022\) Rapid review: Intermediate outcomes for higher education access and success. TASO.](#)

## Student demographics

Join the Dots targets students who have been eligible for pupil premium, have no parental history of higher education, or come from an area of high deprivation as measured by IDACI. Analysis of students' demographic backgrounds shows that 90% of students that took part in Join the Dots met the targeting criteria.



**Pupil Premium**

**40%**

(23/57)



**No parental history of higher education**

**70%**

(39/56)



**Living in 40% most deprived areas according to IDACI**

**68%**

(42/62)



**Target Pupils meeting 1 or more of 3 criteria**

**1+: 90%**

**2+: 55%**

**3: 12%**

## Additional demographic information

Additional demographic information	Percent	Count	Sample
Male	27%	18	67
Female	73%	49	67
Black, African, Caribbean, Black British	20%	9	46
Asian, Asian British	26%	12	46
White	33%	15	46
Mixed / multiple ethnic groups	13%	6	46

The data on this page should be interpreted with caution, as demographic data was not available for all students and the amount of data available varied between categories.

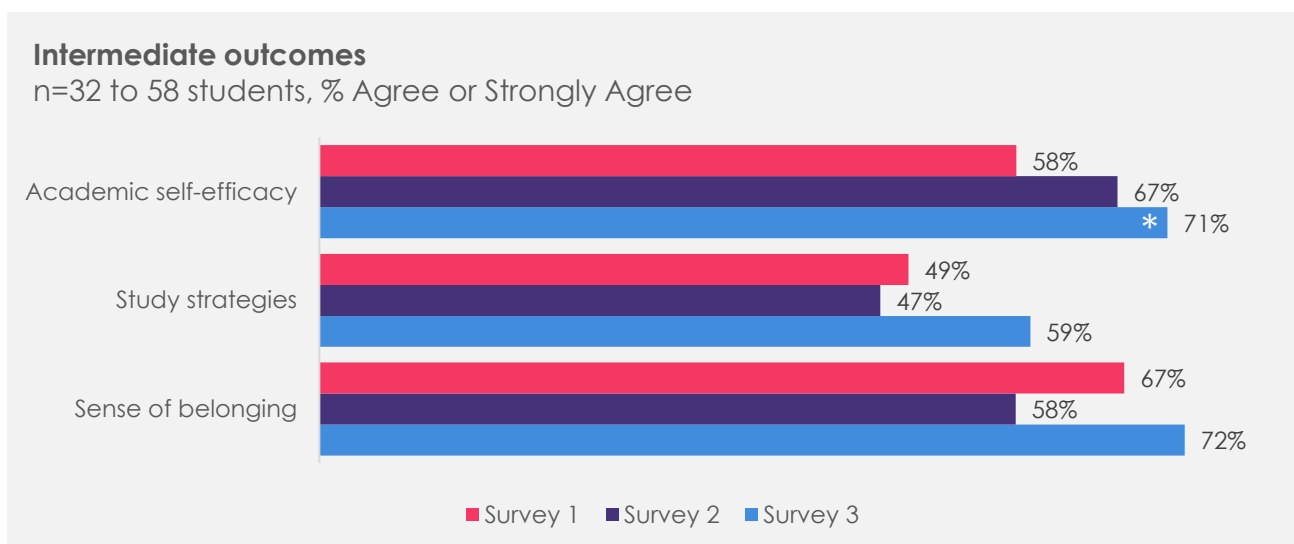
## Intermediate outcomes survey

### Survey respondents

In total, 58 students responded to the first survey, 32 students responded to the second survey, and 35 students responded to the third evaluation survey, representing all six participating universities. This compares to 85 students who started the programme. We will explore further ways of encouraging engagement with the surveys in year two of Join the Dots.

### Changes in intermediate outcomes

Comparing the responses to surveys 1, 2, and 3 shows a statistically significant increase in academic self-efficacy over the course of the programme. We also found overall increases in students' use of study strategies and in sense of belonging, as measured by changes in the percentage of students agreeing or strongly agreeing with statements measuring the outcomes.



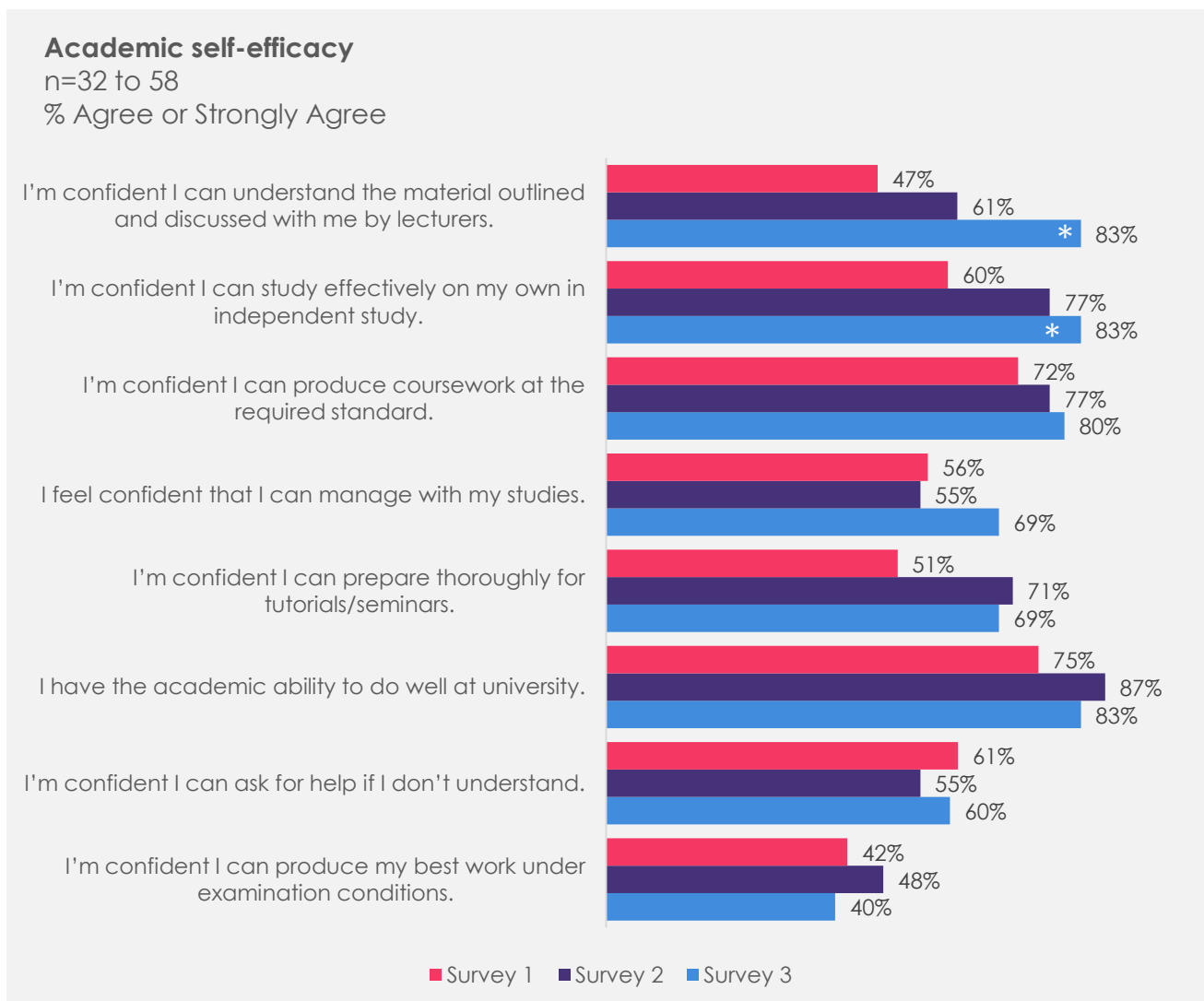
\*statistically significant increase

### Academic self-efficacy

We used statements that are specifically about students' academic self-efficacy to measure this outcome, meaning their confidence to succeed as learners at university. Students were asked how much they agree with each statement, with 1 being "Strongly disagree" and 5 being "Strongly agree".

Comparing responses to academic self-efficacy questions in surveys 1, 2, and 3 shows that academic self-efficacy increased in almost all statements, as measured by changes in the percentage of students agreeing or strongly agreeing. There were statistically significant increases for confidence in ability to understand the material discussed by lecturers and studying effectively in independent study. Confidence in understanding the material discussed by lecturers was identified as an academic self-efficacy statement with low agreement in survey 1, therefore it is promising to see the positive effect Join the Dots has

had on students. This finding was reflected in the focus groups, where students specifically mentioned that taking part had increased their confidence.



\*statistically significant increase

**Students reflect on their confidence:**

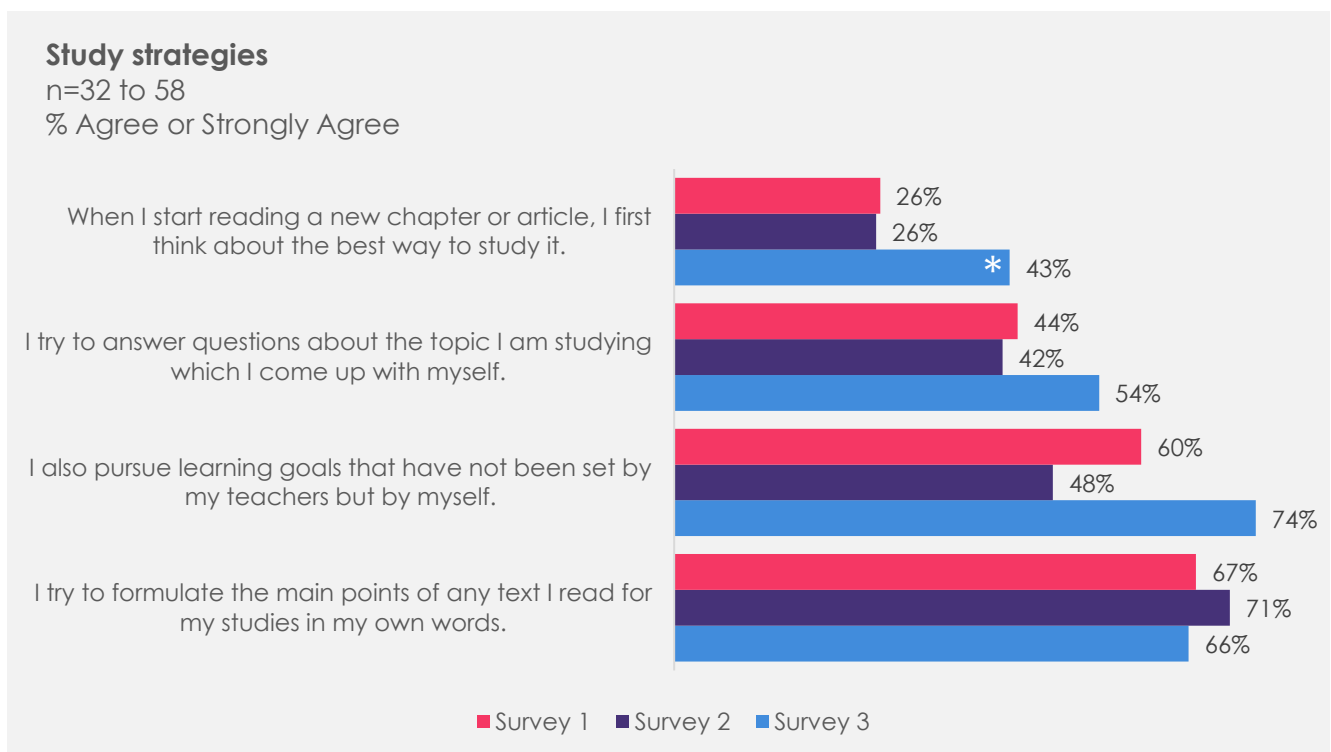


“More than anything a student would want in the first year [...] I think the program overall was really amazing and it kind of increased, like, my confidence.”

“The first day I went in to the tutor, my tutor actually gave me more confidence.”

## Study strategy use

Comparing responses to study strategy questions in surveys 1, 2, and 3 shows an increase in using study strategies, as measured by respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing. We found a statistically significant increase in thinking about the best way to study a new chapter or article when starting to read it. This study strategy was identified as the one for which students showed least confidence in survey 1. Further, students that took part in a focus group at the beginning of the programme specifically requested support with university-style learning, including independent reading. Therefore, it is promising to see the positive effect Join the Dots has had on students in this area.



\*statistically significant increase

### Students reflect on study strategies:



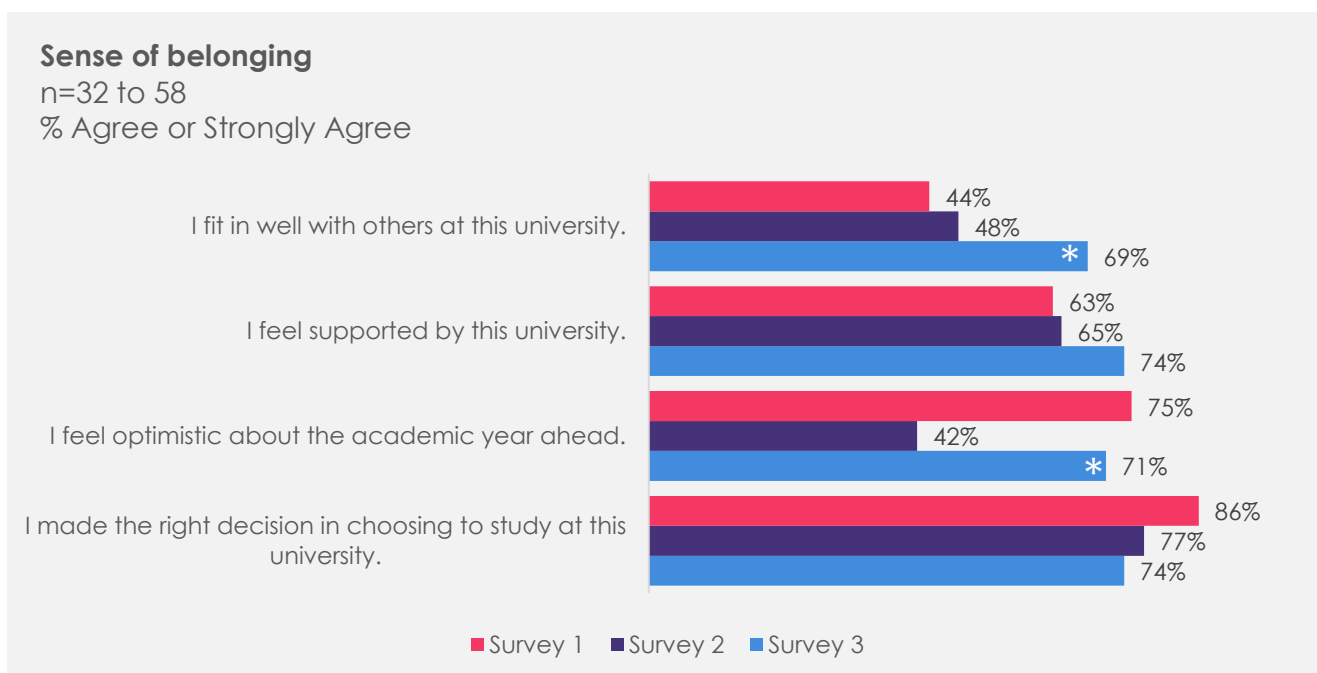
“The tutors [...] told us like how to do a lot of things that I was new to, for example, like, doing presentations and stuff [...] I had to do a presentation a few months ago and that really helped because I knew exactly what to do.”



## Sense of belonging

Comparing responses to sense of belonging questions across surveys 1, 2, and 3 shows a statistically significant increase in respondents agreeing that they fit in well with others at their university. We also found a statistically significant increase in optimism about the year ahead, as agreement for this question decreased in survey 2. However, respondents felt less positive that they had made the right decision to choose to study at their university over the course of the programme.

Sense of belonging is a complex outcome that is influenced by multiple external factors<sup>2</sup>, which may help to explain the variation in responses we received across the different survey items and across time. In the focus groups run at the end of the programme, students told us that they felt like they belonged at their university when they spoke to peers who were struggling with similar issues as themselves ("It's really nice and comforting to know that someone else is also really struggling with a certain aspect of something, or takes 4 hours to go through that lecture. Really nice to make you not feel alone." – Focus group participant). We are using this feedback to inform the content of Year 2 of Join the Dots.



\*statistically significant increase

### Students reflect on feeling supported by their coach:



"I was able to speak to my coach and just reflect on my uni experience and how I feel, and explain how I feel overwhelmed, and get help with managing that."

"My teacher was really amazing. I really liked her. I feel like over the time I've kind of built a relationship with her."

<sup>2</sup> [Blake et al. \(2022\). Building Belonging in Higher Education: Recommendations for developing an integrated institutional approach. Pearson/WonkHE.](#)

## Focus group insights

We conducted focus groups at the beginning and end of the programme, to gain deeper insights from students into their experience of Join the Dots and their first term at university.

In the first focus group, we spoke to nine Join the Dots students from different universities. At this point, most of the students had had their first meeting with their coach and some had attended an online launch event. Key insights include:

- Students felt positive about the prospect of taking part in Join the Dots, as they were aware that university would be more academically challenging than school.
- One student told us about meeting their coach: "I enjoyed meeting my coach, it made me feel more at ease because the coaches were people who have experienced uni themselves." Another fed back about the launch event: "I found it really useful, especially hearing from someone who had studied at uni and him giving his opinion outside of, like, idealizing everything, so it was good to have that."
- Several students found it difficult to manage their reading lists and take notes in lectures, as it felt like a lot of information to take on in a short space of time. We took this feedback on board when planning study strategy support sessions.
- In terms of university life, some students felt anxious about making friends and about managing their finances. However, they had found discussing these anxieties with their coach helpful, as their coach encouraged them to get involved in social activities and reassured them that it was normal for making friends to take time.

At the end of the programme, we spoke to five Join the Dots students from different universities about their experiences. The focus group participants had engaged in the programme to varying degrees; however, our engagement data shows that 15% of all students had attended an office hour with their coach and 31% had emailed their coach more than five times for support, which were both optional aspects of Join the Dots. Key insights from the focus group include:

- Students were all positive about their experience of taking part in Join the Dots. They found the 1-1 academic support offered particularly helpful: "I feel like having that teacher and one to one session was more than anything a student would want in the first year." Another student told us: "For [my coach] to double check and go over [my essays] and give me feedback, that was like beyond helpful."
- Students also felt that taking part had boosted their confidence: "I think the programme overall was really amazing and it kind of increased like my confidence." The support from their coaches paying off made them feel confident about doing pieces of work in the future: "I did get a first in that essay and it set up the confidence that now that I've got an essay in March and that actually counts, I have that academic ability to do well, and I know what makes a good essay."
- We received some useful suggestions from students on how we could improve Join the Dots, such as building more time into the group sessions for students to connect with each other and share their university experiences. We are taking this feedback on board when planning the second year of Join the Dots.

## Conclusions

During their first term at university, students taking part in Join the Dots built on a strong baseline. We measured increases in self-efficacy, study strategy use, and sense of belonging over the course of the programme. These findings suggest the programme had a positive effect on students as they transitioned from school to university and gives us a promising starting point for year two of the programme.

Qualitative feedback from students over the course of the programme showed that they particularly valued support from their coaches in preparing for assessments, becoming an independent learner, and receiving feedback on coursework.

Students taking part in focus groups told us that they found the 1-1 support offered by their coach particularly helpful when they were completing their first assignments. In addition, they appreciated the flexibility of the programme, as they could attend study strategy sessions that were relevant to them.

The findings from this evaluation will feed into the second year of Join the Dots when planning the content and structure of the sessions on offer. In addition, we are engaging students earlier in Year 13 by offering a series of pre-university support sessions.

