



Final Report

The Converge evaluation project 2020-22



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ST JOHN
UNIVERSITY



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We are grateful to the Office for Students and Research England for funding the Converge evaluation project.

Contents

One-minute summary	4	7. Organisational culture, partnerships, and community models	65	IMAGE 1: Storyteller craft work – woven basket, Current Converge student, York St John (CCSYSJ157)	11	FIGURE 1: Menu of data collection options	19
Foreword	6	7.1 Converge's organisational practice	65	IMAGE 2: Storyteller artwork – painting, Current Converge student, Northumbria (CCSNU084)	40	FIGURE 2: Word cloud formed of responses to the question 'How would you define Converge?'	25
1. Executive summary	7	7.2 Community healthcare models and system change	71	IMAGE 3: Storyteller artwork – 'Visual Story' model (Current Converge student, Northumbria, CCSNU132)	55	FIGURE 3: External partners' perceptions of Converge's values	28
ABOUT THE PROJECT	9	8. The future of Converge	76	IMAGE 4: Storyteller artwork – zine (Past Converge student, York St John, PCYSJ049)	57	FIGURE 4: The university student volunteer journey through Converge	30
2. Context and background	10	8.1 Short-term improvements	76	IMAGE 5: Storyteller artwork – 3D collage model (Past Converge student, Northumbria, PCSNU063)	60	FIGURE 5: University students' reasons for joining Converge	31
2.1 The Converge context	10	8.2 Long-term development and perceived enablers/barriers	79	IMAGE 6: Storyteller artwork – painting, Current Converge student, York St John (CCSYSJ044)	66	FIGURE 6: University students, Converge students and external partner perceptions of the university student role	32
2.2 Policy contexts	12	8.3 Policy positioning	86	IMAGE 7: Storyteller musical composition – 'Hopes and Aspirations' (Current Converge student, Northumbria, CCSNU100)	90	FIGURE 7: Types of knowledge exchange in Converge	44
2.3 The context of coproduction	16	9. Impact of this project's coproduction activities	89	POEM 1: Storyteller poetry – 'Converge' (Current Converge student, Northumbria, CCSNU132)	26	FIGURE 8: Skills developed by university students and Converge students	47
3. Approach and methodology	17	9.1 Impact of CEP's coproduction methods on participants	89	POEM 2: Storyteller poetry – 'Learning about me' (Current Converge student, York St John, CCSYSJ044)	41	FIGURE 9: Past university students' confidence improvement ratings	50
3.1 Aims and objectives of the research	17	9.2 Benefits of coproduction to the project approach	91	POEM 3: Storyteller poetry – 'Impressions on my first Zoom meeting' (Current Converge student, Northumbria, CCSNU082)	64	FIGURE 10: Past university student volunteers' change in understandings of mental health	56
3.2 Approach and methods	18	9.3 Lessons around coproduction methodology for wider application	93			FIGURE 11: Participants' perceptions of how Converge supports links between creativity and mental health	58
3.3 Ethical approval	23	CONCLUSION	95			FIGURE 12: CERT members' responses to the question 'What does CERT mean to you?'	67
3.4 Governance and monitoring	23	10. Conclusion	95			FIGURE 13: Potential new Converge target groups suggested by research participants	81
DETAILED FINDINGS	24	10.1 The impact of the Converge model	96			FIGURE 14: Potential new Converge subject areas suggested by research participants	83
4. The Converge model	25	10.2 Reflections on the Converge evaluation project process	97				
4.1 Conceptual model, principles, and ethos	25	10.3 Collated findings and recommendations	98				
4.2 University student role and recruitment	30	References	106				
4.3 Community, identity, and representation	38	Acknowledgements	110				
5. Knowledge exchange, upskilling, and formal progression	44						
5.1 Types of knowledge exchange	44						
5.2 Personal skills and attributes	49						
5.3 Professional and vocational skills and practice	51						
5.4 Progression into work, education, or volunteering	52						
6. Wellbeing and personal progression	54						
6.1 The impact of Converge on wellbeing	54						
6.2 The COVID-19 pandemic	62						

One-minute summary

Converge brings together university students and adults with experience of mental health challenges ('Converge students') in York and Newcastle to create a community of learners: a proven model for education and healthcare to work together

The Converge environment

'Mental health services are quite paternal. Whereas Converge is much more equal, everybody has equal footing.'
External partner

'The people that were there all had a history of mental health issues. And I think what comes with that is knowing that you feel safe.'
Converge student

The vast majority of Converge students said that their wellbeing and sense of personal identity improved as a result of being part of Converge

Converge students value being able to access university resources and tutors

The Converge environment helps people to feel 'held', and fosters a sense of belonging within a particular place

The Converge Evaluation and Research Team (CERT) is seen as impactful and successful

Exchanging knowledge and attitudes

'It was the sort of environment where the differences naturally dissolved.'
Converge student

'I've learnt a lot about my own mental health, and thinking about it as a continuum rather than either you're sick or you're not.'
University student

74% of past university student volunteers agreed or strongly agreed that engaging with Converge had changed their understanding of mental health challenges

The Converge model helps people to exchange attitudes and outlooks as well as knowledge and skills

Gaining skills and experience

93% of past university student volunteers agreed or strongly agreed that engaging with Converge had improved their confidence

'There's real kindness and thought put into how things are organised, how things are run, how things are communicated.'
Converge student

University students told us that they gained skills in facilitation, communication, leadership, collaboration, and adaptability

Converge students told us that they gained artistic, communication and research skills, and learnt how to take creative risks in a safe setting

'University students gain a "real life" facilitation experience of working with real people in a real community. And you see them grow as people and facilitators.'
Converge staff member

Progression and next steps

University students went on to postgraduate study, community work, and tutoring or administration work with Converge

'It's about humanity, and it's about being connected. And it's about supporting one another and being in a community.'
University student

Converge students went on to higher education, community volunteering, arts-based practice, and tutoring or administration work with Converge

'I'm now on such a prestigious MA course, because I talked about Converge so much during my interviews and what I learned - me teaching Converge students, them teaching me.'
Past university student

All groups would like to see Converge grow across the range of courses and locations available...
...but not at the risk of diluting what is already on offer

Foreword

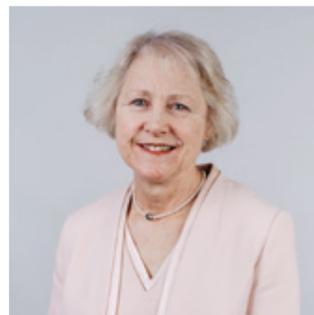
York St John University and the Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust have a common mission to improve the lives of people in our region. It is this mission which has fostered a partnership to provide and promote a community approach to education and wellbeing. The Converge model underpins our partnership, enabling quality engagement with the community and the provision of mental support services. Through Converge we are able to share our understanding, knowledge and skills for the benefit of individuals who are experiencing mental health challenges.

Converge builds on a 'whole person approach' to wellbeing, recognising the benefits of collaborative education and healthcare. By utilising education as a healthcare tool, we are able to support the growth and maintenance of good mental health. Together, we have created an environment where people are identified as students, as opposed to patients or service users. They form part of a wider University community with open access to our setting. The programme offers a range of learning opportunities which have been made accessible, removing the often complex barriers to accessing mental health support services. Prospective students need only have a declared, self-defined experience of mental health challenges and be in a position to join group classes. This approach has enabled many individuals to benefit from the programme who may never have gained access to such opportunities through more traditional routes. We have also seen how the benefits to students stretch far beyond the subject matter of the courses offered. Participation leads to a growth in confidence, self-esteem and self-care skills. This growth then often leads to further progression into work, study or volunteering.

Through Converge we are learning together as a community. Pre-conceived ideas of mental health challenges and higher education are being challenged through the collaboration of Converge students and York St John University students, as well as at the Converge programme at Northumbria University. This exchange of attitudes and outlooks supports the personal growth of university students

who go on to be graduates. They take into the world an understanding of the challenges facing our society today and a commitment to addressing these challenges with their communities.

The enclosed evaluation report expands more on the model of Converge, its impact and supporting evidence base. The opportunity for independent evaluation has been welcomed by York St John University and the Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust in order to protect the integrity of the findings outlined in the report. We have valued the fresh perspective of this project, funded by Research England and the Office for Students, and are committed to supporting its recommendations to further embed and strategically grow Converge as a best practice model.



Professor Karen Bryan OBE
Vice Chancellor
York St John University



Brent Kilmurray
Chief Executive
Tees, Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Trust

1. Executive summary

The Converge evaluation project has shown that the Converge programme in York and Newcastle has far-reaching and lasting impact at both individual and strategic levels – from skills development to improved wellbeing, and from the fulfilment of social justice aims to smart investment models. It offers a workable, person-centred, creative model of a 'community of learners' for other universities and healthcare bodies to use.

Key findings

- 1. Converge offers an innovative model of reciprocal knowledge exchange which jointly benefits universities, students, people with experience of mental health challenges ('Converge students'), healthcare bodies, and community partners. It is seen as part of a national move towards a community-based model of mental health support services, as well as a key example of universities' aims to support wider society.** As well as the benefits to participants laid out below, this model improves collaboration between healthcare and education, and adds value to what universities and third sector partners can offer in support of employability and social justice. See Sections 4, 5 and 7 for more details.
- 2. Converge directly equips university students and Converge students with a wide range of skills, supporting onward progression to work, volunteering and education as well as personal progression in terms of learning and self-development.** Alongside subject-specific and professional skills such as leadership and facilitation, Converge helps both groups' confidence, self-esteem, and communication skills. Converge students report that the motivating factor of the courses and the learning they take from others with similar experiences helps them with their own self-management and self-care skills – something that in turn supports the NHS's growing Personalised Care agenda. See Sections 5 and 6 for more details.
- 3. Converge demonstrates that the exchange of attitudes, outlooks and mindsets is a crucial and non-traditional form of knowledge exchange, which in turn enables the exchange of knowledge and skills to take place.** Our findings show that this alternative model of knowledge exchange is both possible

and necessary: both university students and Converge students reported that working together helped them to unpick pre-conceived ideas or stigma around mental health and higher education respectively. We call this 'attitudinal knowledge exchange', and see it as a key enabler of the exchange of knowledge, skills and innovation. See Section 5.1 for more details.

- 4. Converge has a positive impact on participants' wellbeing and sense of personal identity, and increases their awareness of their own individual strengths and assets.** In turn, these benefits increase self-esteem, self-worth, and engagement with new opportunities, and reinforce understandings of mental health and recovery as non-linear processes. University students and Converge students feel that they are on an equal footing, supporting the spread of more inclusive practice as those individuals go on to work or collaborate elsewhere. See Sections 4 and 6 for more details.
- 5. Converge offers a place-based learning environment in which participants feel 'held'. This is enabled by the combination of high-quality values, welcoming and connected campuses, and strong interpersonal relationships.** Converge students told us that they feel respected, cared for and supported, particularly through the Discovery Hub learning support team in York – a unique partnership of NHS and peer workers. The majority feel a strong sense of belonging, and are reassured by there being no limit to their engagement with the programme. Embodied in the form of open access to the university setting, resources and staff, these values and practices together offer a model for how to strengthen and embed a sense of 'Place' within healthy communities – a key national priority within the new Integrated Care Systems. See Section 4 for more details.

6. Converge's coproduction activity in the form of the Converge Evaluation and Research Team (CERT) is seen as impactful, and carries weight within its field. CERT's research work promotes coproduction approaches, provides skills development, and reinforces the message of social justice in the workplace. CERT itself was seen as ripe for further development, particularly around increased fundraising for standalone member-led projects. See Section 7.1.3 for more details.

7. Converge's emphasis on education is perceived as a primary support to the growth and maintenance of good mental health, and encourages more expansive approaches to learning, teaching and community engagement. In particular, learning is perceived as a key part of widespread system change in the context of an increasing awareness of the benefits of community-based models of healthcare delivery. See Sections 6 and 7 for more details.

8. There was a widespread appetite for the Converge model to grow and develop, though not at the cost of the existing programmes being diluted or spread too thin. The data also shows that Converge could explore the diversity of its community across both university student volunteers and Converge students. In terms of course delivery and range, there was strong shared interest in a greater range of courses both within and outside of the arts, as well as a desire to consider targeting people in more dispersed geographic areas or vulnerable communities. The data also points to a need to consider diversity, access, representation, and potential barriers to engagement more directly. See Sections 4 and 8 for more details.

Key recommendations

1. Converge should incorporate increased strategic planning and horizon-scoping activity into its delivery programme through strengthened governance frameworks and an increase in staff capacity in this area. Some stakeholders also felt that Converge needed to articulate its impact more clearly to its funders, though not at the cost of its 'whole person' ethos and approach.

2. Converge should undertake ongoing work to position itself as a proven, place-based, person-centred model that answers national-level priorities across the agendas of social justice, Personalised Care, Integrated Care, research impact, student employability, and universities' civic engagement.

3. York St John and Northumbria Universities need to further embed institutional support for Converge, specifically around university student engagement and succession planning in York and continued capacity-building for the newer programme in Newcastle. The impact of Converge could also be more strongly articulated in relation to the demands of the Teaching Excellence Framework (especially around 'Outcomes'), the Research Excellence Framework (around 'Impact') and the Knowledge Exchange Framework (both as a demonstration of innovation and to broaden ongoing work on diverse ways of measuring best practice).

4. The central Converge teams should consider growing the model across target audiences, subject areas and locations, carefully balancing priorities and capacity. Areas identified by research respondents included the potential for new target audiences (including particular demographic communities or conditions, such as those with learning disabilities), range of courses (particularly in the social sciences, humanities, health and social care, and physical health), geographic locations (especially outlying North Yorkshire locations), and national delivery partnerships.

5. Converge should consider carrying out additional data collection and analysis of the demographic representation of both university students and Converge students, in order to ensure fair access and diversity. There is a clear opportunity here to develop more innovative and collaborative recruitment methods. In terms of Converge student access, this could be done in partnership with organisations with similar values and routes to more diverse client bases.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

2. Context and background

2.1 The Converge context

The Converge programme (founded 2008; see yorks.ac.uk/converge) is a partnership between York St John University and the National Health Service (NHS) that is 'built on a convergence of interests of the two organizations: real world experience for university students and good quality, non-stigmatizing courses for people with mental health problems' (Rowe, 2015, p. 119).

In 2016, Northumbria University piloted a Converge programme in Newcastle, and in 2018 secured funding for a part-time coordinator to take this work forward. It has now run for a total of five years after its set-up year, and, compared with Converge in York, is still at a relatively early stage of development.

The key principles of the Converge model are as follows:

1. to work with participants as students (hence calling them 'Converge students'), not patients or service users, and to frame the provision as education, not therapy;
2. to involve university students in the delivery of the courses and in the support of Converge students;
3. to work closely with the university and mental health providers in order to offer a resource that supports social integration and recovery. (Rowe, 2015)

To do this, Converge offers free university courses on campus in York and Newcastle to local adults with experience of mental health challenges. University students support the facilitation of the courses and other outreach projects, and receive training and guidance to do so.

The only criteria for joining Converge is that prospective Converge students should have self-declared, self-defined experience of mental health challenges and be in a position to join group classes. University students seeking to volunteer with Converge must be registered on a course at either York St John University or Northumbria University, and are often recruited via their course lecturers as

part of a formal placement activity. Converge York also works closely with Pacific University, Oregon, USA, with a cohort of occupational therapy students visiting York each summer to run a programme of activities with York-based Converge students.

The York programme offers online and postal courses under the 'Converge Connected' banner, which is open to Converge students at Northumbria. York-based Converge students are supported in their learning journeys by the Discovery Hub, a support team funded by the TEWV NHS Trust which is made up of occupational therapists and Learning and Access Workers with their own experience of mental health challenges (previously called Peer Support Workers; this language was intentionally changed to reflect their emphasis on providing all-round support with the learning journey, and to move away from illness-focused identifications). Converge in York also runs a voluntary Ambassador programme via which existing Converge students can support newer members.

Converge in York hosts a choir ('Communitas'), theatre company ('Out of Character'), and a research group made up of people with lived experience of mental health challenges (CERT, the Converge Evaluation and Research Team). It also works alongside Emerging Voices, a local charity providing opportunities for people with mental health services to engage in music.

A third Converge programme was trialled in Leeds between 2017 and 2019, but did not continue as a permanent offer (see 'Section 8.2.3: Geographic and institutional growth' for more discussion on the Leeds programme and its closure).



IMAGE 1: Storyteller craft work – woven basket, Current Converge student, York St John (CCSYSJ157)

Existing research into the Converge model

Previous research and evaluations related to Converge's work and ethos have noted the following additional themes:¹

Research related to knowledge exchange:

- The space of the university as a place of 'hope and aspiration, orientated towards the future' (Newton and Rowe, 2018, p. 149)
- Reciprocal benefit to both the university and the mental health community (Rowe, 2015, p. 130)
- A way to improve the attitudes of university students towards people with mental health issues, as part of a 'return to ordinariness' (Rowe, Forshaw and Alldred, 2013, p. 157)
- Participatory education as social action (Bates and Mellor, 2017)
- Obliquity: an indirect, oblique way to approach an issue (Converge has therapeutic benefit specifically by not focusing on participants' perceived need for therapy) (Reason and Rowe, 2017, pp. 20–22)
- Individual tutors' role in supporting and developing participants' progression routes (Rowe, 2010)

¹We are particularly grateful to Dr Catherine Heinemeyer for her 2019 review of the body of literature that already exists in relation to Converge.

Research related to teaching practice:

- Converge as an example of ‘service learning’ (Asghar and Rowe, 2017)
- Adaptive pedagogy, responding to participants’ changing needs (Kenwright, 2019)
- Creative risk-taking as a central part of the educational offer (Stannage, 2017, pp. 109–110)

Research focused on creating new knowledge and understandings:

- A focus on extending critical understandings of ‘recovery’ (Stannage, 2017; Asghar and Rowe, 2017; Heinemeyer and Rowe, 2019) through risk-taking, participatory processes and building resilience – including the importance of the community, not only the individual. In particular, Stannage’s (2017) work highlights the importance of empowerment and agency in understandings of recovery, where supportive relationships are developed through group dynamics and the relational risk-taking that occurs (pp. 219-220).

As part of the 2020-2022 ‘Student knowledge exchange competition’ cohort of UK universities, funded by the Office for Students and Research England, this evaluation project seeks to investigate Converge explicitly in connection to its role in supporting knowledge exchange (KE). Knowledge exchange is a key output of academic research, and conveys how knowledge and ideas move between the knowledge source (the university) and the potential users of that knowledge. The key common element is that information and expertise is exchanged with businesses, society and/or the wider economy.

The combined impact of the Converge model, encompassing both previous research and the programme itself as a model of action research, was submitted to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021 as an impact case study. This submission highlighted Converge’s core research questions: the programme as, itself, an investigation into the conditions that foster a successful relationship between universities and health services; the impact on university students and people who use mental health services; and the potential for peer research in a mental health context. As such, this evaluation also seeks to add additional evidence to these priority questions to support Converge as it develops in the future.

2.2 Policy contexts

As will be apparent from this summary of the Converge model, the programme lies at the intersection of several policy positions. Embedded within a university, it engages in knowledge exchange and student learning through placements and volunteering, contributes to skills development and mental wellbeing at community level, and engages in evaluation and research activities across the country.

Higher education policy has evolved to focus on key three areas: teaching, research and civic engagement. These priorities are brought together and monitored by the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcome Framework (TEF), the Research Excellence Framework (REF), and, most recently, the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF). All three structures give context to higher education policy and inform the funding that each higher education institution receives.

Meanwhile, in the UK’s healthcare sector, regional-level commissioning is in the process of being transferred from Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) to Integrated Care Systems: collaborative networks which aim to function more successfully at the level of localised place and neighbourhood.

In this section, we lay out these overarching contexts in more detail; please see also ‘Section 8.3: Policy positioning’ for a sense of potential future ways to align Converge with these developments.

2.2.1 Higher education: Teaching, research and the ‘Third Mission’

The Primary Mission – Teaching

Since its creation in 2018, the Office for Students (OfS) has identified its mission as supporting universities so that ‘every student [has] a fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers.’ (Office for Students, 2022). This includes the measurement of Student Outcomes with targets for the proportion of graduates progressing onto a further higher education course or graduate level employment (Office for Students, 2022a, p. 19). One focus within higher education is now the development of employability skills within undergraduate study, including their application and development through work placement, business links and related activities. ‘Embedded employability’ at York St John University captures many of these themes, and Converge contributes to this through student placements and volunteering activities.

The Secondary Mission – Research

‘The advancement of knowledge through research is an essential function of all systems of higher education... Innovation and interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity should be promoted and reinforced in programmes with long-term orientations on social and cultural aims and needs.’ (UNESCO, 1998, pp. 5-6)

Research – the exploration and extension of knowledge – remains central to the higher education sector. Academic research is now recognised as a facilitator of government policy and is overseen by monitoring mechanisms such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF).

UKRI has identified engagement as one of four principles for change within research. This encompasses the promotion of innovation through commercialisation, knowledge exchange and the impact of research beyond academia, its ‘effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life’ (UKRI, 2022 & 2022b). This final indicator will now receive a 25% weighting within the REF, reflecting the increased emphasis of government policy away from ‘open-ended inquiry’ (Collini, 2012, p.4) toward the application and innovation of knowledge within society and the economy.

As outlined in ‘Section 2.1: The Converge context’, Converge supports both universities’ own research aims as well as their work in community engagement and social justice. In particular, Converge plays a leading role in York St John’s Institute for Social Justice (set up in 2020) and its ongoing development.

The Third Mission: The Civic University, Public Engagement & Knowledge Exchange

‘The civic university has always mattered enormously. If you strip all these things away, you are left with an impoverished place – and it is impossible to think of another institution that could deliver these benefits.’ (UPP Foundation, 2019, p.18)

Within the UK, non-governmental organisations such as the UPP Foundation, the Civic University Network, and the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement – as well as Universities UK and governmental departments – are increasingly focused on universities’ ‘Third Mission’. This can broadly be described as ‘civic engagement’, and includes the role of universities in enriching the local and national economy, technology transfer, knowledge transfer, the promotion of entrepreneurial skills, innovation, growing new talent, the production of research outcomes useful to businesses and the public sector, supporting local communities through education and inspiration, social welfare, and the growth of social and cultural capital.

Within UK government policy, the ‘Third Mission’ of higher education is seen as a form of knowledge exchange where ideas and approaches developed within higher education are shared with businesses and communities facilitating innovation. Since the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) in particular, the government has encouraged the collaboration of the public and private sectors with universities (BEIS, 2017).

Knowledge exchange is the ‘collaborative, creative endeavour that translates knowledge and research into impact in society and the economy... a set of activities, processes and skills that enable close collaboration between universities and partner organisations to deliver commercial, environmental, cultural, and place-based benefits, opportunities for students and increased prosperity.’ (McMillan, 2020, p.3)

UK Research and Innovation (UKRI) was set up in 2018 to support ‘the flow of knowledge and ideas around society’ (BEIS, 2017, p. 78) and to benchmark the success of university activity through the development of a Knowledge Exchange Framework. This framework seeks to provide ‘an essential mechanism to support universities in effectively contributing to UK growth’ (Johnson, 2016). The Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) produced its first report in 2021. It identified that knowledge exchange activities undertaken by higher education institutions make ‘a very significant contribution to the economy and society’ (Research England, 2022, p. 5).

The wider sector continues to debate how knowledge exchange can be defined, measured, and reflected. For example, the British Academy questions the ability of the Knowledge Exchange Framework to reflect knowledge exchange in SHAPE subjects (Social Sciences, Humanities and The Arts for People and the Economy) and to capture the knowledge exchange impact on socially-driven enterprises, the public and third sector, where the focus is on generating social impact rather than quick and high volumes of income (British Academy, 2021). Projects such as the Converge evaluation project can help to support these discussions, demonstrating that qualitative and creative research methods have a place in the evaluation of knowledge exchange activities.

2.2.2 Community mental health and social care: From competition to collaboration

Existing mental health support in the UK is often characterised as complex, fragmented, and disjointed, with transitions between services too often leading to people falling through gaps in provision and little or no support (National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, 2019). In response, current policy initiatives emphasise the adoption of a broader, collaborative, joined-up approach which recognises the wider determinants of health. This includes the understanding of communities as assets and collections of needs (Buck et al, 2018, p.6). The agenda for this kind of integrated care approach at national level has now taken shape in the form of the Health and Care Act (2022).

Integrated Care Systems (ICS)

‘People need support which is joined up across local councils, the NHS and voluntary and community organisations... We want to make Integrated Care Systems as strong and effective as possible in every part of England, through partnership working and with the ambition to tackle health inequalities, help communities thrive and achieve the very best for everyone.’ (NHS England, 2022)

The new Integrated Care System model aims to bring together providers and commissioners with local authorities and other local partners, including the voluntary and community sector, to collectively plan and deliver health and care services to meet the needs of the local population. They will operate across three levels of activity: System (regional), Place (city/town level), and Neighbourhood (Charles, 2021).

Most activity to integrate care and improve health will happen at the level of ‘Place’. Here collaboration across providers will create a ‘different relationship with communities themselves, framed around local people being active partners in creating healthier places and communities’ (Charles et al, 2021, p.7).

Policy commentators have called for Integrated Care Systems to ensure that this ambition for truly collaborative delivery really takes place. For example, as part of their campaign for a ‘community-powered NHS’, the think tank New Local have called for Integrated Care Systems to take full account of patients within their

environment, rather than in isolation from it; to strategically support and invest in communities; and to support ‘broader social and economic development as an opportunity to reduce health inequalities by addressing the wider determinants of health outcomes’ (New Local, 2022, pp. 42, 69, 114).

Mental Health Care Policy and Practice: From De-institutionalisation to Community Care

‘We are waking up to the fact that the roots of health and wellbeing lie not in our hospitals but in our communities.’ (Redding et al., 2016, p.5)

Since 1961, mental health care has moved from psychiatric institutions towards care in the community (Powell, 1961), a move which has involved the closure of many large nineteenth-century psychiatric hospitals. In the twenty-first century, the theme of community is embedded in person-centred approaches, recovery, and self-management. A broad range of community assets are recognised and drawn upon to facilitate an individual’s recovery from mental health challenges (Redding et al, 2016).

The Department for Health (2011) called upon professionals to help individuals ‘identify and achieve the outcomes that matter to them, including a suitable and stable place to live, educational opportunities, jobs, and social contact’ (p. 16), emphasising ‘the importance of good relationships, education, employment and purpose alongside reductions in clinical symptom’ (p. 21).

The emphasis placed on community assets has found explicit expression in the 2019 Community Mental Health Framework for Adults and Older Adults (National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, 2019). These ambitions also have clear parallels with the aims of Integrated Care Systems, where community assets will be mobilised in the promotion of health and social care. In May 2022, these calls were further supported within the NHS’s Fuller Stocktake Report (‘Next Steps for Integrating Primary Care’), which calls both for a more psychosocial model of care and a more population-based approach – for example, aligning secondary

care specialists with neighbourhood teams (Fuller, 2022, p. 16). The Fuller Report stresses the need for voluntary sector expertise to be drawn in to centralised planning work, as well as the need for Integrated Care Systems to be supported in the process of ‘appropriately de-medicalising ‘care’ to help deliver a more personalised offer for patients’ (p. 19).

Evolving alongside these developments is the Personalised Care agenda, which represents an attempt to shift power and decision-making towards the people who use and receive health and care services (NHS England, 2017). This takes place through integrated personal commissioning, personal health budgets, and conversations with people focused on what matters to them. This means that service users have a voice in decision-making processes around their own care, which can include non-clinical community and VCSE provision.

‘I want support to build a life for myself in my community, to be a part of my community, without it being linked to mental health.’ (Statement from someone with lived experience of mental health challenges, quoted in the NCCMH Community Mental Health Framework for Adults and Older Adults, 2021, p. 2)

2.3 The context of coproduction

In line with the widespread shift of policy towards person-centred, community-based, coproduced policy and practice, Converge has developed a series of approaches which ensure that its wider community has a voice in its delivery and research activities. Key to this work is the Converge Evaluation and Research Team (CERT), a group of researchers at York St John University who have lived experience of mental health challenges (the term preferred by CERT). Since 2017, CERT has carried out numerous evaluations of community mental health projects and have published articles in academic journals.

Many CERT members have experienced being treated differently due to their mental health status. As such, CERT is ideologically invested in using coproduction as a tool to achieve greater social justice and empowerment for those who have been stigmatised and marginalised due to their mental health. As the CERT mission statement says, 'We listen to people with experience of mental health challenges, to influence service provision through research and evaluation'.

The term 'coproduction' has become a catch-all for numerous participatory, action, community-based, and collaborative research approaches. Each of these have distinct, and at times competing, histories, traditions, logics, rationales, and methods (Thomas-Hughes, 2018). An early coproduction scholar, Edgar Cahn, saw coproduction as a way 'to fundamentally change administration and service delivery, locating power with the citizen, rather than just using them to improve the "system" or service delivery and effectiveness' (cited in Lambert & Carr, 2018, p2). Cahn explains that 'coproduction challenges the assumption that service users are passive recipients of care and acknowledges their contribution in the successful delivery of a service' (Realpe & Wallace, 2010, p10).

As such, coproduction is part of a broader movement towards greater social justice and empowerment. It is an approach to public services where things are designed and delivered 'with' people rather than 'to' or 'for' them (Horne et al., 2013; Nesta et al., 2013). As the UK National Institute for Health and Care Research (Hickey et al., 2018, p. 5) puts it:

'[R]esearchers, practitioners and the public work together, sharing power and responsibility from the start to the end of the project, including the generation of knowledge. The assumption is that those affected by research are best placed to design and deliver it and have skills and knowledge of equal importance.'

The Converge evaluation project seeks to embrace and further develop coproductive approaches within both its core methodologies and the way that it shares its findings. Involved in discussions about the Converge evaluation project from the project's inception, CERT researchers have been enthusiastic about being able to use the insights they have from their lived experience of being a Converge student in this project. This involvement has spanned the design, delivery, and dissemination of the project, including paid interviewing work, creative autoethnography, and peer-led data analysis groups. This coproduced activity is driven by strong social justice motivations around ensuring that all students get their voice heard in the evaluation process. See 'Section 3: Approach and methodology' and 'Section 9: Impact of this project's coproduction activities' for more details.

3. Approach and methodology

3.1 Aims and objectives of the research

Starting in September 2020, this project's aims were to:

1. Build and showcase a strong, holistic evidence-base about Converge, specifically how it benefits and impacts on university students, people who use mental health services and the lead organisations running the programme (York St John University, the TEWV NHS Trust, and Northumbria University).
2. Provide the universities and the NHS with evidence to help them scale up and spread the Converge approach and ethos into other projects and locations nationally and internationally.
3. Provide the Office for Students and Research England with evidence of the distinctive way that knowledge exchange is being conducted and achieved through the reciprocally beneficial, co-created model that the universities and NHS use to operationalise Converge.

Our specific objectives in pursuit of these aims included:

- The use of a mixed methodology embracing a coproduction approach founded on participatory research, creative methods, and collaboration;
- Involvement in the design, delivery, and dissemination process from university students, Converge students, staff, and stakeholders; and
- The dissemination of learning from the evaluation to influence future NHS approaches and raise awareness in Higher Education and amongst community/third-sector organisations, including with international partners.

Our specific research questions were as follows:

1. What is the impact of university students and Converge students' involvement in Converge (including skills and employability, educational and practice-based impacts, social cohesion, and wellbeing)?
2. What is the impact of university students' involvement in Converge (including skills and employability, educational and practice-based impacts, social cohesion, and wellbeing)?
3. What is the impact of Converge on the practice, culture, processes, and common operating principles of the universities (including individual academics), mental health providers and other partners involved in its delivery?
4. What wider insights does Converge demonstrate about knowledge exchange models and practice, the impact of these on accessibility and progression, and the role of education in community outreach, social integration, and social justice?
5. What insights for participatory and creative research methodology do both Converge and this evaluation bring to light?

3.2 Approach and methods

3.2.1 Data collection methods

The project was divided into three overlapping strands of research data collection:

- Strand 1: Impact on university students;
- Strand 2: Impact on Converge students (in collaboration with CERT); and
- Strand 3: 'The Culture of Converge', including the impact on university staff, university structures, NHS Trusts, and arts and community organisations.

Our primary methods were surveys, qualitative 1:1 interviews, group workshops, and autoethnographic research by Converge students and university students (spanning journalling, arts, music and more). We originally planned to carry out both 'walking interviews' (also known as 'go-along interviews') and object handling sessions, but unfortunately the pandemic made this impossible. Based on advice from the groups which access Converge, we explicitly chose not to use standardised wellbeing scales from the start of the project, instead foregrounding individuals' own voices.

The autoethnographic researchers who we called our 'Storytellers', drawn from Converge students and university students, were paid an hourly rate, and had access to an expenses budget for art materials. Each one was also given bite-sized training in Research Methods and supported by regular coffee mornings which combined creative tasks with time for discussion, collaboration, and reflection (see 'Section 9: Impact of this project's coproduction activities' for more details of this process).

Interviews were primarily carried out by the core Converge evaluation project research team, with the following two exceptions:

- Four interviews were carried out by Discovery Hub staff members; these focused on Converge students' learning journeys and allowed a reflective discussion between the interviewee and the support staff member who had supported them through their progress; and
- A small selection of interviews with university students and Converge staff members were carried out by CERT members (all Converge student interviewees were offered the choice of either a core research team interviewer or an interviewer from CERT; however, no-one took up the offer of a CERT interviewer).

To support these respondent-facing data collection methods, we also accessed existing datasets held by York St John University and Northumbria University on the demographic make-up of both past Converge student volunteers and the wider student cohort for the relevant years. These were fully de-identified, meaning that this data could not be triangulated with specific alumni respondents to our own project, but instead provided a snapshot of the demographic context in which Converge operates. This data was not available for Converge students.

Aside from the de-identified alumni dataset, participants were offered all options as a menu or 'shopping list' that could be tailored to an individual's interests, skills, availability, and access requirements, as follows:

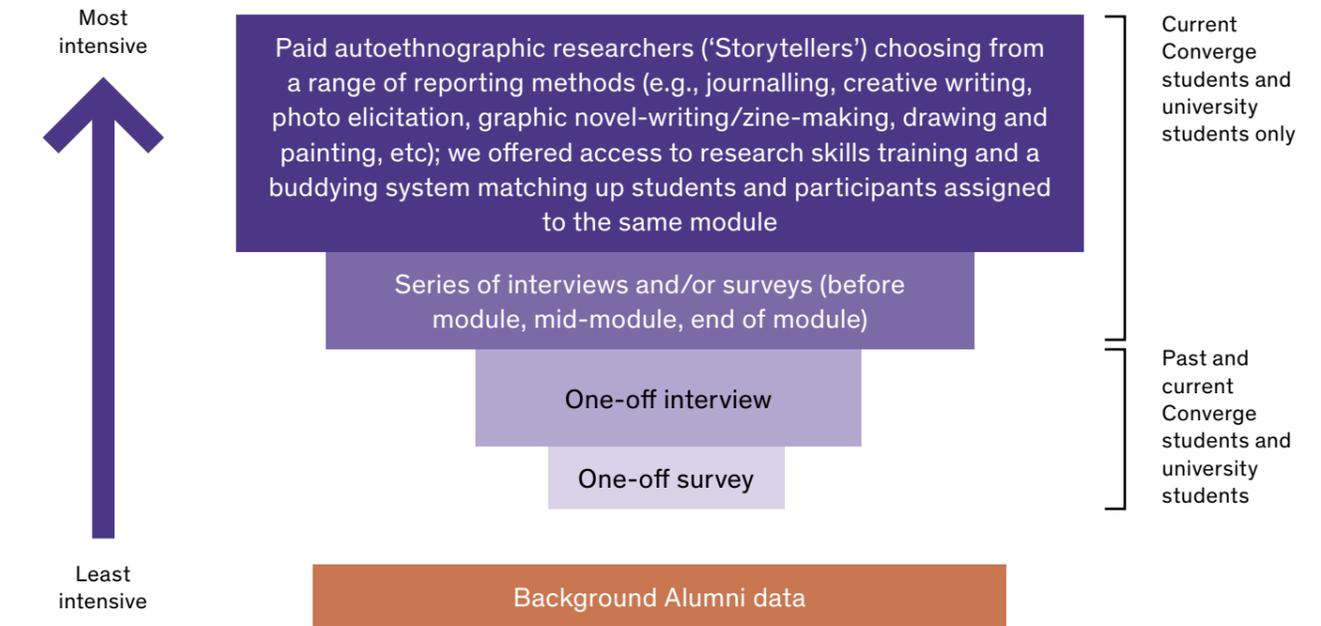


FIGURE 1: Menu of data collection options

3.2.2 Triangulation, sampling, and participation numbers

Triangulation of data and methods

Our intention with the 'menu' of data collection options outlined in 'Section 3.2.1: Data collection methods' was to enhance the validity of our findings by triangulating our data in the following ways:

- **Data triangulation**, namely data from different participants (or the same participants across different methods), time periods (past and current participants; pre- and post-course surveying and interviewing);
- **Triangulation of methods**, across a) qualitative methods (interviews, workshops and some survey content), b) quantitative methods (alumni data and some survey content, although this was kept minimal due to the input of CERT members to the research design process that participants were wary of too much quantitative data due to their experiences with mainstream healthcare monitoring processes, including wellbeing scales) and c) creative, autoethnographic work; and

- **Investigator triangulation**, namely by using a variety of people to collect and analyse the data (core research team members across all data collection and analysis methods, CERT members and Discovery Hub staff across interviewing, project participants involved in data analysis, and participants employed as autoethnographic researchers).

Sampling and participation

Our sampling methods were dictated by the pre-set membership of the Converge community across York and Newcastle. This spanned past and current Converge students, university students, staff members (both within the Converge teams and the wider university), and external partners across education, healthcare, and the community sector.

Given that the project explicitly chose not to collect demographic, socioeconomic, or health-related data on Converge students (though we did access de-identified data on university alumni), our ability to characterise this sample in more detail was limited (see 'Section 10.2: Reflections on the Converge evaluation project process' for a discussion on the limitations of our methodology). Instead, our sample was primarily characterised by which group each participant fell into. Where someone spanned more than one group – such as a Converge student who had become a tutor, or an external partner who was also a past Converge volunteer – we asked them how they most clearly identified themselves.

The sample was distributed across 174 participants as follows, all of whom took part during January to December 2021:

- 40 university alumni (30 from York St John University and 10 from Northumbria University)
- 23 current university students (20 YSJ, 3 NU)
- 21 past Converge students (19 YSJ, 2 NU)
- 41 current Converge students (34 YSJ, 7 NU)
- 26 external partners (20 linked to York St John University and 6 linked to Northumbria University)
- 23 Converge and university staff members (18 YSJ, 5 NU)

This is a total of 141 participants based in and around York and 33 based in or around Newcastle, with a total of 61 Converge students, 63 university students/alumni, and 49 partners and staff.

These 174 people engaged in different ways across 214 responses; some contributed to more than one category and/or more than one strand, and some contributed more than once within one category. Our total figures by type of engagement were as follows:

- Interviews: 102 (four of which were specifically focused on learning journeys, and were carried out by Discovery Hub staff members; a further six were carried out by CERT members)
- Survey responses: 77
- Workshops: 5, with 22 attendees across them
- Autoethnographic Storytellers: 13

Recruitment activities

To recruit across the groups listed above, we undertook the following activities from autumn 2020 onwards:

- An open call to past and current Converge students using both existing email lists and the inclusion of a flyer and sign-up sheet in new member application packs; where email responses did not work, we also carried out more targeted postal recruitment (particularly in Newcastle where responses from past Converge students were limited);
- An open email call to past and current university student volunteers via the main Converge office team and the Alumni teams at each university;
- Targeted invitations to past and current external partners and key internal staff members at each location, with names identified by our three governance groups;
- An open invitation to workshops or shorter interviews (due to the time pressures they face) to local Community Mental Health Team members across the four wider York areas (as Northumbria University did not have formal referral routes in from the local NHS Trust at the time of data collection, this step was not taken in Newcastle);

- An open call for participation on the main Converge website;
- Two rounds of recruitment via the Discovery Hub in York, starting with a round of systematic sampling from the database of people who had accessed this support service, selecting every tenth registered person supported by the Hub since its inception. However, as this produced very low take-up, the Discovery Hub Manager then individually approached several people who had most frequently accessed the service in order to encourage participation;

3.2.3 Data analysis

Coproduction and group analysis

The overall research design and individual research materials were taken to CERT regularly throughout the planning process in order to gather input on their suitability. During the latter half of the data collection period (January-December 2021), we also set up what we called a 'Collaborative Analysis Group', with all members of CERT invited along and offered payment to take part. This group proved extremely useful, providing additional perspectives on emerging themes. Throughout the analysis and coding phase in spring 2022, we expanded this group to include university students and internal staff (e.g., Converge tutors), renaming it the 'Discussion Group' to make it more accessible and less potentially daunting.

Each of these groups examined and discussed selected interview extracts at length at each meeting, with the Discussion Group also working on analysing the finalised Storyteller work in the spring term of 2022. In total, we held eleven group analysis sessions: seven Collaborative Analysis Group sessions in autumn 2021, and five sessions of the Discussion Group in spring 2022 concurrent with our data analysis phase. See 'Section 9: Impact of this project's coproduction activities' for more details about this work.

- Finally, to try to address the potential for self-selection and positivist bias – something that was not possible to avoid entirely within this project, given the constraints of the sample population – we carried out personalised invitations to people who had dropped out of the programme. However, perhaps unsurprisingly, responses to this line of recruitment were minimal.

Data coding and thematic analysis

Alongside this group analysis work, during January-April 2022 all project data was uploaded to the data analysis software programme NVivo and then thematically coded – first by pre-set parent codes (Community, Organisational Practice, etc), and then again by sub-codes which had emerged throughout the first stage of coding. Due to the large volume of data and the relatively short time period allocated to analysis, we were not able to double code everything, but instead selected a representative sample across all strands to be coded a second time at both parent code and sub-code level. Seven members of CERT joined our team training on NVivo in January 2022, three of whom went on to support the double coding of the data (with payment offered for all time spent on the project, including training and ongoing guidance sessions).

The fully coded dataset was then thematically analysed by the core research team, with emerging findings regularly taken both to the Discussion Group outlined above and to the Project Design and Delivery Group.

3.2.4 Dissemination of findings

Over the course of the project (September 2020 to September 2022), we held the following events to increase participation and to share emerging findings:

- **A drop-in community event in York in September 2021**, combining dissemination of early findings with an accessible consultation on people's responses to both the work and wider community contexts.
- **Three academic seminars over 2021-22**, in order to raise wider disciplinary/academic engagement prior to the end-of-project conference. These focused on a) the Converge model as part of a wider 'Healing Campus' approach (April 2021); b) the key emerging finding of the 'attitudinal knowledge exchange' model enabled by Converge (November 2021); and c) an overview of the policy contexts in which Converge operates (July 2022). All three took place on Zoom to maximise national reach, with each one attracting between 20 and 50 attendees.
- **A thank you event** for all research respondents, staff, governance groups, and internal and external partners. Although originally planned for December 2021 (the close of the data collection period), due to COVID-19 infection rates this took place in York in May 2022, and had over 40 attendees.

We plan to share the findings laid out in this report in several ways:

- **End-of-project academic conference** (September 2022): This conference will consist of short presentations of our key findings across five key themes (Knowledge exchange; Identity, language and environment; Collaboration and coproduction; Health and wellbeing; and the Future of Converge), with each one followed by two to four short, snappy responses from academic, community, policy, and creative partners. There will also be plenty

of opportunities for audience discussion and networking, and a concluding plenary panel made up of Converge students and university students. The day will also present the five creative dissemination outputs detailed below, as well as a performance from Converge's Communitas Choir.

- **Creative outputs:**
 - Two student artworks produced in response to the research data: a musical composition featuring Converge students and staff as performers, and a mixed media mural using extracts from the qualitative data and Storytellers' written work. Both works will be performed/exhibited at the end-of-project conference.
 - A newly commissioned film created in response to our findings by Converge's Out of Character theatre company, to be premiered at the end-of-project conference.
 - Two three-minute animations encapsulating key findings from the project (one focusing on the 'attitudinal knowledge exchange' enabled by the Converge model, and one summarising the wider benefits of the model to potential new delivery partners).
- **A short summary booklet** laying out the key findings and recommendations of this report in a more concise form (this full report will also be available online and in printed form for those who prefer to have access to the detailed findings). This booklet will be given to all attendees of the end-of-project conference.
- **A co-authored journal article** exploring the methodology used or developed by the project and its key findings (due for submission in September 2022).
- **A series of press releases and 'case-making toolkits'** created over July-August 2022, which can be used by the Converge team after the end of the Converge evaluation project to support ongoing stakeholder engagement and partnership development.

3.3 Ethical approval

York St John University provided ethical approval for all project activities via its School of Arts Ethical Review Board, including thorough details of our safeguarding and accessibility arrangements.

The study was not deemed to involve recruitment of patients through the NHS, as Converge participants are already members of the programme and we were dealing with Converge's own learner records, not medical records. However, as we also consulted NHS staff members, we also successfully secured service evaluation approval from the two NHS Trusts with whom we worked (TEWV NHS Trust – reference no. 6582AMH21 – and CNTW NHS Trust – reference no. SER-21-020).

3.4 Governance and monitoring

The project has been overseen by three governance groups:

- A monthly Project Design and Delivery Group, designed to develop and drive the project to ensure that its milestones and objectives were met;
- An Oversight Group which provided 'internal' assurance that the project was on track and achieving objectives to enable accurate and timely reporting of progress to funders, and to develop deeper institutional learning (this group met six times over the course of the two-year project); and
- An Advisory Group made up of experienced external partners who provided advice, insight, and support (this group met four times over the course of the two-year project).

We used a RAID Log (Risks, Actions, Issues, Decisions) to keep track of project progress, as advised by the York St John University Project Office, with any issues flagged up to the monthly Project Design and Delivery Group and escalated up the governance chain if necessary.

We have also taken part in the funders' own evaluation, run by SQW, including providing five detailed progress reports over 2020-2022.

DETAILED FINDINGS

4. The Converge model

4.1 Conceptual model, principles, and ethos

4.1.1 Key features and perceptions of the Converge model

'I think Converge in its purest form is "Come on campus, be with people."' (Past Converge staff member, York St John, UCYSJ190)

As part of this research, senior Converge staff were asked to conceptualise the core model of the programme. In summary, **Converge offers education, not therapy, to people with lived experience of mental health challenges, who are as centrally involved as possible. The model rests upon the convergence of interests across education, health, and social care, with university students involved in all aspects of the work.**

Key features include:

- Converge students being treated as university students;
- The importance of there being no limit to people's engagement, so that they can benefit from the long-term 'social soil' of the model (Pearse and Crocker, 1943, p. i);
- A 'human' approach'; and
- Delivery being seen as secondary to research.

Most wider respondents understand this model well and can articulate several of these core aims when asked. Common words and phrases that came up most often included 'people', 'opportunity/opportunities', 'community', 'learning', 'access', 'creative' and 'experience', as demonstrated in Figure 2.



FIGURE 2: Word cloud formed of responses to the question 'How would you define Converge?'

In particular, partners emphasise the importance of Converge as **an educational model that differs in both concept and delivery from more therapeutic services**, noting the ensuing impact on Converge students' sense of identity (see 'Section 4.3.3: Impact on identity'). It is seen as a collaborative group model that takes the onus off individual target-setting and progression, though this is also facilitated. Similarly, while Converge students often emphasise that mental health is not the focus of the programme, they note that both the shared implicit understandings of previous experiences and the support available are important to them – something well understood by partners across the wider healthcare system.

'Mental health services, I think, are quite paternal. Whereas Converge is much more equal, everybody has equal footing. It's more normalised.' (External NHS partner/funder, York, EPYSJ214)

Converge is seen as **part of a wider move towards a national model of mental health support services** which share particular features seen as aspirational and positive (listed here with the most commonly cited coming first):

- A shared view of an individual as a whole person, with their own strengths and assets;
- The importance of being cared for within the community (though not ignoring any biomedical needs);
- A service that is shaped by the communities it serves, matched to individual need and dictated by their health condition;
- Less formal structures with limited bureaucracy, especially around risk assessment;
- People with lived experience on the staff team/ embedded coproduction approaches;
- A safe and supportive culture in which staff can try new things without feeling that this risk-taking falls onto any one person's shoulders;
- Inclusivity, with no closed door;
- Knowledge of their own organisation's scope and limits (for example, signposting to clinical support rather than trying to replicate it);

- An understanding of mental health as fluid and not fixed, including offering hope for the future rather than shutting it down;
- A collaborative approach;
- An awareness of the impact of mental health challenges on individual identity;
- Strong leadership;
- Good relationships and communication; and
- Ongoing attempts to re-humanise the mental health model.

C Compassion
 O Opportunities
 N Narrative Writing
 V Values
 E Enthusiasm
 R Respect
 G Gratitude
 E Empowerment

POEM 1: Storyteller poetry (Current Converge student, Northumbria, CCSNU132)

Social justice and the role of universities in wider society

'I do think that it provides a great opportunity, and an important way of doing something that is just fundamental, opening up universities in particular ways... Because the problem with universities is that they become bunkers. And they give lectures on communities, but the academics that do the lectures on communities never go into the communities.' (Converge staff member, Northumbria University, UCNU197)

Respondents across all groups stress the need for Converge to consider whether their offer addresses **broader political concerns around social justice and representation** (both for the student population and local communities – see 'Section 4.2: University student role and recruitment' and 'Section 4.3: Community, identity, and representation'). Education is a social justice issue due to the fact that many people have been excluded from being able to access its many opportunities, whether due to structural issues and inequalities or having been ill and absent from formal education at crucial points (such as during exam years).

The data shows a shared perception amongst external partners that **York St John, and Converge in York in particular, are 'allies'** to the national push for social justice in community work. A small number of Newcastle-based respondents view **Northumbria University as less active in perceptible social justice work** on a wider strategic level than it could be, though they felt that this may not be the case on an individual staff level. It is worth noting that the six Newcastle-based partners interviewed for this project (a relatively small sample) had primarily collaborated with the university via Converge, and not necessarily through its Widening Participation programme or other activities. There was also a sense that the wider region of Newcastle and Gateshead faces barriers to social justice work because of the impact of long-term austerity measures.

University staff and external partners alike share a strong sense that **universities have a responsibility** to contribute to wider society, and that Converge is an example of a model which does this well. These perceptions focus in particular on opening up **access to learning and progression, and on a duty to share public sector resources**. The data also shows that respondents feel that both universities gained clear benefits (including funder interest and student recruitment wins) from community engagement activity alongside more altruistic motivations. One person mentioned that it would be interesting to challenge the university sector about who they think is their primary client – students, communities, or the government.

'It's about social justice... people have a different sense of whether a university is there to help you get a job or to improve quality of life, whether that's through getting a job and maybe having higher earning power, or whatever... and others again, it's like, this is a public resource that everyone should be able to access in whatever way they want. They're very different views of what a university is.' (Group analysis of an external partner interview, Discussion Group 3, 14th October 2021)

FINDING: The Converge model is well understood externally, and is seen as being founded in two-way learning between university students and Converge students. It is perceived as part of a wider national move towards a more community-based model of mental health support services, as well as a key example of universities' duty to support wider society.

4.1.2 Principles, values, and ethos

External partners view Converge as having **shared values** with their own programmes and with community initiatives in the area. Specifically, partners highlighted the importance of the following values:

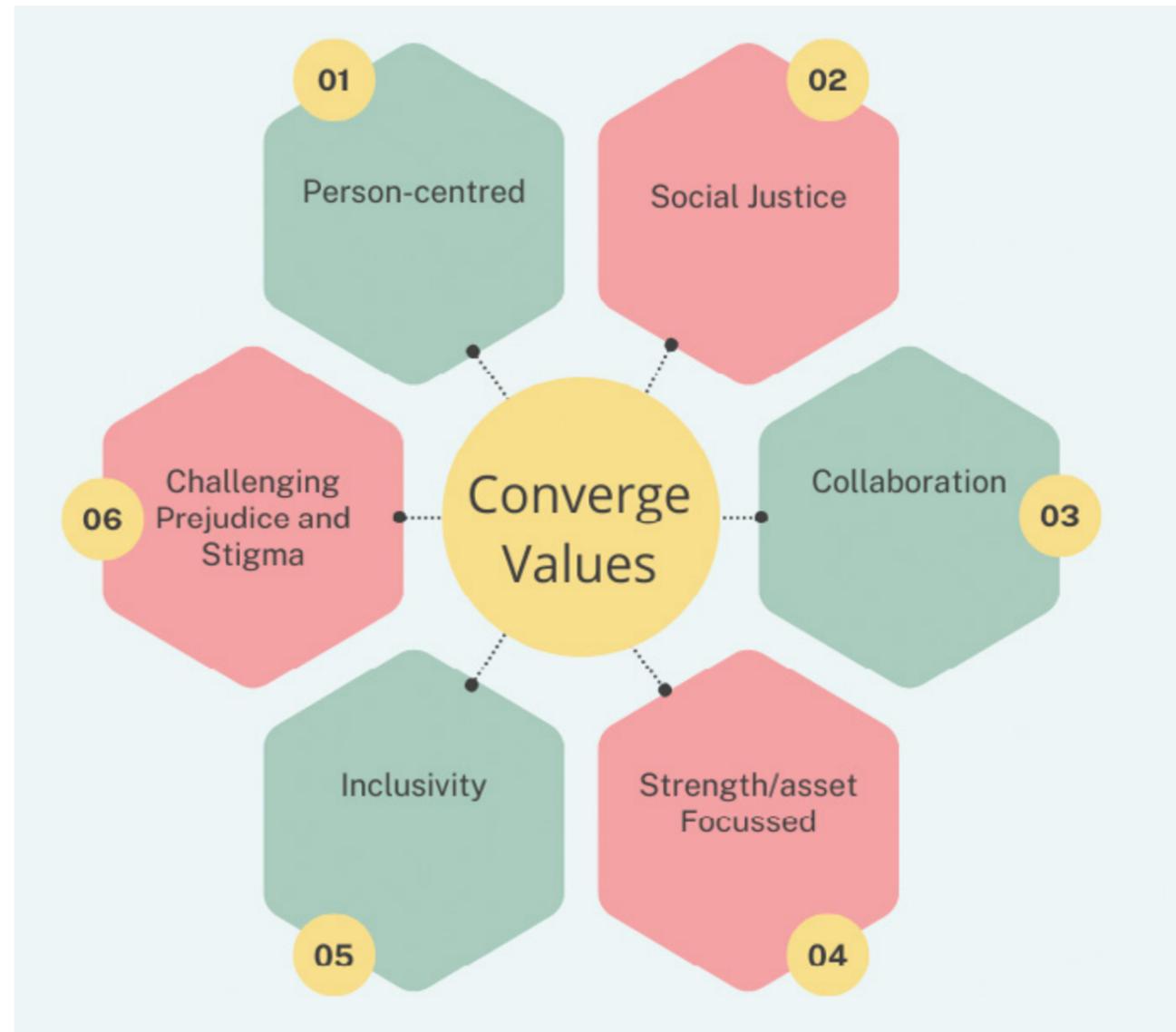


FIGURE 3: External partners' perceptions of Converge's values

Both university and Converge student participants share similar perspectives on the key values that underpin Converge. However, they go beyond this and identify that an ethos of kindness seems to be the foundation that Converge is built upon.

'I think that's the main thing that I've picked up about Converge and CERT – the whole thing, I think, is very considered. That's the word that springs to mind. I feel like there's real kindness and thought put into how things are organised, how things are run, how things are communicated. Yeah. It's very kind and considered.' (Current Converge student, York St John, CCSYSJ247)

Both Converge students and university students, as well as partners, highlight the importance of the **non-hierarchical structure** of the programme. Although there are tutors and management staff, their perspectives on the programme are not privileged, and Converge students and university students are able to influence how Converge develops. This non-hierarchical structure relates to how students and staff communicate and respond to each other. It also contributes to the **non-competitive and unpressurised environment**, which many university students underlined is vital to how comfortable and confident they feel within Converge. This aligns with the views of Converge staff, who focus on the **equal and reciprocal relationships** they are able to develop with university and Converge students.

'I've established relationships here with the people we've worked with through the Discovery Hub which feel really equal. I think some of those amazing recovery stories that I've been able to tell you about is because I've been able to work in a really human way with people.' (Current Converge staff member, York St John, UCYSJ119)

The **openness and accessibility of staff**, particularly those **staff in leadership** roles, is especially important for Converge students. This ethos of students feeling **confident and comfortable enough to approach senior staff** speaks to the ways in which Converge is able to nurture relationships based on **mutual respect and equality**, without being hindered by power dynamics. Participants across all strands highlight how communication between individuals across the groups that make up Converge is consistently **respectful, compassionate, and warm**.

Converge students value the ways that Converge **centres the pursuit of education and learning**, as opposed to accredited courses (see 'Section 8.2.2: Range of courses and audiences'). There was less consensus on this amongst other participant groups. It is interesting to note that, in general, university students speak more about the values and ethos of Converge **in relation to community and belonging**, rather than focusing on these aspects in isolation.

FINDING: All participant groups highlighted the environment of openness that Converge promotes. This translates into a shared understanding and acceptance of individual mental health experiences. In turn, participants felt that this led to a recognition of the different kinds of expertise that university and Converge students, and staff, bring to the community.

RECOMMENDATION: Within any future growth of Converge, measures should be taken to protect the level environment in which students feel able to approach staff members on equal footing.

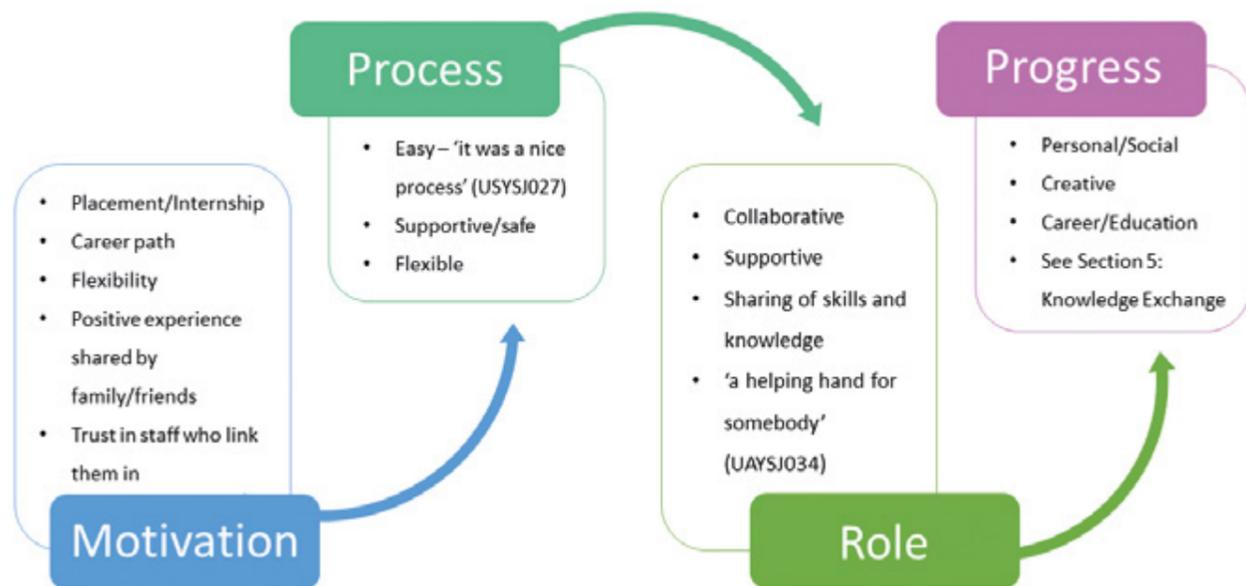


FIGURE 4: The university student volunteer journey through Converge

The university student role at Converge is primarily seen as a **supportive role with an onus on sharing skills and knowledge** with Converge students. However, as explored more fully in ‘Section 5: Knowledge exchange, upskilling, and formal progression’, this **support and sharing is a two-way, mutual process between university and Converge students**.

Perceptions of what the university student role is within Converge are interlinked with discussions on university students’ motivations for joining Converge, as well as the process of becoming a volunteer or choosing Converge for placement. For university students (both volunteers and those on placement) in particular, their **initial connection was followed through because of the easy and supportive nature of the joining process**. Counter to research arguing that student volunteer roles need to be clearly defined (Jardine 2017; Sanders and Higham 2012), the flexibility and freedom within the Converge university student role is viewed as a positive by many, allowing for unique and innovative thinking and practice to occur (see Figure 4). However, as explored in ‘Section 4.2.2: Understandings of the university student role’, the **different levels of commitment** demonstrated by university students can be a point of tension for

Converge students, particularly if an environment of trust and exchange is to occur (see ‘Section 5.1: Types of knowledge exchange’).

4.2.1 Motivations for joining Converge

‘I think [the Northumbria coordinator] is fab. You’ve got to like the people you’re working with, and I think she’s amazing.’ (Current university student volunteer, Northumbria, USNU078)

‘I don’t think that if [university staff member] wasn’t my lecturer, that I would’ve jumped. He was so encouraging, and broke down all my preconceived ideas of working in that field.’ (Current university student volunteer, York St John, USYSJ225)

The data shows that university students joining Converge, whether as volunteers or through placement, do so because of their need for professional experience, their trust in those who make the initial connection, and the desire to better understand mental health (see Figure 5). These interrelated reasons for volunteering with Converge align with the existing literature on what tends to motivate student volunteers (Hustinx et al., 2010; Bromnick et al., 2012; Barton, Bates and O’Donovan, 2019).

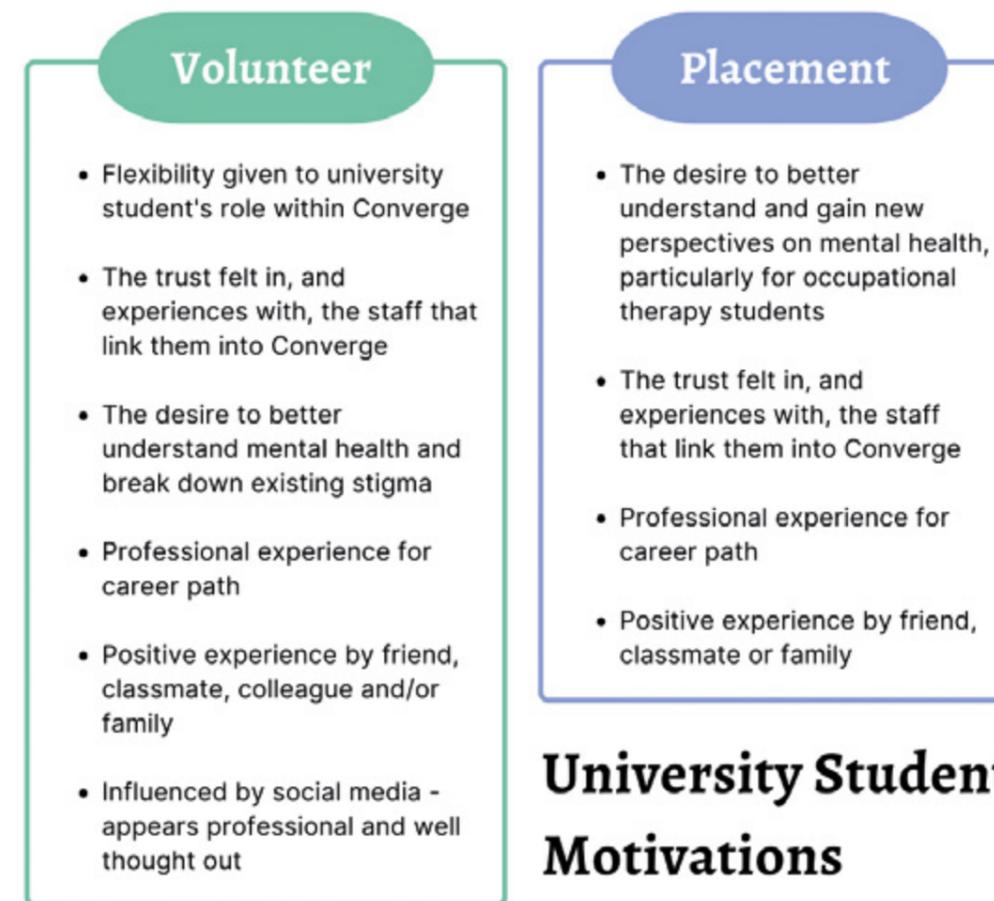


FIGURE 5: University students’ reasons for joining Converge

For university students on placement, a key motivation is the desire to better understand mental health and to gain new perspectives on it. This was particularly highlighted in surveys done by those studying Occupational Therapy. Whilst this points to why they chose to undertake a placement with Converge, the data does not show any further discussion of course-specific motivations (for example, links to assessment or dissertation activity). This might be an area to examine in future, especially with the range of Converge courses being expanded. Instead, what came through most strongly was the **importance of the trust and/or experiences they had with staff who linked them into their placement with Converge**.

The importance of this initial connection into Converge is shared by university student volunteers not on a formal placement, with the influence of lecturers and Converge staff playing a central role in their choice to volunteer. However, their desire for flexibility also comes through strongly as a motivation for joining Converge. One current university student volunteer at

Northumbria (USN078) commented that **it was being able to volunteer without disrupting their studies that made Converge a viable volunteering option**. However, this flexibility is in contrast with some Converge students’ desire for the university student role to have a larger time commitment to build trust and relationships (as discussed further in ‘Section 4.2.2: Understandings of the university student role’).

FINDING: University students – both those on placement and those volunteering – are motivated to join Converge by a desire for professional experience, their trust in those who suggest it (both lecturers and peers), and the desire to better understand mental health.

4.2.2 Understandings of the university student role

'I didn't even really consider myself as having a role as such, because I just felt like I wanted to be like everybody else. And I wanted to kind of give that impression to them, that they were the same as me, and that I was the same as them. [...] I didn't feel that I had a role as such, other than just as a volunteer, and just to be able to be a helping hand for somebody that needed that extra support.' (Past university student volunteer, York St John, UAYSJ034)

Broadly, all participant groups view **the university student role as a two-way supportive collaboration with Converge students, based on the mutual sharing of skills and knowledge** (see 'Section 5: Knowledge exchange, upskilling, and formal progression'). Both placement and volunteer university students perceive **the role to be focused on encouraging and supporting Converge students**, with one York St John alumni student (UAYSJ034) describing it as 'a helping hand for somebody'. Converge students echoed this: for many, the university student role is **primarily about helping to create a safe environment where trust is developed** (see 'Section 5.1: Types of knowledge exchange' for more detail).

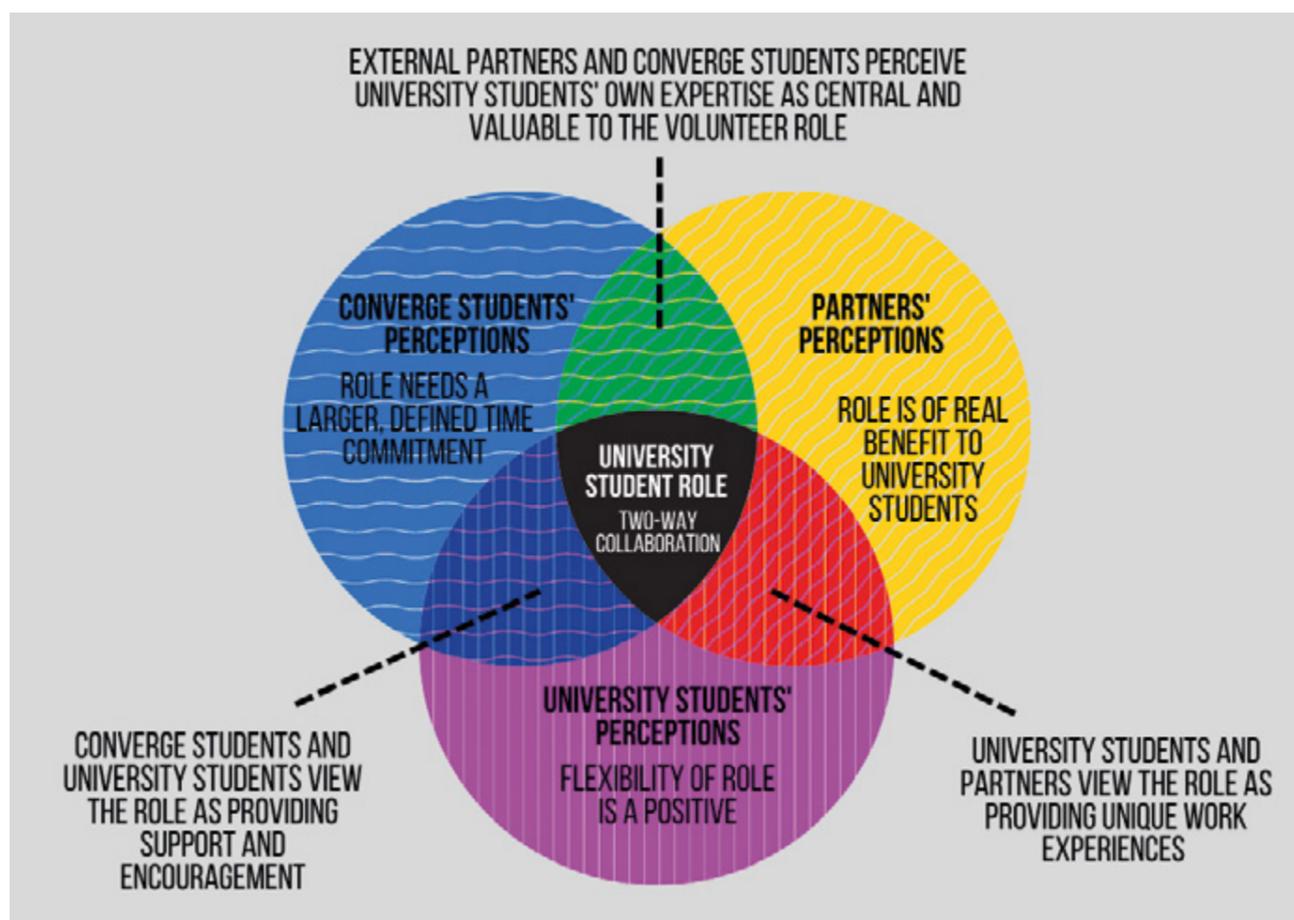


FIGURE 6: University students, Converge students and external partner perceptions of the university student role

There are key overlaps between university students', Converge students', and external partners' perceptions of what the university student volunteer role is and/or should be (see Figure 6). These shared understandings include the following:

- All participant groups view the role as supporting creativity and innovation for both university students and Converge students;
- University students (both volunteers and those on placement) and Converge students see the role as being one that prioritises support and encouragement;
- Converge students and external partners view an important part of the role to be university students bringing their own expertise to it; and
- External partners and university students (placement and volunteer) view the role as providing unique work experiences (see 'Section 5.3: Professional and vocational skills and practice' and 'Section 5.4: Progression into work, education, or volunteering').

The main overlap between all participant groups' perceptions of what could be improved about the university student volunteer role is **the need for greater clarity**, albeit in different forms. For both volunteer and placement university students, particularly at York St John University, there can be a lack of clarity on their role within Converge, leading to a variety in experiences and understandings of the role. In a few cases, this led to university students feeling anxious about their involvement and caused them to disengage. The need for greater clarity over the role is shared by Converge students who said this would help everyone know precisely what the role is and why Converge includes university students. At Northumbria University, **university students reported a greater sense of clarity** over the role. This was due to staff providing a more detailed outline of what they would be doing and when.

A few York St John university student volunteers also shared a desire for there to be **continued clarification of their role to help keep boundaries clear and provide guidance on what to do when disclosures are made** (see 'Section 4.2.3: Training and support for university student volunteers'); the **importance of debriefing** around these issues was also stressed by external partners.

'[There needs to be clearer communication around] what capacity [university students] are there in. So, you know, "This is part of my placement, this is the focus of my time here, or I'm coming in on level one of the volunteer programme, I'm hoping to come to level two so I'm really committed – I'm just popping in to see what's happening and get a taste of it".' (Group discussion of Converge structures, Discussion Group 6, 25th November 2021)

The main disconnect between how Converge students and university students view the volunteer role is the level of commitment involved. As stated earlier, many Converge students view the university student role as helping to create a safe environment where trust and relationships are developed and collaboration can take place (see 'Section 5.1: Types of knowledge exchange' for more detail). For some Converge students this safe environment is hindered by the flexibility of involvement that volunteer university students have. It was commented by a few Converge students that regular attendance would mean all can benefit more from the experience, particularly in terms of trust.

However, as discussed earlier in 'Section 4.2.1: Motivations for joining Converge', flexibility is vitally important to many university student volunteers, and enables them to volunteer alongside their academic studies. The way that these different views of the role are connected will need to be handled carefully so that it addresses Converge students' concerns over continuity, whilst not causing university students to disengage from volunteering. It may be that this is achieved by providing greater clarity to the role from the start to both Converge and university students, including the differences between those on placement and those volunteering.

FINDING: There is a desire from both university and Converge students for greater clarity on what the university student role is, though it is perceived as being clearer at Converge Northumbria than at Converge York.

FINDING: There is a disconnect between what university student volunteers and Converge students value in the role; university students want flexibility, whereas many Converge students feel consistency helps create trust and form relationships.

RECOMMENDATION: Provide greater clarity on what the university student role is, as well as what it entails for volunteers and those on placement. This clarification could also address Converge students' concerns by providing detail on the levels of involvement and what they can expect from both sets of university students.

4.2.3 Training and support for university student volunteers

When it comes to support, university student volunteers across both York St John and Northumbria Universities share that:

- The **support of Converge and university staff/tutors is invaluable**. This is particularly true in terms of being supported to do new things on courses based on their expertise and skills.
- The **support of Converge students plays an important role** in their volunteering journey (see 'Section 5: Knowledge exchange, upskilling, and formal progression' for more detail).
- **Feedback from Converge tutors and staff is appreciated and valued**.

In terms of training, university students shared that while the current training offered (such as the mental health training at York St John) is helpful, there is a need for more. This view is shared by Converge students who feel that **university students would benefit from further support on what their role is and why Converge includes university student volunteers**.

The following training and support needs were primarily identified by university students, but also Converge students, tutors, and external partners:

- **Further training/support on direction and process** of what it means to be a university student volunteer in Converge; for example, setting of clear expectations;
- Potential for more **mentorship** for university students – one suggestion was to have stronger links between CERT and university student volunteers;
- Further **feedback** from Converge tutors/staff would be beneficial, particularly after sessions where university students deliver content or are facilitating;
- A desire for **further, more detailed mental health training**, particularly in reference to potential disclosures and understandings of boundaries; for example, communication, relationship building, sharing of personal info and social events;
- The desire to **meet other volunteers on other courses**; and
- Further **networking opportunities** related to their university student role and volunteering more broadly, with one university student sharing an interest in attending conferences.

'Talking to or reading something from someone who's been there and done it might help to decrease their anxiety – offering peer group supervision for university students every couple of months as an opportunity to debrief, or whatever. Some sort of pathway for support. Because does anyone know at the moment where a university student would go?' (Group analysis of the key project themes, Discussion Group 9, 28th March 2022)

As discussed in 'Section 4.2.2: Understandings of the university student role', there is a **desire for greater clarification** on the university student role in Converge, as well as the training and support needed for this. However, it was also clear that **university students do not wish to lose the freedom to interpret the role**. This is echoed by Converge tutors who stressed that volunteers need to be asked what they want to get out of their time with Converge, with no one approach fitting all. University students' interpretations of the role have led to them being able to use their skills and expertise to develop courses. This ability **leads to several different forms of knowledge exchange** – such as outlooks, skills, knowledge and creative – that **mutually benefit university and Converge students** (as discussed fully in 'Section 5.1: Types of knowledge exchange').

FINDING: The role of the Converge tutor is essential in the training and development of the university student.

FINDING: Converge university student volunteers largely feel supported, though would like more training, mentorship and socialising opportunities.

4.2.4 University student recruitment, accessibility, and representation

Across the board, the involvement of university student volunteers and facilitators is perceived as a **crucial part of the Converge model**. Most people also perceive this to be **beneficial and high-quality** (as much on the social and behavioural support side, and to present a diversity of understandings, as in terms of the academic and professional benefits). However, Converge tutors point to university students' **increased course workloads and pressures to undertake paid work** (see 'Section 4.2.2: Understandings of the university student role'), which those we spoke to believe had dramatically decreased the take-up of opportunities – such as Converge – in recent years. A few people also shared the sense that the increase in the use of professionals as tutors could **limit opportunities for volunteers** to later become tutors, unless properly monitored.

Awareness and visibility

In general, colleagues within York St John who are already involved with Converge, especially at senior level, have a perception that there was a high level of internal awareness of the programme. While these comments may have referred primarily to staff awareness, this perception was not backed up by the data provided by university students, who called for **greater visibility, more use of social media channels to target potential volunteers, and taster sessions**.

Northumbria University has had a smaller number of student volunteers to date, and there is a recognition of the **potential impact COVID-19 has had on recruitment**. One staff member noted that university student volunteers at Northumbria often come to Converge on placement via a course module, so it is not necessarily as active a choice as it might be otherwise.

Access and diversity

York St John University colleagues in particular stress that **volunteer recruitment and progression needs to be more structured, strategic and consistent**, with university students across all relevant courses having equal access where possible. Without this, there is a danger of those losing out being more likely to come from disadvantaged communities (who tend not to be 'opportunity hoovers', unlike peers with existing cultural capital – see demographic data below) or from courses with which there is not yet a personal relationship between staff. University colleagues in both York and Newcastle point to the need to ensure that university students were **representative of the wider student cohort** and had **similar levels of access** to the same opportunities. However, a small number of university student volunteers stress that they thought the **flexible nature of Converge volunteering was also a positive**, so it is likely that more consultation would be needed with this group in order to maintain the right balance between these different needs (see 'Section 4.2.2: Understandings of the university student role').

University student volunteer demographic data

Alongside our core research data collection, we acquired the following four datasets² from York St John University and Northumbria University's SITS system (Strategic Information Technology System), which tracks all registered students' demographic data:

- York St John full student cohorts by year – 2013/14 to 2019/20
- York St John Converge student volunteers by year – 2013/14 to 2019/20
- NU full student cohorts by year – 2016/17 to 2019/20
- NU Converge student volunteers by year – 2016/17 to 2019/20

Comparing university student volunteers at York St John University and Northumbria University

When comparing the demographic profiles of Converge volunteers at both universities, we found some clear similarities:

- Converge volunteers at both universities were **predominantly female, white and from younger age categories**.
- Converge in both locations engaged fewer volunteers partaking in different modes of study, in that they had **almost no part-time or overseas student volunteers**.
- Converge volunteers at both universities were representative of a variety of socioeconomic categories, though **most commonly came from professional/managerial backgrounds**.

Meanwhile, the key differences between student volunteers at each university related to declared disabilities, level of study and disciplinary background:

- While both universities appear to be effectively engaging volunteers with declared disabilities, **the percentage of student volunteers with declared disabilities at Northumbria was twice that at York St John**. This may be due to the messaging used during initial recruitment (for example, a greater emphasis on the mental health focus of the programme) and would be worth exploring further.
- Converge volunteers at Northumbria were also representative of **a higher percentage of postgraduate students** than those at York St John.
- The most commonly studied programmes amongst Northumbria student volunteers were **fashion and drama**, as opposed to **music and occupational therapy** at York St John.

York St John Converge volunteers compared with the wider York St John student population

- **Age:** On the whole, Converge volunteers at York St John between 2013/14 to 2019/20 were relatively representative of their wider student cohort when it comes to age. There is, however, a slightly higher proportion of Converge volunteers who fall into the 20 and under category, so working on ways to engage older students may help to increase diversity amongst volunteers.
- **Gender:** Ratios in relation to gender also differ slightly between Converge volunteers and the wider student population. Volunteers sit at a ratio of around three female students to every male student, whereas this ratio is closer to two females to every male in the wider cohort.
- **Ethnicity:** Volunteers are also generally representative of the wider cohort in relation to ethnicity, although there is a higher proportion of white students (93%) and a lower proportion of Asian students (3%) comparatively to the wider student population (85% white and 5.5% Asian).

- **Disability:** The number of students who have declared a disability is also just slightly higher across Converge volunteers than in the wider student population, however this difference is minimal.
- **Home/overseas status:** Finally, Converge volunteers tend to be under-representative of students from overseas than they are in the wider student population.

Northumbria Converge volunteers compared with the wider Northumbria student population

- **Age:** Converge at Northumbria also appear to be engaging with more volunteers who fall into younger age categories. Students who begin university at an older age may find it more difficult to engage with volunteering activities for several reasons, including pre-existing commitments.
- **Gender:** One of the most significant differences between Northumbria volunteers and the wider student population is the over-representation of females across Converge volunteers.
- **Ethnicity:** In relation to ethnicity, Northumbria volunteers are relatively representative of the wider student population. However, most notably, they have no Asian representation amongst their alumni volunteers in comparison to the wider student cohort (5%).
- **Disability:** Converge volunteers at Northumbria are twice as likely to have a declared disability (which they would have stated at the time of starting their university course) than those in the wider Northumbria student population.
- **Mode of study and home/overseas students:** There is also an under-representation of both part-time students and overseas students across Northumbria volunteers.

To summarise, the volunteers engaging with Converge are generally representative of the wider student population at both York St John and Northumbria. **However, more could be done in both locations to engage with older students, male students, ethnic minority groups (particularly Asian students) and overseas students.**

Suggested solutions

Increased strategic planning to support university student communication, recruitment and support to address these issues could combine: the use of university student volunteer demographic data (as detailed below) in order to consider the **diversity agenda**, and the potential targeting of particular demographic groups; a more strategic approach to how courses are selected and how students hear about opportunities, taking into account **the needs of the TEF**; clearer guidance in the form of **briefing and support** across the board (including a consistent support approach from tutors, who would themselves need training and guidance to do this); and a consideration of the **feasibility** of these activities in line with Converge team capacity.

FINDING: Across the board, the involvement of university student volunteers and facilitators was perceived as a crucial, beneficial, and high-quality part of the Converge model, though many people said that the volunteer role could be more clearly communicated and supported.

RECOMMENDATION: The data points to the value of increased strategic planning around university student communication, recruitment, and support. In particular, there is a need to:

- Address the disparity in numbers of ethnic minorities in both locations amongst Converge student volunteers when compared with the wider student population.
- Considering methods for engaging more male and gender-diverse students is an area for Converge at both York St John and Northumbria to consider moving forward.
- Work with older students at both locations to formulate volunteering opportunities better suited to their needs and priorities.
- Part-time and overseas students likely face additional barriers to taking on volunteering commitments, so working with these groups at both York St John and Northumbria to create opportunities which fit their needs more closely may enable them to also benefit from the knowledge exchange activities in Converge.
- Work more closely with past Northumbria student volunteers who have a declared disability to find out more about their high levels of engagement, in order to identify strategies for increasing engagement in underrepresented student groups.

²All records were de-identified before transfer, and consist of student characteristic data only. The relatively small numbers of Converge volunteers, particularly at NU, act as a significant limiting factor in these comparisons and make it difficult to draw definitive conclusions. Not all the Converge student volunteers covered by this demographic data chose to take part in the main data collection activity of this project (i.e., to take part in surveys, interviews, workshops or autoethnographic work), though everyone for whom we had contact details was offered the opportunity to take part.

4.3 Community, identity, and representation

'It's about humanity, and it's about being connected. And it's about supporting one another and being in a community.' (Current university student volunteer, York St John, USYSJ225)

4.3.1 Belonging: the Converge community

The data shows that, for both university and Converge students, the Converge community makes them **feel welcomed, accepted, comfortable, cared for, and not judged**.

'It was the sort of environment where the differences sort of naturally dissolved.' (Discussion Group 11, 'Key themes across the project', 16th May 2022)

Many participants, both Converge and university students alike, share how important the **supportive friendships** that they have built are. Partners also highlight that these relationships are an **important facet** of the programme. This allows both Converge and university students to feel **comfortable and safe** to share their experiences, feelings, and thoughts in their courses and with the community more generally. For Converge students, one particular aspect of belonging and feeling part of this community is the understanding that fellow Converge students **share experiences** of mental health challenges. This may differ from previous experiences around mental health, such as those found in the NHS (see 'Section 6.1.3: Comparison with other mainstream mental health services').

'I think that the people that were there had all verbalised that they did have a history of mental health issues. And I think what comes with that is knowing that you feel safe.' (Current Converge student, Northumbria, CCSNU084)

Relationships built within the Converge community **across the different stakeholder groups** are also important. Examples include the relationships between Converge York's Learning and Access Workers and Converge students, or between Converge tutors and university students. These relationships are perceived as **reciprocal and not patronising or performative**; they also stem from,

and in turn enable, a feeling of **shared space and collaborative activity** (see 'Section 6.1.2: Creativity and wellbeing').

'What intrigued me most was that this was a programme that was intentional about making space for people to create together. Not something that was purely for getting a grade or passing a class or anything like that. But the creation of these projects together really formed a community.' (Past university student volunteer, York St John, UAYSJ150)

A smaller group of participants share how they **feel they are on the outside looking in**, never quite fully fitting in with the community at Converge or the wider university community. At times this is linked to feeling 'out of the loop', not receiving invites to events and courses, or simply not feeling that they have been made welcome. At other times, these feelings of isolation are linked to the fluctuations of their individual mental health. This can lead to feelings of **isolation and sadness**, and in some cases means that people **leave the programme** entirely.

'I just felt as though I was an outsider watching this happen rather than being a part of it.' (Current Converge student, York St John, CCSYSJ043)

FINDING: The data shows that, for both university and Converge students, the Converge community makes them feel welcomed, accepted, comfortable, cared for, and not judged.

FINDING: Feelings of isolation and separation from the community are often linked to missing communication (some respondents speculated that this could be related to not receiving emails, not knowing about events, or not feeling 'in the loop' with other Converge students) or not feeling appreciated.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge should consider how it can ensure that all participants have access to information about events at Converge. It might also be useful to explore further how Converge students can be encouraged to be part of the wider university community.

4.3.2 The importance of the university campus

The importance of the university campus and its facilities is raised by all participant groups. University students see the **York St John campus as small, welcoming, and 'soft'**, whereas Converge students point out the **beauty of York St John** and the **central location and 'bustling' feeling of Northumbria** campus. These findings are echoed by Discussion Group members, who shared ideas of how Converge students' **comfort on campus develops with time**.

'I was talking to a university student the other day about the sense that they get about how Converge students feel on the [York] campus. And she said that she'd noticed that students who've been with Converge a lot longer seemed on the whole to feel a lot more comfortable navigating around the campus and all of those sorts of things and felt, in her opinion, that they were more part of the university and felt like they had a place there.' (Discussion Group 11, 'Key themes across the project', 16th May 2022)

Both university campuses offer multiple spaces where students can spend time together, such as the café, the canteen, seating areas and many others. These different places offer **spaces to form relationships**, which helps to facilitate closeness across the groups. This is more relevant for students at the York St John campus than those at Northumbria, who did not talk about using university spaces as much as Converge students from York St John. Partners share these general perceptions, referencing the **safe and open atmosphere**. Access to other facilities on campus is also understood as helping to **'level out' the potential for participants to feel a provider/patient power dynamic**.

'Universities are really interesting places: this is the place where everybody should feel as though they're empowered to be whoever they want to. It was lovely in this kind of structure to be able to do that, and to bring [Converge students] in to recreate its space, and say "Well, this is your space, you know – it's not my space. It's not the university space, it's your space while you're in here." There's something quite powerful about that.' (Senior manager, Northumbria, UCNU202)

Partners highlight the importance of the fact that Converge happens on campus, in terms of **conferring respect**. However, they also detail the ways in which Converge tutors are an important resource in themselves, due to their **credibility, knowledge and expertise**. Access to university facilities is seen by all participant groups as an **incredible resource**, especially the access granted by university student cards at Northumbria University. However, for a smaller number of participants this is perceived as intimidating.

The fact that Converge students are **not pushed** to leave Converge contributes to the **sense of belonging** in the community, despite some perceptions from a small number of partners that remaining in a service for an extended amount of time is 'unhealthy' (see 'Section 5.4: Progression into work, education, or volunteering').

'But there's something about it being a university setting. My self-esteem was on the floor. I felt like I was on the fringes of society, I was worthless. And then suddenly to be brought into a university precinct... It's like, wow, yes, to be scooped up from the edges of society and brought right bang in the centre where it's all happening, that just felt so privileged and honoured, and it was very moving.' (Current Converge student, Northumbria, CCSNU106)

FINDING: There was a strong shared sense of the importance of the university campuses themselves, which offer multiple spaces to form relationships and to 'level out' power dynamics.

4.3.3 Impact on identity

Impact on Converge student identity

The feeling of being a part of the Converge community is related strongly to issues of identity, a perception shared across all participant groups. University students talk about wanting to be **on the same level** as Converge students; it is important for them to be on **an equal footing with Converge students** without **a hierarchical structure between them**. Some university students find that their own experiences as a service user influenced the way they approached volunteering. University students are clear that it was important for them **that Converge students ‘feel like students’**, as opposed to being visitors on campus.

Most Converge students value the approach of treating everyone **as an individual with various overlapping identities**. They also value the way in which being part of Converge **adds more layers to their identity**, instead of focussing only on being a patient, with one student sharing how they found out that **‘there’s more to me’** (Current Converge student, Northumbria, CCSNU106). University students as well as partners share these perceptions around the growth of different kinds of identity.



IMAGE 2: Storyteller artwork – painting, Current Converge student, Northumbria (CCSNU084)

Leading on from the way that the Converge community does not centre the patient identity, many Converge students realised that their **student identity actually became the primary identity** they relate to. For some, this was likened to re-finding their voice, and discovering parts of themselves that they thought had been lost. Sometimes this was about **reclaiming sources of joy** that they thought were no longer accessible to them.

‘I still struggle a lot. But I think I’ve definitely felt more confident in my ability to be more than a patient. [I would now] describe myself as a student and a member of a choir rather than a patient and a service user.’ (Current Converge student, York St John, CCSYSJ057)

Similarly to the theme of isolation discussed elsewhere (see ‘Section 4.3.1: Belonging: the Converge community’ and ‘Section 6: Wellbeing and personal progression’), **not all Converge students feel able to identify as a student**. Instead, some see themselves **in a grey area that is not quite a student and not quite a patient**. For some students this is related to their general feelings around belonging, and their own **self-esteem** and **self-worth**. However, others pointed to the way in which they **do not have equal access to university facilities**. This included not being able to access the university Wi-Fi or the Student Union.

Learning about me
The me I never knew
Has taken me on a journey
With a completely different view
Unfolding like the pages
In a secret book
I found the me
Who never took a look
What a pleasure
What a treasure
Finding all I've found
Life is just evolving round and round

POEM 2: Storyteller poetry – ‘Learning about me’ (Current Converge student, York St John, CCSYSJ044)

Language

The language that Converge uses to identify its members is seen as important, particularly by Converge students and external healthcare partners. **By specifically referring to ‘students’, ‘performers’ and ‘enrolment’ instead of ‘patients’, ‘service users’ or ‘referral’, Converge centres students as learners and individuals in their own right**. Having this kind of language used to describe their experiences helps Converge students to feel valued by the university, and marks a clear difference from the kind of language that they may be used to reading about themselves in from mental health service letters, appointments, and reports. Converge students also value the way that the language that Converge uses centres their artistic identity, referring to themselves as a writer, actor, or musician. However, this was not referred to as often as the emergence of a student identity.

Impact on university student identity

Converge not only influences Converge students’ sense of identity, but also allows university students to challenge their own beliefs around their personal identity. For example, students who typically described themselves as a musician or a dancer (usually, but not always, related to the course they were studying) had the opportunity to expand their ideas about themselves by trying new activities like improvisation or choir. Partners echo this perception that being part of Converge enables the cultivation of new identities. Seeing oneself as an actor, writer, or performer becomes increasingly important and widens the individual’s perceptions of themselves.

'[Converge helped me to] put myself out there and do something slightly different, because we weren't writing this same thing all the time. It was nice to be able to take inspiration from others, but then also give myself a challenge.' (Past university student volunteer, York St John, UAYSJ034)

FINDING: By allowing the exploration and cultivation of new identities, Converge is perceived to avoid the trap that other mental health services can fall into of embedding somebody in their diagnosis and being a 'service user'.

FINDING: Not all Converge students feel able to identify as a student, which may be related to self-esteem, but also might be linked to not having equal access to facilities as university students.

RECOMMENDATION: Clearer guidance around which of the university facilities are open to Converge students might help with their feelings of belonging moving forward, especially in relation to the wider university community.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge should consider how it can preserve the importance of valuing students as individuals moving forward, especially within any future growth strategy.

4.3.4 Converge student recruitment, accessibility, and representation

External partners in particular have strong views about how Converge students were recruited, largely around issues of **access, equality and diversity**. The recruitment of Converge students – which largely happens through word of mouth or NHS/Local Area Coordination referral in York, and through third sector organisations' recommendation in Newcastle – is closely aligned to broader questions of social justice across educational and third sectors. As explored in 'Section 8.2.2: Range of courses and audiences', there is a **shared worry that the most diverse communities are not being reached either nationally or locally**, especially after the disproportionate impact of the COVID pandemic. Groups identified included racially diverse populations, young people, those in the criminal justice system, and people with learning disabilities.

Partners in **York feel that York St John did well on issues of equality and community engagement across the board**, especially when compared to larger universities, but a minority think that it should be pushing harder, especially around **race equality**. There is a shared sense that, while Northumbria University aimed to increase participation at a strategic level (in the sense of university access more generally), it is **not yet doing enough in this area university-wide**. Again, it is worth noting that the six Newcastle-based partners interviewed had primarily collaborated with the university via Converge, and not necessarily through its Widening Participation programme or other activities.

In terms of Converge's own performance in this area, several partners highlight that **having the right demographic data** is crucial to making sure that the right audiences are being identified and targeted. This research project was not able within its scope to collect or analyse this type of data for Converge students, but Converge in both locations may want to consider developing data collection systems to help them to do this work – whether 'light touch' (e.g., collating Converge student postcodes to address potential geographic gaps) or more intensive data. However, several respondents feel that the collection of this form of data is not necessarily in line with the Converge ethos (see 'Section 8.1.2: Data, systems and tracking').

Linked to this, many participants in York identify **the geographic location of Converge** as a potential issue. While the campus is identified as one of the key strengths and offers of the programme (see 'Section 4.3.2: The importance of the university campus'), those in outlying areas may find it hard to find the time or money to travel into the centre of York. The online and postal 'Converge Connected' programme, which has grown since this research was undertaken, should help to mitigate this risk – however, several respondents, particularly NHS partners, state **a desire for face-to-face delivery in the suburbs and villages surrounding York** (see 'Section 8.2.3: Geographic and institutional growth'). The issue of geographic spread did not arise in data provided by Converge students in Newcastle.

There are also specific barriers raised by participants in terms of access to Converge for Converge students. A small number of respondents comment that this may be related to **Converge students' perceptions of themselves as being unskilled**, and thus lacking confidence to take part. **The academic requirements to begin studying are often described as a 'hurdle'** by partners, though Converge's focus on the arts is perceived to help to remove this.

Partners underline that part of universities' role in society is to widen accessibility and participation in education (see 'Section 4.1.1: Key features and perceptions of the Converge model'). However, the status of Converge taking place at a university can make joining seem daunting for potential Converge students. This barrier requires individual confidence as well as open routes and communication to help encourage potential Converge students. Knowing someone already part of Converge can be pivotal in making something accessible. Videos of campus including who new Converge students will meet and where they will be going might also help to increase accessibility. It is vital that Converge remains open and welcoming to new people and does not become a closed community that feels unapproachable for new members.

FINDING: York St John is perceived as doing well on issues of equality and community engagement across the board, including Converge, though a small number of participants would like to see greater action on race equality. There is a shared perception amongst the six Newcastle-based external partners interviewed that, while Northumbria University aimed to increase inclusive access and participation at a strategic level, it could do more in this area university-wide.

RECOMMENDATION: Consider developing ways to monitor the demographic reach of Converge student recruitment in order to ensure fair access (see 'Section 8.2.2: Range of courses and audiences'), as long as the Converge ethos is not threatened by data collection work.

RECOMMENDATION: Develop the Ambassadors' role in recruitment and support to widen participation and access for new Converge students in York.

RECOMMENDATION: Develop resources for new Converge students in both Converge locations that include videos of who they will meet and where they will go to increase accessibility.

'I think the university can be a really daunting space for some people, but actually when you get in there it's not as daunting and I think it's because people realise that we're just the same. We're just people, we're just humans and we're all allowed.' (Converge staff member, Northumbria University, UCNU196)

5. Knowledge exchange, upskilling, and formal progression

5.1 Types of knowledge exchange

'It's not like I'm going in as if I know everything. I'm going in as me, who's honest about: "This is what I can share with you; what can you share with me?" It's a cross-pollination of skills and knowledge, isn't it?' (Current university student volunteer, York St John, USYSJ225)

At Converge, **knowledge exchange is experienced as a reciprocal, collaborative process** where learning about, and from, each other is viewed as a cornerstone of its success. The **different types of knowledge exchange are enabled by the Converge environment** (see 'Section 4.1: Conceptual model, principles, and ethos'). All strands reflect that, in this environment, mistakes can be made **free of judgment** and is founded upon **mutual sharing and support**, along with both sets of students **finding a common ground** during their time at Converge (see 'Section 4.3.1: Belonging: the Converge community').



Types of Knowledge Exchange

FIGURE 7: Types of knowledge exchange in Converge

As demonstrated in Figure 7, the two main ways in which this reciprocal exchange occurs are:

1. The exchanging of attitudes, outlooks, and mindsets; and
2. The exchanging of skills and knowledge

Two further forms of exchange branch off from these:

- An exchange of behaviours that emerges from the main exchange of attitudes, outlooks, and mindsets
- An exchange of creative expression that emerges from the main exchange of skills and knowledge

The data suggests that **Converge provides an environment that enables these different forms of knowledge exchange to take place**, giving university and Converge students the **ability to experiment, fail and develop skills without fear of judgment** (see 'Section 4: The Converge model').

University facilities and resources also help create this environment, with external partners and university staff sharing that it is extremely important that Converge takes place on a campus, **promoting inclusion and access** (see 'Section 4.3.2: The importance of the university campus').

Exchange of attitudes, outlooks, and mindsets

'I suppose the university students are really bringing their learned experience whereas the Converge students are sometimes bringing their lived experience; and it's recognising the benefits of both of those things. I think they both have a place.' (External NHS/national government partner, York, EPYSJ193)

'Let go of perfection. Just do it. What's the worst that could happen? And learn and teach, accept, be open, have fun, worry less. (Storyteller, Coffee morning 4, 22nd November 2021)

Whilst both the forms of knowledge exchange detailed above play a pivotal role in the development of personal and professional skills for Converge participants across the board, it is **the exchange of attitudes, outlooks, and mindsets that has overwhelming importance for all groups**. While these three elements have many crossovers, we see each one as subtly different: 'attitude' refers to complex beliefs, feelings and values, both towards oneself and others; 'outlook' relates to someone's general approach to day-to-day life; and 'mindset' refers primarily to how established or 'stuck' these attitudes or outlooks may be in totality. All three positions may change through interactions with other people and contexts.

As discussed in 'Section 6.1: The impact of Converge on wellbeing', **university students' understandings of mental health are radically changed through their involvement with Converge**, with many sharing how Converge students have helped them transform their original mindsets from when they first start at Converge. For one past York St John university student volunteer (UAYSJ150), being part of Converge challenges 'the otherness that you are projecting toward people, not just at Converge, but [also] within your own community'.

This is supported by many Converge students who feel that they are teaching university students what it means to struggle with mental health, normalising these experiences and **increasing their capacity for empathy and understanding**. This shift in university students' understandings of mental health, through the exchange of attitudes and outlooks, was also vitally important for external partners. They view this exchange as shifting Converge students' experience and sense of being 'other', whilst also **breaking down assumptions and barriers** in both directions.

This shift in attitudes and outlooks is supported by an exchange of behaviours between university and Converge students. For example, many university and Converge students mention the negative impact that **striving for perfection** had on them before their time at Converge. This is the same for external partners who comment **how important it is for both sets of students to make mistakes**, as this allows for growth and progress to take place. By encouraging each other to 'let go' of perfectionism, both sets of students are able to change how they view themselves and their work.

‘It’s not so much about skills. I think it was more about how, as an 18-year-old, you interact with people that you’ve never interacted with before.’ (Past university student volunteer, York St John, UAYSJ174)

The exchange of behaviours enabled by Converge is **founded upon a mutual understanding of what it means to struggle**, albeit in different ways, and how to keep going. What emerges is a change in students’ perspectives – both university and Converge students – in relation to the value they place on their work and on themselves. This allows for **a process of self-(re)discovery to take place**, where new skills are developed through this exchange of behaviour, as well as the other types of knowledge exchange detailed below. There is also an acknowledgement of the skills that had always been there and **needed the right environment to flourish**.

‘I think they [Pacific University students] enjoyed the openness as well. They had an open mic at the end for everybody to come together and one of the students got up, in fact a few of them did, and were talking really openly about their mental health struggles and things as well. You know, I think they found that really liberating in itself; I think they really enjoyed the benefits of being able to be themselves in Converge. And I don’t know whether it’s the openness of Converge that enabled them to do that, but I think a lot of them found it very cathartic in a way. It comes over, doesn’t it, in the deep feeling of this interview, the sitting on the bench and, you know, in tears together and relating, but like in a good way.’ (Group analysis of university student interview, Discussion Group 2, 30th September 2021)

Exchange of skills and knowledge

‘It was really daunting at first because obviously, everyone’s an adult and I look really young. Are they going to take advice from a 19-year-old?’ (Past university student volunteer, York St John, UAYSJ001)

The second main form of exchange – skills and knowledge – is also viewed as collaborative, with Converge students and university students perceived to be equal partners. The varieties of skills identified as gained during people’s time at Converge includes leadership, communication and listening (see ‘Section 5.2: Personal skills and attributes’ and ‘Section 5.3: Professional and vocational skills and practice’ for more detail by participant group). However, it was the *types* of knowledges being exchanged that are of note. There is an emphasis on the **equal importance of lived knowledge**, alongside subject knowledge. The sharing of both types of knowledge was not just between university and Converge students, but also included Converge staff, university staff, and external partners.

Creative exchange

‘I think for people recovering from mental health, there’s a particular value in creativity. If you’ve been in mental health services for a long time, you’re expected to go and see people when you’re told to go and see them. To do what those people tell you. To answer the questions they ask. And when you give somebody in that position or with that history a piece of paper and say, “What colours do you want to use?” Or you give them some words and say, “Write whatever you like”, you can actually see that it’s like a dam bursting. That they’re finally allowed to express themselves. Learning isn’t somebody telling you what to do. It’s you exploring your world and expressing it how you want to express it.’ (Past university student volunteer and current Converge tutor, York St John, UAYSJ041)

What also stands out in this exchange of skills and knowledge is the emergence of creative exchange between university and Converge students. **Converge students are viewed as drivers of creative inspiration** for university students, as well as pushing them to go beyond their subject training and think outside the box. This creative inspiration is also experienced by Converge students who share how **university students’ practice and experience influences their own**. Both groups thus **develop their creative practice and thinking skills** through their interaction (see Figure 8 in this section, and Figure 11: Participants’ perceptions of how Converge supports links between creativity and mental health in Section 6.1.2: Creativity and wellbeing).

The data supports the idea that the creative exchange occurring in Converge is a ‘facilitated creativity’ (Stannage, 2017, p. 193) which **minimises pressure, is highly supportive, and positions creative practice as a valued activity in itself, with no set outcome**. It involves a level of risk-taking and vulnerability from all involved, but particularly for Converge students. All participant groups perceive this to be facilitated by the unique position that Converge holds within their university environments and its ability **to push the desire to experiment** (see ‘Section 4: The Converge model’). External partners point out that this is further supported at Northumbria University through the Design School’s emphasis on **co-creation**, as well as York St John University’s strengths in **collaborative contemporary arts and practice**.

‘I mean, for the [university student] artists, I wonder whether any of them ever been challenged into doing animation, for example? I mean, it’s a completely different mindset, doing animation to drawing and painting. Somebody might like the challenge of that.’ (Group analysis of an external partner interview, Discussion group 3, 14th October 2021)

University students feel their **love of creative practice reignite and feel more able to explore their skills outside of academic boundaries** as a

direct result of this exchange: ‘there were no sort of rules [...] this is our creative space’ (Past university student volunteer, York St John, UAYSJ030). This is echoed by Converge students, who reported that their **ability to engage and develop their creative practice without fear of judgment** helped them to unlearn previously negative associations with learning and the arts, particularly in earlier education settings.

Interestingly, Converge staff, as well as some wider university colleagues, also note the **influence of this creative exchange and its non-linear nature on their own professional work and practice**. For example, one university colleague from Northumbria University shares that, ‘purely personally, I think it helps me kind of try and think a bit more creatively’ and prompts ‘thinking of doing things and working with people in different ways’ (UCNU197).

Summary of skills gained (both personal and professional)

As shown in Figure 8, **university students identify a range of skills they feel are developed through Converge**. These range from **interpersonal skills** such as communication; **relational professional skills** including leadership and collaboration; and core **professional skills** such as time-management and facilitation.



FIGURE 8: Skills developed by university students and Converge students

Many **Converge students share that they are able to gain skills through different types of 'risk-taking'**, whether that be personally, socially or creatively. Both sets of students feel that the main impact of gaining new skills is **increased self-confidence** – a view shared by university and Converge staff, and discussed in further detail below in 'Section 5.2: Personal skills and attributes'.

FINDING: The Converge model enables different types of knowledge exchange that are reciprocal and multi-directional, and help develop interpersonal and professional skills for both university and Converge students. Central to Converge's own form of knowledge exchange is the environment it creates, based on mutual understanding, respect, and collaboration.

FINDING: The types of knowledge exchange created by Converge offer a model for understanding of knowledge exchange that complements but goes beyond that embodied by the Knowledge Exchange Framework.

RECOMMENDATION: Articulate to stakeholders how Converge helps to further understandings of what different forms of knowledge exchange could be in Higher Education.

RECOMMENDATION: Any development or growth of Converge should retain an emphasis on the factors needed to create the 'right environment' for different types of knowledge exchange to occur, especially in relation to the exchange of attitudes, outlooks and mindsets.

RECOMMENDATION: Promote the different types of knowledge exchange enabled in Converge at both York St John University and Northumbria University, especially in both institutions' KEF submissions.



5.2 Personal skills and attributes

'Where do you get your sense of value from? Do you get it from yourself, or do you get it from others? I think I spent so many years thinking that I could only be the way I was because of others. And actually, I got myself there because of me. And I think Converge really helped me with that realisation.'
(Past university student volunteer, York St John, UAYSJ034)

In order of the most mentioned, the top three identified personal skills and attributes per participant group, as referenced in interviews, were as follows:

University students	Converge students	External partners/university staff perceptions of skills development by US and CS
Confidence	Confidence	Confidence
Empathy	Taking risks	Self-worth/self-development/self-discovery
Communication	Social skills	Social skills

As seen in this table, the development of self-confidence by university and Converge students is identified by all participant groups. For both sets of students, the **largest impact is on (re)discovering things about themselves and the confidence that (re)emerged from this.**

For university students, this growth in self-confidence takes the form of:

- Trying different ways and approaches to working;
- Being able to put boundaries in place, and asking for help when needed;
- Opening up new opportunities – both creative and professional.

Converge students share the following experiences:

- Feeling validated and valued. For example, one current Converge student from Northumbria University (CCSNU106) was asked to take part in Converge's main governance group, and said: 'Being part of the Converge Northumbria Steering Group is very validating, because I represent other Converge students. And it makes me feel that Converge really deeply cares about its people';

- Feeling able to challenge yourself both creatively and socially;
- Finding joy in being creative, as discussed in more detail in 'Section 6.1.2: Creativity and wellbeing'; and
- Accessing new opportunities – creative, social, and professional.

Some university students spoke of how learning to ask for help and understanding boundaries means they felt more confident in themselves and their desire to 'give back' to their community grew. This is supported by **93% of past university volunteers who share that they either agree or strongly agree that engaging with Converge improved their confidence** (see Figure 9).

Engaging with Converge improved my confidence

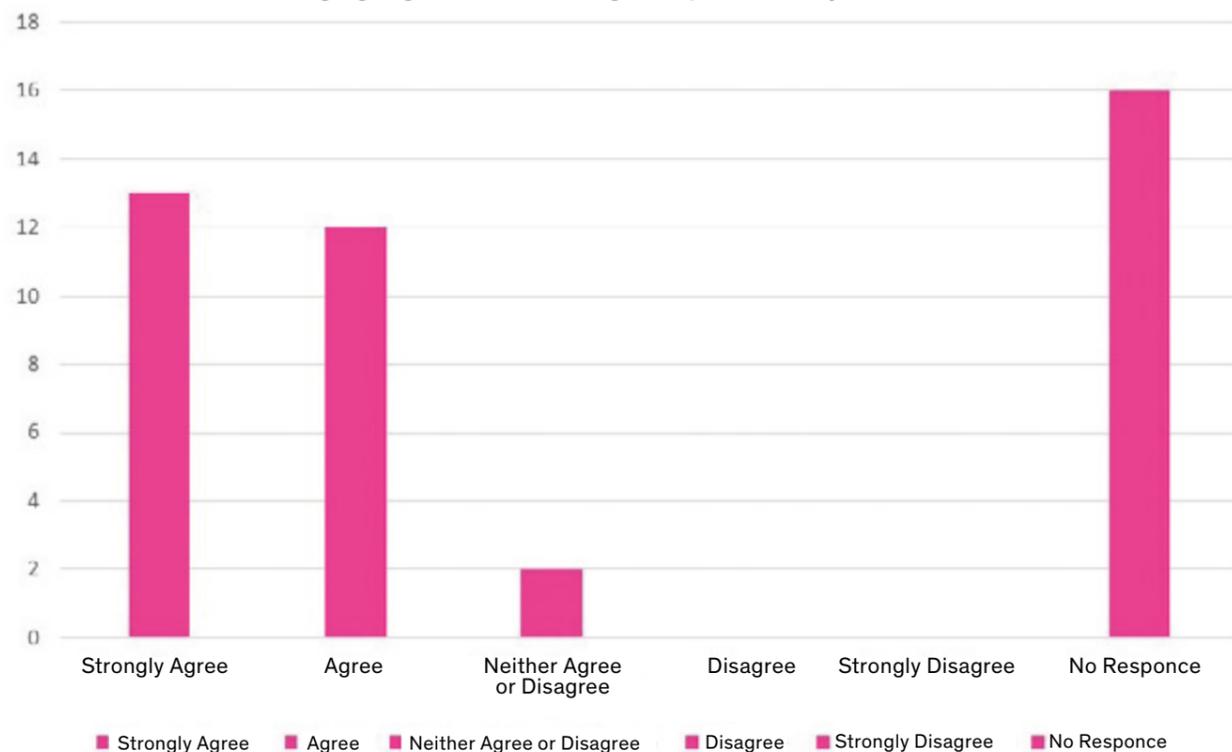


FIGURE 9: Past university students' confidence improvement ratings

Despite limited data on whether Converge students' confidence was improved by being involved in Converge (no single Converge student chose to fill in both a pre- and a post-course survey, meaning we could not track changes in these responses), both past and current Converge students speak frequently about 'regaining' confidence. Many share that, by challenging themselves, they are able to draw upon previous knowledge and skills. For example, one current Converge student from York St John University (CCSYSJ059) said that their involvement in Converge had given them 'the writing bug back'.

Many external partners and university colleagues also spoke about seeing **rising confidence in both university and Converge students**. External partners perceive there to be several benefits from this change, including Converge students' growing ability to address problems in other areas of their lives.

FINDING: Converge helps both university and Converge students to increase their confidence (93% of past university student volunteers either agree or strongly agree that engaging with Converge improved their confidence; Converge students' qualitative data also supports this finding).

'The scrapbook that I have made [as part of the Converge evaluation Storytelling project] reflects the multiple Converge courses that I have taken part in. I am very proud of everything that I have achieved – and can look back at these photographs, artwork and printed materials at any time, which is great.' Written reflections on the Storytelling process, Current Converge student, York St John (CCSYSJ011)

5.3 Professional and vocational skills and practice

'I think [university student volunteers] gain a "real life" facilitation experience of working with real people in a real community. It allows them to explore their own interests, I think, and as facilitators in their own practice to develop. And you see them grow as people and facilitators.' (Converge staff member, Northumbria University, UCNU196)

The Converge environment provides the foundation necessary to build professional and vocational skills. University students (across both interviews and surveys) feel that the main professional/vocational skills and practice they develop include leadership, communication, adaptability, and time management skills (see Figure 8: Skills developed by university students in Section 5.1: Types of knowledge exchange).

Notably, the **different forms of facilitation and collaboration** opportunities provided by Converge to university students and Converge students also **allow for these professional skills to be developed**. External partners, university colleagues and university students alike all commented upon how Converge provides 'real-life' facilitation opportunities that are unlike what university student volunteers will experience elsewhere. The impact of these opportunities includes:

- An understanding that what university students are **learning goes beyond just facilitating a group**;
- The need to be **person-centred**, rather than goal-orientated; and
- An understanding of how to support group dynamics.

Many respondents across all participant groups agree that **what makes this facilitation successful is the various forms of collaboration it provides** for university and Converge students, as well as tutors and staff. For most university students this is about learning to collaborate more with others, particularly those with lived experience. It is also aided by being able to just 'have a go' within a supportive atmosphere (as discussed in 'Section 5.1: Types of knowledge exchange'). The facilitation and collaboration opportunities Converge provides thus **provide the space to think about potential career paths and further opportunities**, and act as a **platform of support** where these can be realised.

See also 'Section 9.1: Impact of CEP's coproduction methods on participants' for a discussion of the skills gained by participants in this project's own activities, over and above those gained through the core Converge programme.

FINDING: Converge provides 'real life' facilitation experiences for university students that help develop skills such as leadership, communication, and adaptability. These experiences support university students in their chosen career paths.

5.4 Progression into work, education, or volunteering

The data shows that university students' and Converge students' individual journeys through Converge **provide space to think about the different paths and forms of progression** that they might want. For university students, this is particularly important when thinking about next steps to take after graduation, whether that be additional studies or work. The data suggests that, in many cases, this decision making is **enabled through university students being able to experience doing things they haven't done prior to Converge**. It is also noted by university students that seeing Converge students' personal progression provided them with a sense of accomplishment and, for most, **affirmed or awakened an interest in seeking work that is education-, community- and/or arts-based**.

It is also noted by university students that **the professional skills gained from their involvement in Converge allowed them to pursue their chosen form of progression**. Examples given include the development of educational, personal, and work projects whilst involved in Converge, as well as developing their communication and interpersonal skills (see Figure 8: Skills developed by university students in Section 5.1: Types of knowledge exchange).

For Converge students, their journeys through Converge often mean that their **hopes and aspirations now feel possible**. Converge acts as a catalyst for Converge students to **enjoy learning and see that they are capable of thriving in an educational environment**. This has helped some respondents to realise that higher education is a possibility, as well as having the confidence to try other educational courses. For some Converge students, **Converge is a 'test run' for university** where they can practice and develop skills in a safe environment (as detailed in 'Section 5.1: Types of knowledge exchange'). External partners also perceive Converge as providing its students with self-belief and the understanding that there is a broad range of opportunities available to them. Some external partners also report that this **self-belief is developed reciprocally** between Converge students, as well as with university students.

'[The data] shows that the relationship with the university really is completely two way because [as well as opportunities for Converge students] they're giving such fantastic opportunities for the university students to try things out, you know, like planning rehearsals and then delivering to a screen full of people is an amazing development thing for their CV. And I just think it does show the reciprocal nature of the whole thing.' (Group analysis of a Converge student interview, Discussion Group 1, 16th September 2021)

In summary, **Converge acts as a platform for potential progression** for both university and Converge students, whether that be into work, education, or volunteering. This can take the following forms:

University students	Converge students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunities for further work within Converge • Converge referenced in job applications and interviews leading to successful appointments • Converge referenced in postgraduate applications leading to successful entry into further study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Given responsibility on courses, with several examples of Converge students becoming paid tutors • Practical help given for entering higher education, as well as emotional support • Volunteering in Converge providing a stepping stone into volunteering for other organisations • Finding arts-based work through their creative practice with Converge • Other employment at Converge (e.g., administrative roles)

What makes this possible is the support provided to both university and Converge students, where interdependence is encouraged and developed. As mentioned in 'Section 5.1: Types of knowledge exchange', neither set of students feel pressure to have any specific outcome from courses.

FINDING: Converge provides a platform for personal and professional progression, with no pressure for there to be a formal outcome (except for university students on placement).

FINDING: Converge enables the development of personal and professional skills for university students and has a positive impact on career progression.

RECOMMENDATION: There could be scope for clearer guidance or support in relation to paths of progression for both university and Converge students. Any form of official outcome would need to be carefully considered to make sure it didn't deter either university and Converge students from participating.

RECOMMENDATION: Disseminate how the Converge model offers a different take on work experience/placements for university students, where a focus on personal progression is as important as professional progression.

6. Wellbeing and personal progression

6.1 The impact of Converge on wellbeing

'As far as mental health [goes], there were times where it was Converge that was keeping me going. There are times when I really didn't want to get out of bed. Had enough of all this, you know, had enough. And then I would think, "Well, not today, it's university day. Get up, get your dicky bow on, and get yourself smartened up." And I would do that. And so it sort of pulled me out.' (Current Converge student, York St John, CCSYSJ098)

Overwhelmingly, participants report that being part of Converge – whether as a university student volunteer or a Converge student – has a **positive effect on their wellbeing**, especially their mental wellbeing.

Converge students report that their **wellbeing fluctuates**; acceptance and acknowledgement of these changes by Converge helps them better manage their mental and physical health. The majority of Converge students feel that the **programme understands the non-linear trajectories of mental health**, and that they are supported both when they are struggling and when things are easier for them.

It was important for participants across all groups that **Converge students felt accepted as a person by Converge**, whatever their mental health experiences were. University students praise the fact that Converge **does not categorise** its members, whether they are university students or Converge students, or indeed tutors or staff (see 'Section 4.3.3: Impact on Identity'). For Converge students, the **respect and kindness** with which they are treated, without being categorised as a mental health service user, is vital in feeling accepted as an individual.

Given that Converge students' own mental wellbeing tends to fluctuate, it is unsurprising that **individuals' mental health can affect their ability to engage** with Converge. The experience of traumatic events prior to (or even during) Converge is common to many Converge students. Before joining the programme, the majority of Converge students were **struggling with their general wellbeing**, as well as with the various symptoms of **anxiety, depression, panic, and isolation**. This extended to how Converge students felt about themselves, with many sharing that they struggled with **self-confidence and self-esteem** before joining Converge. For some, this included struggling to be outside of their home and experiences of agoraphobia. This can act as a barrier to feeling that Converge can be helpful.

'Converge gives me hope that there's a quality of life that I could have. Little steps. I saw Converge as little steps one at a time. It was like I did Converge and then that gives me the motivation and the confidence to go down to the rural cafe where I had friendships for four or five years. Yeah, little steps.' (Current Converge student, York St John, CCSYSJ046)

Converge students also share their feelings of **anxiety and nervousness** around joining new courses, something that is shared by university students. Individual struggles with wellbeing can mean that Converge students may sometimes **miss out on courses or experiences**. As mentioned above, for the most part the courses provide the impetus and motivation to keep going despite difficult times.



IMAGE 3: Storyteller artwork – 'Visual Story' (Current Converge student, Northumbria, CCSNU132). The tree reads: 'Connect; Part of a university setting; Personal development; Fun; Happy; Online work; Zoom; Inspiration; Travel; Process; Let go of the fear; I find myself, challenge myself'

Discussion Group reflections on Image 3: One person commented that the artwork is 'brave – someone letting go and going for it'; they found it was 'honest and alive'. Another commented that their favourite part of the artwork was the tree, reflecting that, for them, it evokes gradual movement, that you can do things at your own pace. Another comment was that the multi-textured nature of the artwork reflected the experience of Converge as constituting all sorts of different experiences. (Discussion Group session 8 on Storyteller artwork, 14th March 2022)

Both Converge students and university students demonstrate a **nuanced understanding** of the issues around mental wellbeing and highlight the multi-layered meanings that are ascribed to it, and relate this to their experiences with Converge. Converge students note that mental wellbeing is not just about being in crisis or acute distress, but can also be more complex than **typical public health messages around awareness** (for example, campaigns stating that everyone has experience of mental health and ill health, or that the key issue is asking for help).

This demonstrates that Converge can provide a space for participants to **think more deeply about mental health experiences**, as well as highlighting the potential difficulties inherent in more generalised messages about mental health. One current Converge student at York St John (CCSYSJ247) referred to these messages being ‘sanitised’ and not a reflection of most people’s experiences.

For many Converge students, **experiences of mental health challenges have contributed to feelings of being on the edges or outskirts of society, which in turn negatively affects their wellbeing**. These understandings of mental health may help us to understand why being part of a community like Converge has such a positive effect on Converge students’ wellbeing.

FINDING: Overwhelmingly, participants report that being part of Converge – whether as a university student volunteer or a Converge student – has a positive effect on their wellbeing, especially their mental wellbeing. The programme is also perceived to understand and support non-linear trajectories of mental health.

6.1.1 University students’ understandings of mental health

As demonstrated in Figure 10, **26 out of 35 past university student volunteers across York and Newcastle either agree or strongly agree** with the statement ‘Engaging with Converge changed my understanding of mental health’ – **a percentage of 74%** of those who responded to the question. While the sample size is relatively small, this is a significant finding.

In their qualitative responses, university student volunteers report that they had often had **very little experience of serious mental health problems** (their own or others’) prior to joining Converge. However, this finding from interview data should be considered alongside the demographic data (see ‘Section 4.2.4: University student recruitment, accessibility, and representation’) showing that, at Northumbria University, Converge’s university student volunteers are twice as likely to have a declared disability (including mental health challenges) than those in the wider Northumbria student population, which may suggest a **pre-existing identification with the aims of the programme**. Generally, university students feel

that their experience with Converge helped them to **develop a better understanding** of mental health. This included developing the awareness that **mental health exists along a continuum** with many different conditions, and that the most important thing is not to make any assumptions about somebody’s wellbeing.

Understandings of mental health issues extended beyond the conceptual; several university student volunteers find that Converge **has helped them through low points in their personal mental health** whilst at university (which they may or may not have previously identified as mental health challenges). Cultivating empathy and compassion for others in Converge allows them to **extend that same kindness** to themselves when they were struggling.

‘I’ve learnt a lot about my own mental health, and thinking about it as a continuum rather than either you’re sick or you’re not. Thinking that on any one day any of us could be along that line, I find much more helpful for looking after myself and noticing when things are going wrong. And the fact that, at the end of the day, yes, having not so good mental health gives you challenges, but you can still be one of many in a classroom and learn about poetry and it doesn’t matter. It’s just there in the background.’ (Past university student volunteer, York St John, UAYSJ041)

FINDING: 74% of past university student survey respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement ‘Engaging with Converge changed my understanding of mental health’. The majority of university students also feel that their experiences with Converge give them a better and more nuanced understanding of mental health issues.

RECOMMENDATION: University students’ new understandings of mental health are something they can apply to their own experiences. This may be a form of knowledge exchange that Converge wants to develop moving forward.

6.1.2 Creativity and wellbeing

The **importance of creativity**, in particular creative expression, and the perception that it has a direct, **positive impact on health** is something highlighted by all participant groups.



IMAGE 4: Storyteller artwork – zine (Past Converge student, York St John, PCYSJ049)

Converge partners point out that **creativity does not only influence mental health**, but also has a positive effect on wellbeing (the overall, holistic health of an individual) more generally (see ‘Section 5: Knowledge exchange, upskilling, and formal progression’ for other benefits of creativity). University students also highlight the importance of the arts and creativity in this context; for some, it is the **embodied experiences** of creativity, through theatre, dance, and other courses, which are especially important for wellbeing and mental health.

‘I think the arts and culture are really important in terms of the therapeutic aspect. I think any sort of learning and upskilling and education is great – you know, that’s the kind of remit – and I think the arts is a really, really valid one. Because of that cathartic, therapeutic aspect to them.’ (External local government partner, York, EPYSJ118)

Engaging with Converge changed my understanding of mental health

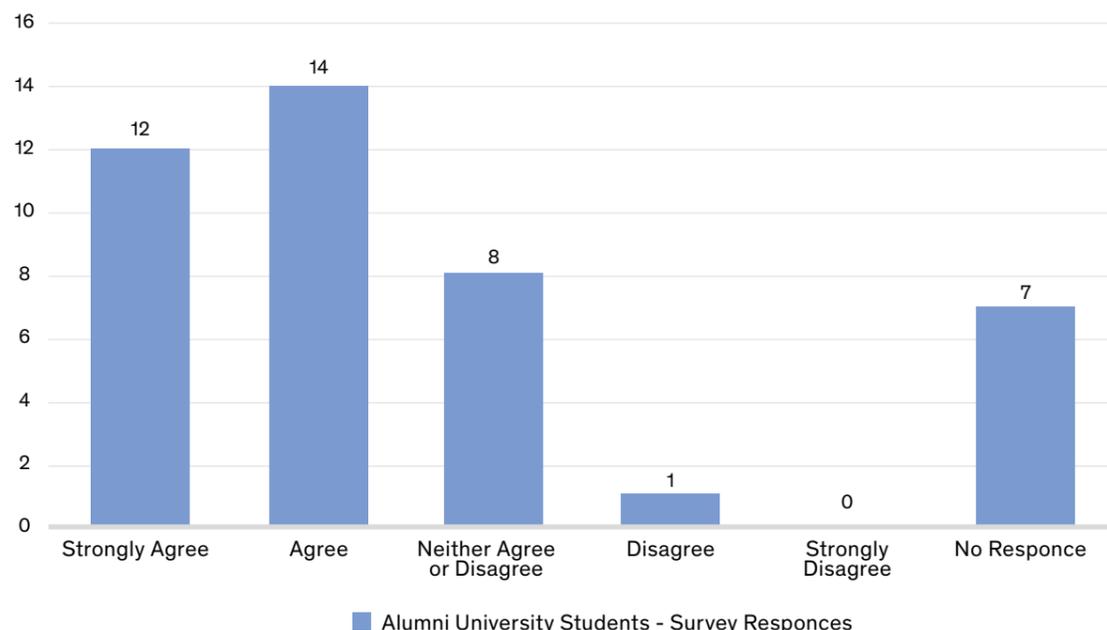


FIGURE 10: Past university student volunteers’ change in understandings of mental health

It may be, as suggested by university students, that the emphasis on creativity that is inherent to most Converge courses allows individuals to **explore and discuss wider problems in a non-direct way**. This might relate to the shared implicit understanding of experiences that Converge students value. **It is not necessary to explicitly discuss mental health**, but these experiences can be explored together artistically with the knowledge that **each individual brings their own lived experience** and understandings to the group.

‘But there were so many therapeutic benefits from just being a part of the theatre company [Out of Character]. And because a lot of the work that they did was about their own experiences, being able to get those out and talk about them, but in more of a creative way, was so beneficial to them – they would explore them in so many different ways.’ (Past university student volunteer, York St John, UAYSJ142)

A smaller group of Converge students shared how Converge gives them **‘permission’ to explore their experiences artistically**, which can have a **cathartic and therapeutic effect and improve their wellbeing**. This is supported by data drawn from a smaller group of university students, who suggest that the **arts might be a way to ‘heal’ from trauma**.

FINDING: Both Converge students and university students specify that the arts provide a creative outlet for their emotions. This ability to express oneself in a safe and non-judgemental space through an artistic medium plays a key role in the positive effects that Converge has on members’ wellbeing.

6.1.3 Comparison with mainstream mental health services

‘I had a wobble in September, and I phoned the GP. They put me in touch with the crisis team. Crisis team did about two or three weeks and then put me back to the doctor. But the doctor at least did ring me a couple of times. And that was, my mum had died then. But this time, they don’t seem to be taking any notice. Whereas with the Discovery Hub and Converge, you feel part of something. And you get this warm fuzzy feeling.’ (Current Converge student, York St John, CCSYSJ253)

Many participants discussed the differences between Converge and other services in interviews, workshops, and collaborative analysis groups. Converge courses are perceived to provide **greater freedom** than typically found in more mainstream mental health services. Many Converge students point to the potentially **negative effects that statutory mental health services can have on how they feel**. This is in contrast to their experience with Converge, which, as detailed in ‘Section 6.1: The impact of Converge on wellbeing’, predominantly helps their wellbeing. Several Converge students shared that they found the **creative expression** facilitated through Converge helped them to make **breakthroughs and deepen their understanding in other therapeutic settings**.

Overall, Converge students **appreciate the support that the NHS has been able to provide them** and see it as an important step in their wellbeing journey; however, the **more open and inclusive approach** that Converge provides allows them more freedom and individuality. Many Converge students refer **to the pressures that they know NHS staff are under** and the effect this might have on staff members’ ability to offer the care they wish to give. For a smaller group of Converge students, the **support of mainstream NHS services (such as Community Mental Health Teams) in parallel with Converge** is especially helpful.

An intersecting thread in partner interviews and workshops was the repeated emphasis on **particular needs for support around early intervention and prevention** (see ‘Section 7.2: Community healthcare models and system change’). In addition, the outcome measurements typically used in the mental health sector, such as the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS), were judged to be **inadequate in terms of capturing an individual’s experience**.

This highlights why Converge does not use these standardised measures. We also avoided use of these kinds of measure in the methods for this project, and instead focussed on more **creative and collaborative** ways of exploring people’s experiences.

‘People who are in the service system are often trapped by it because of its complexities, and how hard it can be to navigate. And often it doesn’t work in a very person-centred way.’ (External local government partner, York, EPYSJ129)

FINDING: The ability to access Converge alongside mainstream mental health services is valuable for Converge students.

RECOMMENDATION: The programme may wish to consider how it increase its profile within local mental health services, to ensure that opportunities with Converge are highlighted to more service users.

6.1.4 Motivation and recovery journeys

Converge helps Converge students’ wellbeing in a practical way by providing an **impetus and the motivation** to get out and to do something. This was especially helpful for those Converge students who were struggling with their mental health at the time. Participants shared how, when in crisis or when their mental health was especially low, **their courses were often the only things that motivated them** to take care of themselves.

‘I think that it gives me a reason to get up on some days where I would normally be feeling a bit lost. I still have mental health struggles – but then I also have lots of chronic illness issues as well. It just definitely gives you a sense of purpose, and I guess when you’re feeling a bit in a funk, then it’s good to have that external motivation to be like, “Right, get up, you’re going to go and do this.” And by the time you come home you usually feel better anyway.’ (Current Converge student, York St John, CCSYSJ159)

FINDING: Converge supports Converge students’ wellbeing by providing an impetus and the motivation to be active and engaged in something.

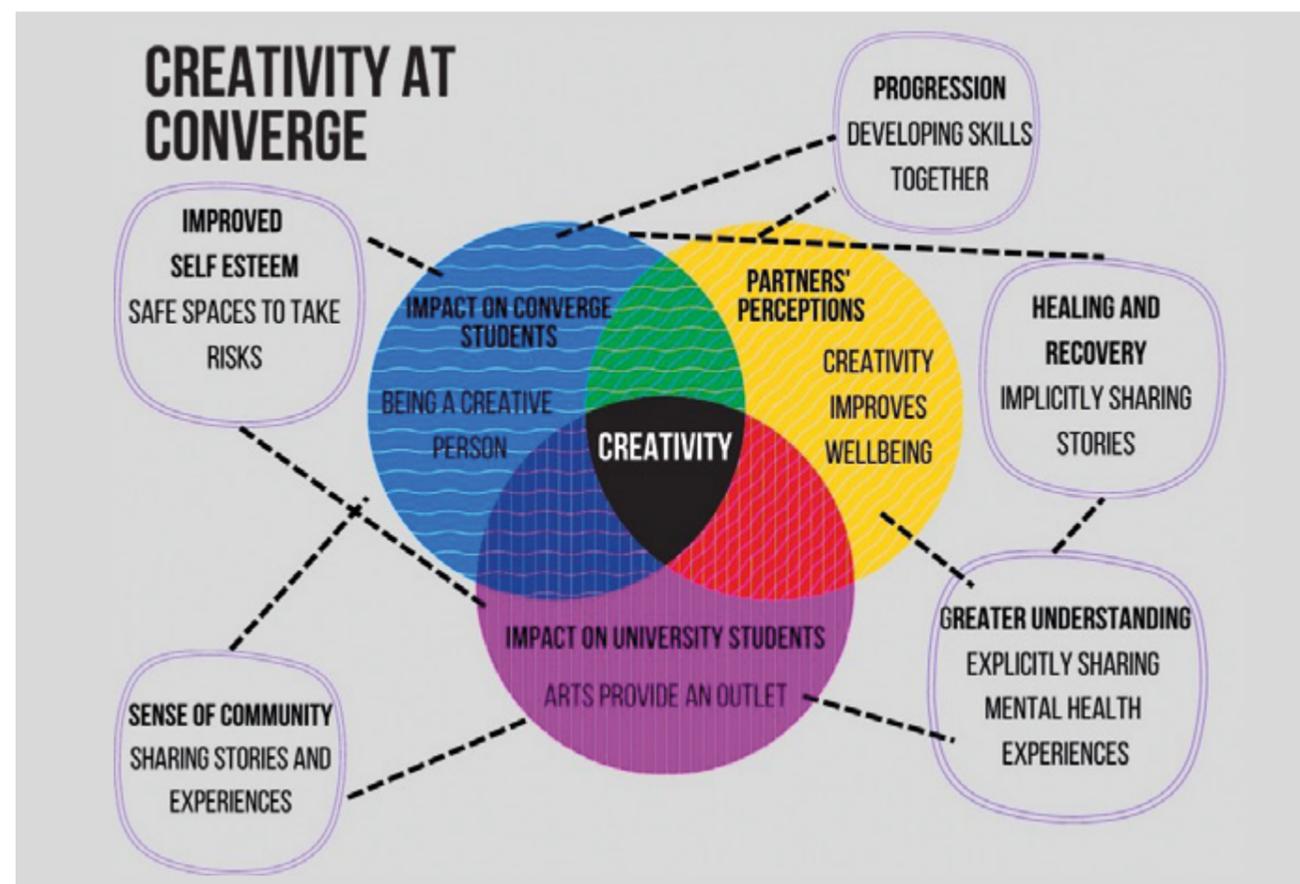


FIGURE 11: Participants’ perceptions of how Converge supports links between creativity and mental health



IMAGE 5: Storyteller artwork – 3D collage model (Past Converge student, Northumbria, PCSNU063). This Storyteller highlighted that, before Converge, they had felt like the figure in the prison at the back of the piece. As a result of their time with Converge, they had been able to walk outwards on the path to a different kind of view.

6.1.5 Community and wellbeing

Participants from all groups shared the reflection that the **community is at the core** of Converge’s impact on wellbeing. Some aspects of the Converge community were especially beneficial in relation to wellbeing:

- A relaxed, non-pressured, and accepting atmosphere;
- The creation of a safe space in which one can share and explore their emotions;
- No pressure to move to a different place or state; and
- No pressure to conform to a set timeline of progress.

‘Even just watching some of the Out of Character performances helped us understand each other and what we’ve been through and this realisation that everybody everywhere has experienced something really hard that has affected them in a mental health way, one way or another. And it can bring people really close together.’ (Discussion Group 4, 28th October 2021)

One point shared by both groups of students was that Converge is not always a serious place; in fact, **often it is about having fun and laughing with each other**. These moments are just as essential to improving wellbeing as the more typically mental health-focused interactions. Providing a meaningful distraction can help Converge students when they are struggling with their mental wellbeing. University students, through their experiences volunteering with Converge, were able to witness first-hand the positive effects Converge has on participants’ mental health.

FINDING: The Converge community was felt to be relaxed, non-pressured, and accepting – a ‘safe space’ for learning and exploration.

6.1.6 Enablers and barriers for personal progression and recovery

Both university and Converge students identified milestones of personal progression during their time with Converge. Many students from both groups shared how **getting outside of their comfort zone** with Converge led to **increased confidence and feelings of accomplishment**. In turn, university students feel a **sense of accomplishment** from the progress that they see Converge students making.

The progress that Converge students make does not necessarily have to be external to Converge; in fact, **progressing within Converge** (for example to different courses, different roles, or new subject areas) is seen as just as important for their sense of self. For a few Converge students, some of their most important personal development is tied to their increased **capacity to persevere with things even when they become difficult**.

‘That is a wee picture of a shovel. I’m telling myself to dig deep and it says there, “Do one thing. Just one thing.” Could be wash a dish or check your emails. So that was a gargantuan effort just to do one little thing. Which is often the case. It just says, in block letters, “Dig deeper. Reply to email.”’ (Current Converge student, Northumbria, CCSNU100, Storyteller, speaking within a group session about their autoethnographic work)

There is a strong sense amongst all respondents of the importance of recognising smaller achievements, with those **little steps being part of a longer journey**. Another key marker of personal progression for Converge students is the realisation that their **hopes and aspirations can become actionable, realistic goals**. Partners echo the idea that **Converge itself represents progression**, a sentiment shared by students from both groups. There is also an acknowledgement from partners that **progression means different things to different people**, which echoes what students reported.

'[It's not about saying] "Everybody has to be a Converge tutor", because not everyone wants to be a tutor, it's not what they want to do. Some people just want to come and do a six-week drama course and then that's it. And they'll just be in our lives for a short time and hopefully it's had a positive impact on them. But some people we would like to support to become tutors. Some people we would like to support to get employment and some people to volunteer somewhere else, or some people to enter into education themselves.' (Converge staff member, Northumbria University, UCNU196)

'A lot of university students just assume that Converge students want to go on to formal education afterwards. And they see it as a great pathway for getting people towards a university education. It has happened in the past with Converge students, but I personally wouldn't see it as being the marker of success. And I don't think that comes across from the vast majority of Converge students either. So I think it's interesting to look at how different groups of people each have different perceptions of what is a successful journey.' (Group analysis of external partner interview, Discussion Group 3, 14th October 2021)

FINDING: Both Converge students and university students feel that Converge helped them to progress personally, particularly by being encouraged to get outside of their comfort zone, which leads to increased confidence and feelings of accomplishment.

6.2 The COVID-19 pandemic

It is impossible to detail the influence that Converge has had on its participants without acknowledging the context in which this research has been carried out: the global COVID-19 pandemic, which began in early 2020. In general, the pandemic and the UK's ensuing lockdowns and restrictions across 2020-22 had a **negative effect on participant wellbeing**. The isolation borne of lockdowns contributed to a **deterioration in mental health**. For a much smaller group of people, the **lockdowns had a positive effect**, as it allowed them to access Converge from a comfortable and accessible environment in their own home. University students and partners alike share these contrasting views around the simultaneous positives and negatives of the lockdowns.

Given that prior to the pandemic all Converge courses were held in person on campus, moving to online or postal delivery (in the York programme only) had a large impact on the nature people's experiences of Converge. It is noted by all participant groups that **Converge courses are often well-suited to being adapted to online delivery**; Zoom in particular was a helpful alternative to in-person courses. However, online courses **did not fully allow for the same experiences** found in person.

'It made a massive difference to me, having a Converge class on a Tuesday evening. Being in lockdown, and because I live on my own, not really seeing anybody, and then seeing these friendly faces on a Tuesday. It was really good.' (Current university student volunteer, York St John, USYSJ076)

There are some **complexities to engaging in arts practice online**, especially when students are used to working together within a dedicated space. This relates to changes in how students can collaborate with each other, more limited access to resources and facilities, and a change in the experience of being together. There was a real sense in the community of **missing being part of Converge on the university campus**.

Some Converge students **did not have access to devices** that could allow them to access Zoom, or even to the Internet. Converge in York worked hard to help students overcome these barriers by **providing devices and mobile routers**, along with the support to set them up (Converge at Northumbria did not have the resources to offer this). Converge students valued this practical help as it **enabled those who were most isolated to forge connections**. There were also **postal courses** offered by some tutors. These were received especially well by students who struggled with Zoom but still wanted the engagement and enrichment of studying.

In general, it is felt that **Converge offered a 'lifeline' through the pandemic**. This was not just through online courses, but also through phone calls from staff and tutors providing regular check-ins. For some these were the only contact they had with the outside world. The Discovery Hub staff in York in particular provided regular phone calls and emails, and visited students when they were permitted to do so. This **contact was vital** for the many Converge students who live alone and do not have supportive family members or friends. Meanwhile, the Northumbria Coordinator (who was at that time the sole employee and had fewer resources to hand, as the programme was still in its transition from pilot stage) was able to use WhatsApp to keep in contact with Converge students.

At the time that this data was collected (2021), healthcare partners felt that the **full impact on people's mental health had not yet been revealed**. They spoke of the increase in referrals seen during the pandemic as 'eye-watering' and 'scary', extending the feelings of students from both groups who described the negative impact of lockdowns on their own mental health. Partners shared Converge students' perspective that **isolation has increased** as a result of the pandemic, and that the need for community and relationships is something with which Converge can help.

'The pandemic has definitely impacted upon people's mental health, and I think people are still saying that we haven't seen the extent of the backlog caused by reduced access to services yet.' (External healthcare partner, Northumbria, EPNU146)

Respondents also felt that the pandemic indicated that mental health services were **not 'fit for purpose'** prior to the pandemic. A **collaborative exploration of what is needed, and the lessons learnt from the pandemic**, would help the sector to move forward in a positive way (see 'Section 7.2: Community healthcare models and system change').

FINDING: The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns and restrictions across 2020-22 had a negative effect on participant wellbeing, though many commented that Converge had offered a 'lifeline' through the pandemic.

FINDING: Participants felt that Converge adapted quickly and well to online delivery in both locations, including offering IT loans and support in York, though felt that this did not fully allow for the same experiences found in person.

A quilt of faces reminiscent of
 The coloured patches on an eiderdown,
 Hand stitched by women through long gathered nights,
 Whose friendly chat danced, underneath the lights,
 Sharing their knowledge, passing on the tricks
 Their mothers and grandmothers handed down,
 Along the lanes of their assorted lives.
 This way to hold the sheet to keep it tight.
 That middle finger's best to thimble up
 And push the steel sharp threaded needle through,
 Use this, the silk, that rougher twine won't do.
 As if by instinct, sudden, they converge
 Bring biscuits, herbal teas, a letter sent
 From some fond son or daughter to be read
 In this warm parlour, with their bags of scraps,
 Revealing by their choices, who they are.
 There's one who brought all fiery, passionate reds,
 She's full to brimming with the sap of life;
 Another, soft as downy blues of dawn,
 Enraptured by her fate, how mother, wife,
 That burst upon her quickly, made her whole?
 A third who always crouches by the door
 So she can take off, bird shy, on a breeze,
 Like pheasant startled from a roadside hedge,
 Sewing motifs of wings in black on white;

The ordered one whose patches are precise
 Her sewing box aligned, meticulous;
 And one who leads them all with quiet calm,
 Matching their patchwork squares so skilfully,
 Knowing where best to place the fractured blocks,
 Which clashing contrast works, which mixtures blend,
 In herring bone or hexagon bright walls
 Of colours binding to their rainbowed end.
 Much like our meeting, gathered in short rows
 Of threes and fives, prepared to open up
 Some aspect of our lives to strangers whom
 We've never met before.
 This blanket blank
 White canvas that is Zoom, has brought us here,
 To share our thoughts, our interests, our fears,
 Without reproach or judgement, passing on
 Our knowledge and our life's experience;
 All genders, races, ages, mixed as one,
 Are smiling, tacked together on this trail,
 That leads us, who knows where on this bright day?
 'You must come too!' I hear their voices say:
 An invitation that I can't resist,
 'We'll find ourselves, each other, on the way.
 And thread our pieces to a counterpane.'

POEM 3: Storyteller poetry – 'Impressions on my first Zoom meeting' (Anthony Scully, Current Converge student, Northumbria, CCSNU082; please note that this Storyteller has chosen to waive anonymity)

7. Organisational culture, partnerships, and community models

7.1 Converge's organisational practice

7.1.1 Converge staff and support systems

Participants across all groups share a feeling that the **Converge team in both York and Newcastle is warm, approachable, and supportive** (see 'Section 8.1.1: Administration and communication' for specific suggestions about the future development of Converge processes). University students and external partners comment on **the balance struck between professionalism and personal connection**.

Converge students and external partners in York also often reference the support provided by the Discovery Hub – the student support team comprising occupational therapists and peer support workers (now called Learning and Access Workers). As explored in 'Section 6.2: The COVID-19 pandemic', there is a shared sense amongst Converge students that the **Discovery Hub offers a 'lifeline'** (particularly during the pandemic) that differs markedly from core NHS services, both in terms of the **positive, reciprocal relationship tone and the focus on future opportunities**. Some Converge students comment on how essential the **practical support from Learning and Access Workers** has been, for example around benefits.

There is an additional peer support structure for Converge students in York in the form of voluntary Ambassadors. While the data collected from this group was limited, due to COVID limiting attendance to our scheduled workshop, feedback suggests that the **Ambassador role is helpful in modelling the balance between self-managing one's own mental health with various forms of progression**.

In particular, university students from Pacific University, Oregon – who (pandemic aside) visit the Converge York project every summer – find that working closely with Ambassadors 'really helps to kind of debunk a lot of the myths around mental illness and really helps the students to get a really practical experience of what life is living with mental illness' (Converge staff member, Converge Oregon, EPYSJ139). One Ambassador, however, thought that the **role needed to be clearer** and that the opportunities offered by this work could be **spread out more equally amongst the wider Converge student community**.

At Northumbria, discussions around the commitment and warmth of the core university staff members involved in the programme are often accompanied by a comment about the need for increased investment in delivery resource (see 'Section 7.1.4: Institutional support and leadership' and 'Section 8.2.1: Strategic management and planning').

FINDING: Both the core Converge office teams in York and Newcastle, and the Discovery Hub team in York, are seen as warm, approachable, and supportive. The York-based voluntary Ambassador role was also seen as beneficial but in need of some development.

When asked to define what a researcher is, CERT members' responses focused primarily on the **pursuit of knowledge**. In terms of the impact of being a CERT member on their identity and skills development, three out of eight CERT members say that they 'felt like a researcher', while five said they 'sometimes feel like a researcher'; all eight say that they felt they got enough support to use and develop their research skills either all, most or some of the time. **Examples of areas of support that members feel could be improved** were around the development of project leadership skills, training in areas such as Mental Health First Aid, clarity around roles within standalone projects, support for publication skills, support for new members, utilising York St John support structures more (such as the YSJ Learn site), and visibility amongst other Converge students.

While members report being happy to be part of CERT, several have thought about leaving at one time or another: reasons include the pressure of other commitments, confusion over which projects were open to them, and fluctuations in team dynamic and structure (potentially due in part to the pandemic). These suggestions for improvements could be further explored to make sure that member support and recruitment is as consistent as possible.

'These workshop questions are bringing to light all the different areas [of CERT] that sometimes you don't really think about when you're doing it... The way we're getting and developing research skills. All the different aspects.' (Workshop attendee, CERT workshop, 14th December 2021)

CERT respondents focus strongly on the **additional value offered by lived experience researchers**, stating that 'we can be more subjective than a staff team when talking to people with mental health problems from the perspective of our own experience' (anonymous workshop attendee, CERT workshop, 14th December 2021).

When asked to elaborate on why lived experience of mental health challenges is important to CERT in practical terms, respondents offered a range of reasons:

- **Shared insight and empathy** facilitates the process of gathering and exploring data;
- Shared experiences and understandings **build rapport and put people at ease**;
- Lived experience researchers are not limited to using academic descriptions and can therefore work from **'a human point of view'**;
- Beyond CERT, one respondent suggested that co-productive approaches with lived experience researchers **could help Converge to identify potential audiences** who are not currently coming forward.

CERT members suggest that there is sometimes a **potential tension between their primary goals** of carrying out high-quality research on the one hand – which requires a certain amount of coordination time and a focus on methodological practice – and **the aim to be as inclusive as possible**, which in turn requires a flexible approach to people's interests, skillsets and availability (whether for health or other reasons). One respondent stressed the need for **a balance between flexibility and order**, stating that 'I think the ad hoc-ness can be good and difficult as well. I don't think it's purely a negative, personally... we're open to flexibility and people coming in and sort of finding themselves. You know, not necessarily knowing in advance what it is they want to do' (Workshop attendee, CERT workshop, 14th December 2021). CERT members felt that **regular group discussions about the direction of CERT** would be beneficial.

The **question of what 'counts' as lived experience of mental health challenges**, and thus what the membership criteria should consist of – particularly in terms of university student involvement – was also one that came up several times. Generally, though, members stress that university student involvement helps both groups to 'learn from each other', reinforcing **Converge's wider message of 'no us and them'**, although the pressure of university students' timetables can sometimes be a barrier to collaboration.

One potential barrier to involvement with CERT is the issue of payment for research work. While respondents recognise the **importance of being offered payment**, as it recognises the value of the work and the skills required, several also express relief that there is an option to do it voluntarily. The primary reason for this is **the difficulty of reconciling income with benefits claims**; one also said that they were 'a bit embarrassed' to be paid, and another that it **raises the expectations around the work to be delivered**, and therefore feels like something of a dilemma. See 'Section 9.3: Lessons around coproduction methodology for wider application' for further discussion on this.

'I've seen CERT grow, and I just think it's an exceptional tool that we have within the University itself. I only wish that there was more of these around the country. I think it's about having a plan about our future involvement of which way we're going to go.' (Workshop attendee, CERT workshop, 14th December 2021)

Perceptions of coproduction approaches at an institutional and national level

Beyond Converge and its host departments, **both universities' wider understanding of and practical support for coproduction is perceived as patchy**. For example, one university staff member reports that the Finance and HR Departments at Northumbria University initially found the concept and practice of paying peer researchers as risky and untested, though this improved over time. Equally, some 'experts by experience' involved in student recruitment interviews at Northumbria felt that their presence was a little tokenistic, while others felt that they were treated equally. While **York St John is now perceived to be broadly supportive of peer collaboration** in the form of HR and finance structures, some researcher-respondents who took part in the autoethnographic strand of the Converge evaluation project reported **finding these processes especially burdensome and confusing** (see 'Section 9.1: Impact of CEP's coproduction methods on participants' for more discussion on this point). While university processes can be difficult for anyone to access, 'experts by experience' may be coming from the context of having missed out on educational or professional opportunities due to their illness history, and may need additional support.

At the macro level, while **the data shows broad support for coproductive approaches across all participant groups**, a few respondents – primarily university staff and external partners – express concerns about the **potential knock-on effect on identity of the 'peer' label**. The risk that someone may feel cemented in the role of 'service user', and the potential exclusion of people who have in-depth but not first-hand lived experience in the area (as a carer, for example), is something for Converge to bear in mind when further developing its own coproduction approaches.

Although this issue did not arise in the CERT workshop or wider data set, the Converge evaluation project has also shown up a gap in funding mechanisms for new, self-led CERT projects, as they would not be clearly funded by particular clients in the way that commissioned projects have been to date. Converge and the wider university should look into **fundraising opportunities for small member-led projects** that would both support CERT members' own skills development and offer contributions to wider practice and knowledge around coproduction approaches.

FINDING: CERT (at Converge York) is seen as an impactful model for peer research leadership and involvement. However, beyond Converge and its host departments in both locations, both universities' wider understanding of, and practical support for, coproduction was perceived as patchy.

RECOMMENDATION: Internal university support teams, especially HR and Finance, to look at making contracting and payment less burdensome for peer researchers.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge should explore further how to make its member support and skills development offer even stronger and more consistent.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge to examine fundraising opportunities for standalone research projects led by CERT members that would help to develop broader coproduction methodologies and knowledge.

RECOMMENDATION: CERT to hold regular group discussions on its own direction of travel in order to make sure that members are happy with how it is developing.

7.1.4 Institutional support and leadership

'I think we've got to be careful of projects where people see it embodied in a single leader. You know, when I think of Converge [York] I need to think of four people, not one person. I think what we would need is a more empowering kind of collective leadership, and to also make sure it's working with the university structures.' (Senior manager, York St John, UCYSJ192)

York St John is seen as providing the **right balance of support and autonomy** for Converge in York. Meanwhile, while there is a consistent sense of appreciation for the quality and commitment of the staff currently involved in Converge at Northumbria University, there is a widely-shared perception both internally and externally of the need **to build increased capacity at an institutional level** – within the context of Converge NU still being in the early stages of development and growth. Despite this, one respondent did suggest that the institution has 'put their money where their mouth is' by funding the programme in line with their own strategic priorities around community engagement (External healthcare sector partner, Newcastle, EPNU146).

However, in both locations there is a shared concern about the **risk of losing momentum if there is any change of key staff** in either location, including external partners within the Councils and NHS Trusts. One external partner remarked that the quality and sustainability of even established partnerships depends directly on the leadership arrangements in place at any one time. See 'Section 8.2: Long-term development and perceived enablers/barriers' for a more in-depth discussion of recommendations related to this topic, including opportunities to align Converge York with the York St John Institute for Social Justice.

FINDING: York St John is seen as providing the right balance of support and autonomy for Converge in York. Converge at Northumbria University was widely perceived both internally and externally to need to build capacity at an institutional level; this perception often emerged within the wider context of the programme still being in an early development stage and thus not directly comparable with Converge in York.

7.1.5 Impact on universities' organisational cultures

The data shows a shared perception amongst Converge students, university staff, and external partners that **Converge has changed York St John University culture for the better**, making it more open across strategic leadership, teaching practice and campus access (although a small number of staff note that Converge has sometimes had to defend its work from more bureaucratic pressures). As a model, one York-based respondent perceives that **it had made it easier to secure support for other outreach work (such as the Prison Partnership Project)**, and also pointed to the frequent use of Converge as a case study in university-wide funding bids.

At Northumbria, **Converge has had an impact at a localised level on the community and teaching practices of both the Design department and individual lecturers**, with people citing its positivity, 'fresh' approach, and impact on perceptions of mental health. However, in one Converge NU Steering Group member's words, it is potentially still seen as potentially a little 'strange and different' elsewhere in the university (EPNU138). As Converge is based on the City Campus, it is not seen as having changed the culture of nursing, social work, and occupational therapy courses at the Coach Lane campus, though staff expressed an interest in this potential development.

Though the sample size was small, **respondents based at Pacific University, Oregon, did not feel that Converge there had yet impacted upon the broader university**, only on the Occupational Therapy programmes, potentially because it is still largely a summertime programme.

FINDING: There is a shared perception that Converge has changed York St John University culture for the better. At Northumbria University, Converge is seen to have had an impact at a localised departmental level, but has work to do across the university.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge NU to work more closely with health-related courses on the Coach Lane campus

7.2 Community healthcare models and system change

7.2.1 Perceptions of current health, social care, and community sector landscapes

Perceptions of the mental health sector landscape

The mainstream mental health and social care sector is perceived across many participant groups – particularly Converge students, Converge staff and external partners from Council employees to community organisation leaders – **as stretched, under-funded, beset by a huge increase in referrals and staff workload pressures, too biomedical in focus, and overly burdened by monitoring activity**.

The impact of this is perceived by Converge students as making NHS delivery more clinical and less personal than they would like, meaning that **they feel they have reduced agency and little longer-term support**. This is despite many people emphasising that **NHS employees are often dedicated individuals who want the best for their patients**. One respondent commented that there are mixed messages within the NHS itself as to whether individual service users, commissioners or the Care Quality Commission are its primary clients.

In terms of external organisations that are funded by Trusts or CCGs themselves, there is a perception that **the regularity of reporting and re-contracting required (often an annual exercise) is a burden that impacts on the ability to focus on service delivery**. This is despite the recognition that the NHS does need to understand what a service is achieving for its users, and the impact upon their mental health. The move to Integrated Care Systems (see 'Section 2.2: Policy contexts' and 'Section 8.3: Policy positioning') is seen as **a potential opportunity for smaller organisations which have never been able to collaborate with NHS Trusts**, though there is some scepticism around whether this will happen in reality. There is also a **wider perception that NHS funding structures privilege physical health issues** and underplay the proportion of the population who need mental health support or treatment.

Across the board, both NHS and external partner respondents often voice **the need for widespread system change**, with many sharing a sense that statutory money would be best spent on early intervention while retaining secondary care for the most critically ill people (see 'Section 7.2: Community healthcare models and system change').

Perceptions of the community sector landscape

'Stop making services compete for commissioning, don't make organisations compete for money – bring us together, commission us together.' (External community partner, York, EPYSJ135)

Participants were equally downhearted about the funding landscape across the **community sector, which is seen as limiting activity and collaboration. While there is a perception that community services are valued within the mental health service reform agenda**, many feel that funding does not follow, particularly in the arts. The 'closed door' nature of decision-making processes and the reliance on a limited number of information sources are also seen as **barriers to sector development**. While community organisations understand the need to add (and demonstrate) **additional value for money** to their core activities, for example by raising awareness amongst new clients, they also find it **hard to reach and serve the most vulnerable groups**.

Many respondents pointed to the **differences between various actors in the sector**, in both positive and negative ways. For example, community organisations often pointed out that they provide something that funders and statutory bodies couldn't otherwise achieve, while partners within statutory bodies often report that smaller organisations do not always recognise the more progressive work being undertaken. Both these groups expressed **an appetite for contractual relationships based on open dialogue and trust**, avoiding more hierarchical structures where possible.

Perceptions of Converge's funding landscape

'When you see what's come out of funding Converge, it has to strengthen people's faith in just giving some control over. I think it's helped the statutory providers to understand that they are not necessarily the ones who can do everything, and there are others who can support that, and support it well.' (External healthcare partner, Northumbria, EPNU146)

In terms of Converge's own funding arrangements, there is a shared sense that it delivers **excellent return on investment**, though respondents pointed to **the need to demonstrate this impact** more directly (see 'Section 8.2.1: Strategic management and planning'). One respondent noted that Converge's **'unique selling point' in community transformation** may get lost as sector-wide delivery increases in this area, so it must demonstrate why it should receive ongoing investment over newer offers.

One existing funder of the programme pointed to the **Discovery Hub's provision of individual support for Converge students as the most attractive element**, with university student progression seen as a side benefit rather than a core aim. A Northumbria University colleague also commented that the local CCG, the first funder of Converge in Newcastle, did not initially seem to be as interested in the impact upon students as upon mental health service users, though this has since changed.

Indeed, the university-based element of the programme – a core part of its model – seems to lead to tensions for funders and partners, with some perceiving its **university status as a barrier to funding (due to their large reserves) and others seeing Converge as unfair competition within the community sector** due to their use of the university's internal support and existing status. Internally, Converge's ability to fundraise is seen as an asset, though one that carries **lower status than mainstream research funding**.

FINDING: While respondents have mixed feelings about current health, social care, and community sector landscapes, feeling that funding constraints and competitive practices decreased the ability to collaborate, there is a shared feeling that Converge delivers excellent return on investment, though needs to demonstrate this impact more directly.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge to articulate both its impact and its model of 'convergence', whereby Converge students and university students benefit equally and support one another, more clearly to funders.

7.2.2 Local collaboration and competition

Perceptions of wider sectoral collaboration in York and Newcastle

'It's been heartening to encounter others in Newcastle who have some similarities in outlook in terms of putting collaboration first, trying to get away from rigidity, trying to blur those boundaries that are there out of custom as opposed to necessity.' (External community partner, Newcastle, EPNU144)

'Across York in particular, there is some division and almost a sense of competition that prevents a lot of good joint working between the voluntary and community sector and the statutory sector and local government.' (External local government partner, York, EPYSJ118)

External partners and university colleagues alike agree that **collaboration is vital to the community sector's success, and that personal relationships are key**. There are, however, mixed views on the level and quality of collaboration across both York and Newcastle.

In York, while the majority of respondents feel that **cross-sector collaboration and signposting, particularly between statutory and community organisations, was strong, with shared asset-based approaches**, a small number see it as **overly competitive and as having become fragmented** due to the COVID-19 pandemic. A higher proportion of Newcastle-based respondents feel that many organisations there are **happy to collaborate and cross-refer**, though one person remarked that a small number are **more proprietary about 'their' clients**. In both cities, there is a clear desire to group together for smoother bidding processes.

Perceptions of collaborating with Converge

'Converge are genuinely a real joy to work with. They offer great stuff and opportunities to people that we're working alongside, individuals and citizens in our communities. You know, it feels like there's kind of endless possibilities around projects that we can work on together around those shared values, which feels really exciting.' (External local government partner, York, EPYSJ118)

External partners share a sense that they have **good relationships** with Converge, that it is **easy and fulfilling to collaborate with**, and that it is open to **new ideas**. In both York and Newcastle, many community organisations signpost to Converge, and vice versa.

In York, knowledge of Converge within the statutory sector (particularly the Council) is seen as **strong in some areas and patchy in others**. One respondent stated that Converge needed to have greater visibility across the local Health and Wellbeing Board, with another suggesting that it could be a case study at NHS England level. Knowledge of Converge on the ground within the TEWV NHS Trust (for example, at Community Mental Health Team level) was seen as relatively low, and **referral pathways were not always seen as clear or obvious** (see below).

Within the wider community and healthcare sectors in Newcastle, there is agreement that collaboration with **Converge Northumbria was fruitful, though its visibility could be increased**, particularly within the CNTW NHS Trust. While the third sector has greater awareness and there are **good cross-referral links** in place, this tends to be through word of mouth rather than anything more formalised.

Referral into Converge

Within York, Converge students are referred into the service by Community Mental Health Teams (CMHTs), Local Area Coordinators (LACs) and third sector organisations, or self-refer – often after hearing about it from other Converge students. Both CMHT and LAC staff alike feel that awareness on the ground could be better, and that clearer eligibility criteria would help with this. Respondents also noted that it can be hard to convince those people who struggle the most, and that clearer communication about the setting and the offer would help (see 'Section 4.3.4: Converge student recruitment, accessibility, and representation').

The Discovery Hub, Converge's NHS-funded internal support service in York, is seen across the board as **highly beneficial**. Meanwhile, Discovery Hub staff members are keen not to be seen as a discharge option per se, but instead as **part of a broad offer of support for individuals to access as needed**. They commented that **closer relationships with referring staff** could help their own roles and would facilitate a smoother delivery for Converge students. Ideas such as joint inductions, both for new staff members and people accessing the service, are in line with national-level calls for the voluntary sector to be included in NHS training as part of a wider drive towards collaboration skills and practice (Department of Health and Social Care, 2022, Section 1).

In Newcastle, referral takes place more often from **third sector organisations**. One community-based referring organisation thought that a more formalised two-way referral mechanism would be helpful. **Referrals from within the CNTW NHS Trust are rare**.

Transitions between mental health and community services

'What you're trying to do is help somebody stabilise, and emotional regulation and stabilisation comes from having an identity, feeling involved, feeling included and not under the parent of a specialist service. I think Converge needs to continue to do what they're doing, not working with diagnostic-led approaches but actually just working with people with whatever needs and curiosities they have, because that will help them stabilise whatever is going on in their lives.' (External NHS partner/funder, York, EPYSJ214)

As explored in 'Section 4.3.1: Belonging: the Converge community', Converge students report that Converge offers them a **safe, non-clinical, non-stigmatising space** where their history or treatment is not at the forefront of the experience. This is in direct opposition to in-patient services which, though often seen as a necessary part of the broader offer, are perceived to impact upon people's sense of **identity, purpose, and potential futures**.

Where it was known about, **Converge is perceived to directly support successful transitions in and out of secondary care**, both in terms of post-discharge support (especially with the new offer at Foss Park Hospital in York) and as a 'drop-in, drop-out' service for people to access as needed. Many Converge students continue to **use mental health services in parallel with their Converge courses**, with several commenting that mental health staff from other agencies had noticed their progress following their enrolment with Converge. In some cases, this even led directly to their discharge from mainstream services.

Converge students noted especially strongly that **Converge staff are often key** in helping them transition out of inpatient admission. More widely, partners and Converge staff alike emphasise the wider importance of **joined-up, wrap-around community support to a safe and successful discharge** from in-patient services, including the need for a range of types of support such as debt counselling.

FINDING: Converge is seen as offering high-quality collaboration opportunities in both York and Newcastle, though its visibility is patchy.

FINDING: Referral routes in both York and Newcastle are often ad hoc, with greater NHS involvement in York and a higher number of third sector referrals in Newcastle.

FINDING: Converge is perceived to directly support successful transitions in and out of secondary care.

RECOMMENDATION: Raise awareness of the Converge model throughout local and national healthcare and community agenda, for example by liaising with Health and Wellbeing Boards (or equivalent) and by lobbying NHS England to include it as a case study in key publications.

RECOMMENDATION: Carrying out awareness-raising and relationship development work across the NHS and community sectors, including clearer communication around eligibility criteria and joint induction meetings/shared workflow with core NHS staff, would help referral routes into Converge in both locations.

RECOMMENDATION: Increased joined-up working across secondary care and community organisations is key to further supporting individual transitions.

7.2.3 The call for system change

A strong finding across the data is **the perceived need for widespread system change within the mental health and social care sector**. Although this is articulated in different ways – with Converge students talking about their feelings of loss of agency under NHS care or falling through the gaps in services, and external partners focusing on what they see as unequal distribution of funds for community-based early intervention as opposed to other treatment routes – this sense is shared strongly across participant groups. A small number of people pointed out that they were not necessarily suggesting the wholesale transfer of funds into the community sector, which would be 'naïve', but that there is a **need to 'turn the oil tanker' in nuanced ways**.

In general, **the third sector was seen as having a crucial role to play in this task**. This includes both the Converge model and linked initiatives within statutory services, such as the Local Area Coordination model. Short-term suggestions included the **community sector working with NHS staff to take them out of the daily workload and to see the wider delivery picture**, though this was seen as a very difficult task in the face of tight time resource and widespread burnout.

The **increased use of coproduction approaches at a national level was also seen as vital**, though many thought that current peer involvement practice is often consultative – a form of 'lip service' – rather than truly collaborative, and that 'real' opportunities to foreground service users' voices are needed. Large, daunting meetings, a 'closed door' approach to final decision-making, and the tight timescales for NHS-led bidding are all seen as **barriers to coproduction approaches**. Converge's Discovery Hub, in which peer Learning and Access Workers are given equal rights and responsibilities with guidance from a clinical member of staff, is one example of a workable model that can help to shift these tensions.

'People's lived experience isn't built in enough across the city. You're always trying to do more and more [coproduction] really. I think our heart is in the right place, but I still think there's a lot more to be done to make sure that that voice is driving everything. And I think there will be elements of the system which are more receptive to hearing that than others. So that's a work in progress as well.' (External local government partner, York, EPYSJ136)

FINDING: There is a strong shared desire for widespread system change throughout the mental health and social care sector, with more resource allocated to early intervention models.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge and partners to build in a greater level of national-level case-making for community-based delivery models.

8. The future of Converge

8.1 Short-term improvements

8.1.1 Administration and communication

'I think sometimes people aren't in the best place, either through the medication they're on or through the place that they're actually in there and then, to read loads of information. So how can we all ensure that that information is clear? I think it's that personal connection.' (Current Converge tutor, York St John, UCYSJ127)

The Converge administration team at York St John was praised by all participant groups, with their **friendliness, readiness to help, and professionalism** stressed in particular. The same was true of Converge Northumbria, though many external partners in particular frame this in the context of its **early development stage and limited resources** which can act as a constraint; one interviewee said that the NU Coordinator 'does extremely well to do as much of all of those things as they do within the available resources and conditions' (external partner, Northumbria, EPNU138).

Converge students report that **clearer information and advice on their first experiences with Converge** would be helpful, including help with how to get to campus, clear inductions, and a continuation of the buddying system. One person stressed the need for extra awareness of people's **individual needs or anxieties** (for example, whether there will be writing involved and at what level). Converge students also requested clearer guidance on how they could **access other university facilities**.

Some York-based Converge students did note that the communication they received did not always feel consistent, which some suggested was down to the routes by which news was distributed. There are **mixed views on the enrolment procedure**, with some seeing it as relatively straightforward (Converge students in particular reported that it gave them a **sense of agency**) and others feeling that its length acts as a barrier to inclusion. A small number of Converge students also requested **clearer information on next steps** on from Converge, should they want to pursue a course at a higher level, while a university colleague suggested that Converge students could be more involved in **designing courses**.

Internally at York St John, colleagues had **several specific suggestions in relation to the daily running** of Converge. These included:

- The idea of a **regular enrolment session** to welcome Converge students and to reinforce what is expected of them, such as letting tutors know if they can't come;
- Making it easier for **tutors to attend training and networking** opportunities, including paying them for all wraparound activities;
- Offering **more specialised training** for tutors and Discovery Hub staff, such as how to support people with autism, active listening, etc;
- A stronger insistence on **Converge tutors adhering to enrolment procedures**, so that all participants have access to the same support and information, and so that the administration team know who is on campus when; and
- Clearer shared understandings of what is and is not within the scope of **the administration team's role**, particularly at busy times of the year.

FINDING: The Converge administration teams in both locations were praised for their friendliness, readiness to help, and professionalism, though respondents pointed to reduced resources in Northumbria which acted as a constraint to more widespread activity.

RECOMMENDATION: Review enrolment forms, university inductions and individual support for new Converge students.

RECOMMENDATION: Create opportunities for Converge students to get involved in course development.

RECOMMENDATION: Consider a more structured staff training programme.

RECOMMENDATION: Clarify expectations amongst tutors around administrative support.

8.1.2 Data, systems, and tracking

External partners and funders, along with senior university staff, several times raised the issue of the need for thorough systems to track **enrolment figures and participant data**, particularly in relation to the collection of demographic data related to both Converge students and university students (see 'Section 4.2.4: University student recruitment, accessibility and representation' and 'Section 4.3.4: Converge student recruitment, accessibility, and representation'). Those in strategic roles were especially likely to point to the benefit this would bring to an analysis of who Converge currently serves, ensuring that the most vulnerable audiences were catered for.

While we also recommend some planning work around increased data tracking, we recommend that the Converge team remain conscious of the **potential tension this poses to the Converge model**, considering how much importance participants place upon feeling like a student rather than a patient. On the other hand, university students are themselves subject to a high amount of data collection, though this is largely for government-supported courses of one year and above which fall under the Office for Fair Access regulations.

RECOMMENDATION: Streamline enrolment and participant data tracking, for example by investing in a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. This would enable quick and easy analysis of participation and retention by course, term, and demographic group, helping Converge to ensure that its services are reaching its key audiences while still retaining a person-centred approach.

8.1.3 The hybrid campus/digital offer

As discussed in 'Section 6.2: The COVID-19 pandemic', participants across all groups report a **high level of satisfaction with the new digital Converge offer**, 'Converge Connected', which was first developed during the pandemic (this is now available to Converge students in both York and Newcastle). In particular, Converge students and external partners stated a **preference for this hybrid option to be maintained and/or grown** in the future.

All groups stressed that, although the **speed of adaptation** was hugely appreciated, and that **online options enabled access** for people who otherwise wouldn't have been able to join courses, they did not feel that online delivery could ever replace **face-to-face teaching**. There are also simultaneous concerns about digital access excluding those without the necessary skills or income in place, and those with particular support needs.

As an extension of this hybrid offer, some Converge students also felt that they would benefit from a **more structured social element**, such as the equivalent of a Converge students' union with regular activities and meet-ups.

FINDING: The data shows a high level of satisfaction with the new online and postal Converge offer ('Converge Connected') developed during the pandemic.

RECOMMENDATION: Maintain and grow the current hybrid offer, but not at the expense of face-to-face delivery.

RECOMMENDATION: Consider the feasibility of offering a more structured social programme for Converge students.

8.1.4 Partnership development

'I think it's really, really important that Converge looks outward, beyond the university. Because it's to do with linking to the city as well as listening to it, because then somebody who has a mental health problem thinks "Oh, I'd like to do that". The university is only one part of the whole community, so perhaps [Converge should] become more of that. As well as the educational links it's got community links, like the archaeology project and library, and eventually it can build out to have contacts in all areas of the community.' (Group analysis of an external partner interview, Discussion Group 3, 14th October 2021)

In the immediate to middle term, external partners in particular see the maintenance of strong partnerships in both York and Newcastle as key to the sustainability of Converge. Alongside this, partners in both locations see **strategic and succession planning** as a crucial next step (see 'Section 8.2.1: Strategic management and planning'). This is particularly the case in relation to **Converge Northumbria's financial capacity, senior-level university buy-in, and capacity for growth**, all of which were seen as posing simultaneous opportunities and risks by existing partners.

NHS colleagues working on the ground in York requested targeted work to **raise the profile of Converge amongst Community Mental Health Teams and to embed internal buy-in**, for example by strengthening one-on-one relationships between CMHT staff and the Discovery Hub, bringing the Communitas Choir to CMHT offices, and providing more regular updates as to what kind of referral or involvement opportunities were available. They noted that there is widespread staff burnout throughout the health and social care sector, and that it can be hard to effect system change from that basis. Some people even suggested that, where time allows, both partners could offer **mutual shadowing opportunities**, or that Converge could hold **specific arts workshops for NHS staff as attendees in their own right**.

Other concrete suggestions for partnership development work in York included:

- Working more closely with York University, which could support Converge's research activity, collaborative fundraising power, access to resources (including spaces, postgraduate volunteers, and medical students); and
- Expanding existing partnerships with York CVS and MIND.

In Newcastle, while the NHS partnership is at a much earlier stage, there is **a clear appetite both internally and externally to progress this** (and, since this research was carried out, the Newcastle and Gateshead CCG and the North East and North Cumbria ICS have together put in place approximately £50,000 of funding for Converge Northumbria over 2022-23). Ideas included holding a Converge showcase with key public health and mental health colleagues. The **voluntary and third sector in Newcastle** also expressed an interest in integrating offers, schedules, and referral mechanisms, working on joint fundraising activity, and sharing resources, spaces, and training.

Finally, a small number of internal colleagues noted the benefits of Converge York and Converge Northumbria sharing best practice more regularly at the strategic level, for example by holding group visits for the Northumbria Steering Group to York St John, and vice versa.

RECOMMENDATION: Carry out targeted awareness-raising and partnership development work between North Yorkshire-based CMHTs and the Converge Discovery Hub in York.

RECOMMENDATION: Further develop the Northumbria/NHS, ICS, and CCG partnerships, including considering a showcase event.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge Northumbria to consider integrating offers with the third sector where feasible.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge York and Converge Northumbria to share best practice more regularly.

8.2 Long-term development and perceived enablers/barriers

8.2.1 Strategic management and planning

Leadership and succession planning

'You need somebody who is able to speak two languages to the health service and to the academic world and to be plausible in each, because the key characteristic of Converge is that it escapes those two categories but still works with them.' (Converge staff member, York St John, UCYSJ191)

One of the most strongly emphasised recommendations for the future of Converge from external partners and university colleagues relates to leadership and succession planning. This was the case in both York and Newcastle.

In particular, many respondents in strategic roles noted the need for clear, early, consultative planning over **future leadership arrangements at Converge York**. This relates to the possible retirement of the founder and Director in the coming years. Respondents close to the day-to-day delivery of Converge in York noted that the university would need to take into account the **varied demands of the role** on the ground and the need for **a lengthy period of shadowing** for any senior appointments to Converge in the future, as well as the need to retain Converge's focus on delivery and to **avoid becoming purely a route to research activity**. Some respondents also raised the possibility of **collective leadership** as an answer to this need, including closer working at a structural level with the **Institute for Social Justice**.

The picture at Converge Northumbria, which is earlier on in its development, differs. The programme has run for five years (as opposed to 13 years at York St John) and only received funding for a part-time coordinator in 2018, so it is naturally at an earlier stage of development. It was felt strongly both internally and externally that **the work of both the current coordinator and the senior managers involved was high quality and showed clear commitment and dedication**.

However, many external partners in particular are of the view that **the programme lacks enough dedicated time and resource** at a senior level. Several respondents also noted that resource has been so tight in recent years that it has been **hard to find the time for strategic planning**. Since this research was undertaken, Converge Northumbria has secured more stable funding sources, which should hopefully reduce this barrier. However, the data points to a strong perception that **Converge Northumbria needs to find a way to invest in its existing strengths and to grow its capacity** for both delivery and development work, while not losing the quality and welcoming nature of the current offer. Ideas included:

- Embedding **more support for ongoing progression** for Converge students and university students alike, including **helping them into employment** (including Converge tutoring);
- Piloting external **arts and mental health placements** for university students (for example, with partners such as North Tyneside Arts Studio – something in which NTAS also expressed an interest); and
- One person expressed a desire for Converge Northumbria to **set up versions of the Converge Evaluation and Research Team** and the **Discovery Hub support team** within their programme, with the caveat that they would need to be location-specific and led by local need.

In both locations, as well as for spin-out projects such as the Out of Character theatre company in York, the presence of **diverse, active Boards or Steering Groups** – to include people with lived experience and networkers who can act as local champions and advocates to funders and the NHS – is seen as key.

University support and collaboration

The data indicates a strong shared perception that, while support for Converge is currently present within both universities (albeit at different levels), any programme such as this can be **vulnerable to changes in strategy and senior management**. There was a concern that being situated largely outside of a School system (as at York St John, though it is nominally part of the School of Arts) made Converge vulnerable to these potential changes, although several respondents also stressed cross-university working as a strength of the model.

Senior university colleagues in particular stated a need to position (and raise awareness of) Converge in both locations as **critical to the universities' strategic aims** of social justice, community engagement, and work-based learning. At York St John, one person suggested making the case to **internal structures such as Academic Board** more consistently and strategically to support this positioning work.

At the delivery level, people also suggested:

- Formalising or extending **university student involvement**, and framing this explicitly in relation to work-based learning, progression, and employability outcomes (see 'Section 4.2: University student role and recruitment' and 'Section 5.4: Progression into work, education, or volunteering');
- Setting up **agreements with Estates and Timetabling teams** to guarantee term-time access to spaces and resources, or even securing a dedicated teaching space for Converge in each location;
- **Strengthening collaboration with other areas of the university**, including the School of Science, Technology and Health's new mental health nursing course at York St John, and the School of Social Work, Education and Community Wellbeing at Northumbria (see also 'Section 8.2.2: Range of courses and audiences' for ideas about new Converge subject areas to explore). These collaborations could include academics from other departments getting involved in new Converge teaching arrangements as well as providing internal support for individual Converge student projects.

Demonstrating impact

'It's so easy for it to be a tick box exercise and an accounting activity and not the stories. Because it's always about the narratives of impact, about how people were in this dire place but, through that engagement, felt the confidence to go and do this, with a bit of help, to create this.' (External NHS partner/funder, York, EPYSJ152)

The data shows a strong shared sense of the importance of being able to **articulate the outcomes and impact of Converge clearly and convincingly to funders and partners without losing sight of the Converge ethos**. This is often perceived as a potential tension, as is the need to produce high-quality research work that answers the needs of the coproduction approach while working within the sometimes more conventional parameters of the Research Excellence Framework and its impact agenda.

Key to these discussions is **the potential to carry out more quantitative impact assessments** that would demonstrate the impact of Converge on participants, both to the health and social care sector and to university management, in more familiar and statistical terms. As discussed in 'Section 3: Approach and methodology', this project debated this route. After careful consultation with the Converge Evaluation and Research Team (CERT) and the Discovery Hub at Converge York, we decided to focus primarily on qualitative research that centred participants' own narratives and did not depend upon wellbeing scales or access to Converge students' medical records as held by the TEWV Trust (at the time, no such partnership existed in Newcastle). This was because these approaches were perceived to be counter to the core Converge principles of treating people as students, not patients.

The resolution of this complex issue is out of scope of the current report, though we hope that this evaluation provides alternative ways of evidencing the impact of Converge in York and Newcastle.

Long-term partnerships for system change

There is a clear appetite for Converge to play a role in **local (and potentially national) movements for system change within the mental health sector** in both York and Newcastle (see 'Section 7.2: Community healthcare models and system change' and 'Section 8.3: Policy positioning').

Multiple respondents stressed that this work could only be carried out by **a joined-up group of partners** drawn from across NHS primary and secondary care, social prescribing, voluntary sector, and education, all of whom were committed to long-term campaigning and collaboration.

RECOMMENDATION: Carry out leadership and succession planning in both York and Newcastle, including reviewing Board/Steering Group memberships.

RECOMMENDATION: Formalising university student involvement (see 'Section 4.2: University student role and recruitment').

RECOMMENDATION: Carry out internal positioning and case-making work to further embed university awareness and support, including around use of spaces.

RECOMMENDATION: Explore new areas of collaboration with other university departments.

RECOMMENDATION: Continuing to consider and advocate for a variety of methods of demonstrating impact in strategic planning and partnership development work.

8.2.2 Range of courses and audiences

New target audiences (Converge students)

A small number of research respondents commented on Converge's demographic reach and target audiences (see 'Section 4.3.4: Converge student recruitment, accessibility, and representation' for more details), and proposed concrete suggestions for potential expansion of the groups with which Converge currently works (see Figure 13). These suggestions were made within the wider context of a strong shared sense amongst third sector partners that the **most vulnerable and/or diverse communities are not being reached by the community sector** either locally or nationally, with racially diverse populations, young people, those in the criminal justice system, and people with learning disabilities cited in particular.

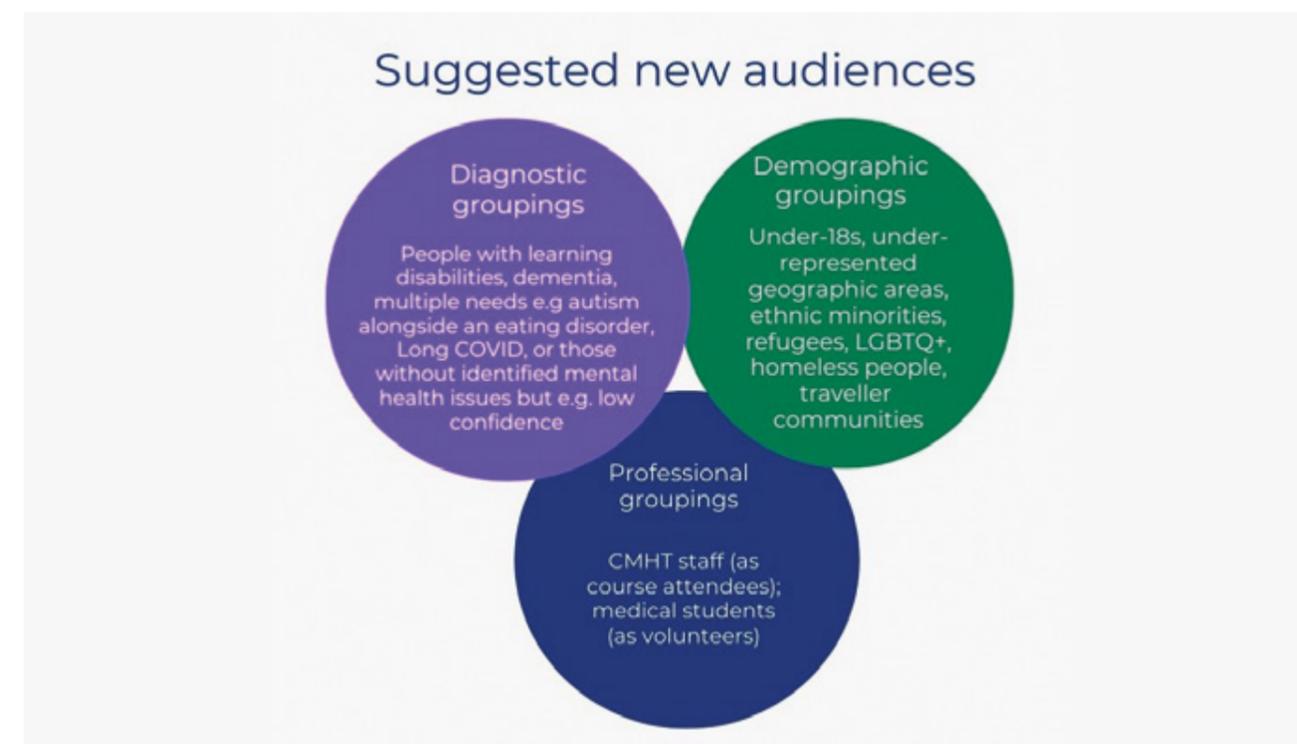


FIGURE 13: Potential new Converge target groups suggested by research participants

A small number of US respondents also commented on **the potential for the Converge programme at Pacific University, Oregon**, to serve older people and those for whom accessing campus is difficult, as well as examining a year-round offer and looking at opportunities outside of courses, for example a choir or theatre company. However, income issues and financial sustainability were cited as a key barrier to these ideas, so any expansion would need to take place within feasible constraints.

Range of courses

The data shows a strong and widespread interest across all groups in a **greater range and number of Converge courses** being offered in both York and Newcastle (see Figure 14). This is also seen by university students as a way to attract a greater number and range of volunteers, and by partners as a way to cement collaborative delivery opportunities. A small number of people also stated an appetite for Converge York to grow their **provision at the Haven**.

Many people stressed that **arts courses lend themselves particularly well** to the Converge model (see 'Section 6.1.2: Creativity and wellbeing'), with a small number wanting Converge to stay focused only on the arts. However, the majority of respondents thought that **new courses do not need to be arts-based**, as long as there is a clear interest in them and they lend themselves to the **group approach**. Those closest to the Converge delivery model noted that **new courses must be aligned to existing university provision**.

A small number of people, primarily external partners and university colleagues, suggested **accrediting Converge courses** so that Converge students could gain credits in the same way that university students on placement with Converge do. However, Converge students and university students alike were wary of this **potentially affecting the dynamic** of the Converge experience, believing it could place undue pressure on participants. Converge students in particular see the aim of Converge as delivering high-quality, high-level courses specifically for people who have experienced problems with their mental health, and not as the pursuit of accredited courses.

'Because there's a question around why do we value education? And what for, because if certain stakeholders think "Oh, well, the value of Converge is as a stepping stone to formal accredited education", versus other people who offer learning for learning's sake and the richness that that brings – it's interesting what funders prioritise.' (Group analysis of an external partner interview, Discussion Group 3, 14th October 2021)

As a more structured progression route, one respondent suggested offering **4-6-month Converge courses** as a way in to Access courses or degree-level study. Another noted the model of the Durham University MA in Law, which ensures an equal number of student places for those with experience of the justice system as for more conventional students, and wondered whether Converge could move towards acting as a **feeder for this model** in mainstream university delivery.

In terms of new subjects that could be offered, respondents across the board suggested a focus on arts, humanities (especially **languages**), health and social care (especially **Occupational Therapy and mental health nursing**), social sciences, physical health, and STEM (especially **engineering**).

FINDING: Converge's demographic reach in terms of Converge student recruitment was thought to need attention, with racially diverse populations, young people, those in the criminal justice system, and people with learning disabilities cited in particular.

FINDING: The data shows a widespread interest across all groups in a greater range and number of Converge courses being offered in both York and Newcastle; respondents generally thought that any new courses do not need to be arts-based, as long as there is a clear interest in them, they are aligned with university provision, and they lend themselves to the group approach.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge in both locations to consider how to diversify both audiences reached and courses offered.

Suggested new courses



FIGURE 14: Potential new Converge subject areas suggested by research participants

8.2.3 Geographic and institutional growth

'If it became too big, we might lose that sense of community. It might be better having little separate hubs that were separate and independently operated, so that they had their own sense of community within them. So it might be better to keep it small, so that you don't lose that community and that sense of place that you get, a belonging in a certain place and to a certain community and specialisation.' (Group analysis of an external partner interview, Discussion group 3, 14th October 2021)

Converge currently runs in York and Newcastle, and also ran in Leeds between 2017 and 2019 (see below). When consulted about the future of Converge, a high number of respondents across all participant groups consistently pointed to a **desire for Converge to grow at both local and national level**, though not at the risk of diluting the ethos or

quality of the existing model (for example, by over-extending staff capacity or by taking on work that was not overtly linked to the main mission). This **concern that Converge may lose something by expanding nationally** was often stated alongside an interest in more people being able to access the model.

Many people share the view that any new programmes would need to be underpinned by Converge principles but be **location-specific and locally led**, with good governance and clear institutional buy-in. Several respondents think that the model would work best at **smaller, more 'homely' universities** that are easy to navigate, as at York St John, though **Further Education colleges** are not ruled out. Particular locations which people felt may be a good fit for the Converge model at national level³ included Sheffield, Scarborough, work at York St John's London campus, and the universities of Newcastle, Sunderland, Teeside and Durham.

³All suggestions were located in England, which may be related to the fact that higher education policy is currently devolved to each of the four UK nations.

Meanwhile, NHS partners in York also suggested a need for **increased provision at local level** in locations such as Acomb, Selby, Dunnington, and rural North Yorkshire. There is a feeling amongst some local practitioners (though this was not backed up by Converge student reports) that potential Converge students may feel more comfortable in **local community venues** that they knew well. Other practitioners, however, hold the perception that, conversely, these venues may feel less safe or welcoming than a university. This approach would also be a departure from the core Converge model, which locates course delivery in universities in order to share access to specialist equipment and spaces such as theatre studios and art workshops.

Lessons from the Leeds programme closure

The Converge programme which ran in Leeds between 2017 and 2019 is a useful case study in the context of Converge's potential future growth. In this model, Leeds MIND held the funds and provided core administration, potentially due to the funding CCG's perception of their established track record in the area. Four local universities then delivered the courses (The University of Leeds, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds Trinity University, and the Leeds College of Music), though the last of these left the programme before its official closure. While the Leeds programme's project managers were not available for interview as part of this study, a small number of existing Converge staff and partners speculated on the primary reasons for its closure.

These responses indicate **a shared perception that there were tensions within the Leeds delivery partnership model, due to mismatched expectations about structure and leadership**. While the model worked well initially, with a core project manager at MIND who was perceived as very sympathetic to the Converge model, changes in staffing within MIND later in the programme term exposed some of these more structural tensions. One respondent noted that it became a 'political' issue that the **delivering institutions were not in charge of their own expenditure and administration**, while another pointed to the need for **project managers to be personally invested in the core model** – in effect, to be able to act as an advocate and champion. Instead of a focused negotiation on collaboratively resolving

these issues so that all parties felt that their own strategic priorities were protected (despite several attempts from the York-based Converge team), the programme ceased to operate in 2019. This suggests that, had there been **a clearer governance and guidance structure in place from the planning stage onwards**, it might have been possible for the programme to be saved and reimaged. Plans for any future expansion of Converge into other cities or institutions would need to consider this lesson carefully.

FINDING: There is a strong shared appetite for Converge to grow at both local and national level, though not at the risk of diluting the ethos or quality of the existing model.

FINDING: The closure of the Leeds pilot (2017-2019) was perceived to have been due to issues with differing expectations around partnership structures, leadership and administration.

RECOMMENDATION: To carry out scoping work around the potential development of national-level partnerships with other higher and further education institutions, with a view to extending the Converge model to other locations.

RECOMMENDATION: To consider local programme growth in York without straying from the key principle of access to campus resources; this might include working with partners to assess any additional issues at play, e.g., anxieties about accessing a university campus, or the price of inner-city travel.

RECOMMENDATION: To take the learnings from the Leeds programme and the reasons for its closure on board when considering any future geographic or institutional growth, in particular around governance structures and making sure that institutions have shared expectations around leadership and delivery.

8.2.4 Perceived barriers to growth

The perceived barriers to the kind of growth outlined in 'Section 8.2.3: Geographic and institutional growth' largely relate to risks at the strategic level, as follows:

- The **danger of doing too much and over-reaching capacity**, e.g., by managing increased numbers of student volunteers or outreaching staff skillsets or strengths
- **The risk of diluting the existing offer**, its core principles or local identity;
- The pull from partners to expand into **non-critical activity that falls outside of Converge's scope**;
- The threat of getting too tangled in either **greater NHS bureaucracy** or the pressures of **higher education research culture**; and
- Cross-sector **funding limitations** which can hinder sustained development work.

Several **complex tensions in relation to ethos, values and priorities** emerged in discussions on the potential expansion of Converge. These are apparent across all participant groups, and include: questions of widening accessibility versus feelings of belonging to a core group; the breadth of the offer versus its depth and quality; the ongoing struggle between biomedical and community healthcare models (see 'Section 7.2: Community healthcare models and system change'); and how to cater simultaneously for groups with conflicting needs (for example, the suggestion of working with people with addictions on a campus filled with vulnerable young people). Some Converge students pointed to their sense of the **different perceptions of what success looks like** held by Converge students, Converge staff, and funders, with the latter potentially more focused on measurable outcomes than individual narratives. Meanwhile, more delivery-focused concerns related to the **availability of teaching spaces** on campus, the **administrative burden of referral systems** within the mental health sector, and **funding constraints** which may restrict either new work or the guaranteed delivery of the existing offer.

As discussed throughout this report (see especially 'Section 8.2.1: Strategic management and planning'), there are several additional perceived barriers in relation to the development of Converge Northumbria within the context of an appreciation of it having run for less time to date. These are primarily related to funding, capacity, sustained leadership, university buy-in and the limited awareness within the CNTW NHS Trust. Meanwhile, perceived barriers to the growth of the Converge project at Pacific University, Oregon, included the problem of access for Converge students living long distances from campus and the ongoing issue of the lack of sustained funding (both for core delivery and for individual university students to engage in specific activities).

FINDING: The most commonly-cited perceived barriers to the growth of Converge were the risk of over-reaching capacity or diluting the existing offer, the pull to expand into non-critical activity, the threat of becoming overwhelmed by NHS bureaucracy or higher education research culture, and cross-sector funding limitations.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge to carry out careful and consultative strategic planning for any growth plans, articulating the expanded scope and feasibility in clear terms.

8.3 Policy positioning

The research findings explored so far in this report present both a challenge and an opportunity: **how can Converge continue to improve delivery in line with the needs of its user groups within a varied and shifting wider context, and how does it need to position itself to do this?**

As outlined in ‘Section 2.2: Policy contexts’ and ‘Section 2.3: The context of coproduction’, Converge’s activities relate equally to health and social care policy, higher and further education policy, and the practice of coproduced research. When considering policy and practice in tandem, a ‘messy gap’ between the two can emerge where the complexity and nuance of lived experience is found. These complexities can offer moments of creative potential, in turn generating **suggestions for future policy development**.

This report has demonstrated that Converge provides **stepping-stones for re-entry into broader society**, and is well placed to both inform and deliver policy objectives within a **broad community of provision**, facilitating a participant’s recovery journey within and beyond primary and secondary care. It confirms the **benefits of non-medicalised interventions** and **supports Integrated Care Systems** in their remit to embed **place-based community opportunities**. By contributing across all three missions of the higher education sector (teaching, research and civic engagement) it also **offers a model of best practice for socially engaged universities**.

8.3.1 Positioning within higher education policy

Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework

University students, through their engagement with Converge, gain **increased confidence in their future career pathways and enhance those skills identified by employers as lacking to pursue graduate level employment (QS Intelligence Unit, 2018)**. As such, the opportunities available to university students through Converge for professional and flexible experiences is a model of good practice for higher education institutions seeking to engage with the Outcomes agenda within the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework.

Research Excellence Framework

Converge, as evidenced through the contribution of the Converge Evaluation and Research Team, creates opportunities for people with lived experience to engage in impactful research. This engages with **the need for research to demonstrate impact** through tested and emerging methodologies, articulated in the REF as ‘[a]n effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment, or quality of life, beyond academia’ (UKRI, 2022).

Equally, there are clear opportunities for Converge to bring about **impact on local and national health and social care policy and services**, both as an action research model in its own right and through CERT’s role as a trusted provider of co-produced research and evaluation work. For example, CERT could undertake community-based participatory research work with Integrated Care Systems that contributes to services at the level of ‘Place’ and ‘Neighbourhood’ (NHS England, 2019).

Knowledge Exchange Framework

Converge facilitates a process of knowledge exchange across all stakeholders, enriching the lived experience and applied understanding of participants however they engage with Converge. Knowledge exchange experienced through Converge is multi-directional, flowing both from and into the university eco-system; in many cases, it brings about a change in attitudes as well as in knowledge and skills. This relationship built between and across stakeholders is symbiotic, complex, nuanced and mutually beneficial.

The **complexity and quality of the knowledge exchange model demonstrated by Converge** risks being lost in policy developments around universities’ engagement with communities or businesses, particularly when many centralised frameworks focus on quantitative metrics. Converge needs to articulate the value of its knowledge exchange model carefully and widely in order not to lose out on opportunities for its own development and for the sector more widely.

Reinforcing our findings across the Office for Students’ Student Knowledge Exchange Competition network

It is also becoming apparent that similar themes are emerging at a national level through the dissemination of outcomes from projects funded by the Office for Students and Research England as part of the Student Knowledge Exchange Competition under which the Converge evaluation project itself is funded. This was particularly evident when comparing outcomes against that of the project exploring student-led knowledge exchange in chronic lower back pain clinics undertaken at Plymouth Marjon University. Here again, the reciprocal and tripartite nature of knowledge exchange has been highlighted. It is hoped that this connection will develop into continued research collaboration exploring emergent themes across mental and physical health and the scaling-up of effective approaches.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge to further embed and extend its work-based learning elements throughout York St. John and Northumbria Universities, and to broaden access to a greater range of university students.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge is an effective model for supporting university students in their efforts to prepare for future graduate level careers, and should work to raise visibility within the Office for Students.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge to assess and develop opportunities for the CERT model of coproduced research to become more active at local and national level, and to articulate itself as a model for others to follow, for example by acting as a case study for UK Research and Innovation’s own dissemination work.

RECOMMENDATION: The outcomes of this project can be used to inform the development of the Knowledge Exchange Framework and its approach to collating, measuring and valuing knowledge exchange.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge to continue to develop collaborative research opportunities to explore, develop and influence national and local application of shared models of good practice across health and social care provision.

8.3.2 Positioning within health and social care policy

The Converge evaluation project demonstrates that **the Converge model directly contributes to the positive mental health and wellbeing of its participants** (see ‘Section 6: Wellbeing and personal progression’). In this model, Converge both helps to develop participants through its own offer and also supports them to access a unique portfolio of services from the statutory, community-based and third sectors to enhance their health and wellbeing (see also ‘Section 7.2: Community healthcare models and system change’). As such, it offers a **best practice model for embedding community-based provision** across the sector.

Integrated Care Systems and Mental Health Care

‘Relationship building, social support, employment, and education are not only what a healthy community can provide but have also long been seen as effective components of good mental health care.’ (National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, 2021, p.4)

Driven by the move to Integrated Care Systems and the Community Mental Health Framework, Converge offers a **model of best practice for embedding community-based service engagement and clinical and non-clinical blended approaches** for improved mental health and wellbeing. It **confirms the value of whole-person approaches** where participants are recognised as people with complex and varied needs and aspirations which transcend a narrow mental health diagnosis.

Converge also **supports transitions from primary and secondary care into education and beyond**, an area identified as problematic in previous community approaches to mental health care (see ‘Section 7.2.1: Perceptions of current health, social care, and community sector landscapes’). It represents a **model of good practice for the use of valued community assets as contributors to health care** which facilitate relationships between statutory and third sector providers and, crucially, between community members who may otherwise experience isolation.



Personalised Care

When people are able to **transform their sense of self-identity and to grow self-management and self-leadership tools**, their agency increases, and they have greater cognitive space to speak out and participate creatively in their own care. These outcomes are in line with the aspirations for a national growth of take-up in personalised care approaches, particularly in the form of NHS England's Personalised Care Framework. Under this framework, people are encouraged to take a central role in identifying unique pathways to their own recovery. Embedding this approach in health and social care requires not just organisational change but also individual change. Fundamental to this can be a change in personal identity that facilitates an openness of thinking beyond the constraints imposed by an individual's diagnosis. Converge shows that the use of non-clinical assets can foster new socially valued identities or additional layers within an identity which can help **enable and empower people to speak out, participate and take ownership of their personalised care**.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge can act as a case study to inform the development of community involvement in service delivery at Integrated Care System 'Place' level in its communities and at multiple 'Place' level sites of delivery across the nation.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge should position itself as a model of good practice in relation to the role and application of valued non-clinical community assets as key to implementing Personalised Care approaches, particularly via NHS England's work in this area.

9. Impact of this project's coproduction activities

9.1 Impact of CEP's coproduction methods on participants

See 'Section 3.2.3: Data analysis' for an overview of the coproduction methods we used in this project. In summary, there were four main ways for people to get involved with our research activities:

- As part of the **wider consultation activity with CERT**, advising at regular intervals on the project's research design, materials, and final analysis;
- As a Storyteller during the data collection stage (**paid autoethnographic researchers using creative methods** to reflect on their own experiences with Converge), supported by training in research methods and group coffee mornings;
- As a member of the project's **Discussion Group**, which came together regularly throughout the data collection and analysis periods to carry out collaborative thematic analysis (while unpaid, members of the group received a thank you gift voucher at the end of the analysis period); and
- As a **CERT member paid to undertake NVivo training and data coding activity** as part of the core research team.

Although these were commissions rather than core coproduction activities, as part of our dissemination phase we also paid and supported two additional groups to provide creative responses to the Converge evaluation project data (see 'Section 3.2.4: Dissemination of findings'):

- Members of the **Out of Character** theatre company and its spin-out team In the Moment worked to produce two short films together, receiving training in filmed monologues;
- **Two university students** were supported to develop their data interpretation and project management skills in the production of a musical composition (Ewan East, MA in Musical Composition student, York St John University) and a fine art mural (Lyndsey Turner, BA in Fine Arts, Northumbria university).

Personal skills, understanding, and enjoyment

'I started to draw scenarios of these memories. And it was almost as though Converge kind of gave me permission to do it. It was the Storytelling element. Because that's what it's all about: telling your story.' (Current Converge student, Northumbria, CCSNU083 – Storyteller, speaking within a group session on their autoethnographic work)

The Storytelling project influenced the Converge Storytellers and researchers in multiple ways. One of the key outcomes for participants was the creation of a space to **allow deeper reflection on their own experiences**. Participants were often surprised to realise **how far they had come** since their early time with Converge, and the chance to reflect on their experiences and to gain a more comprehensive understanding of their own journeys increased their sense of **self-confidence and self-esteem**.

'I allow you to see me. I am getting there in believing I have so much to share from my recovery. I am given light and opportunities. Skills for the future. The fear subsides.' (Current Converge student, Northumbria, CCSNU132 – Storyteller, written reflections on their autoethnographic work)

Converge students' interview data pointed to the fact that being with Converge improved their confidence; however, Storytellers were able to go a step further and **identify exactly which aspects of Converge contributed to their improved self-esteem**. Storytellers highlighted how their **belief in their own ability had changed**, and how they were able to identify the aspects of Converge that had been especially helpful for them. This enabled them to **seek out these helpful experiences in other environments** too. The creative research methods that Storytellers used and the feedback they gained from their fellow group members allowed them to increase the belief they had in their own creativity, and also offered opportunities to **develop new creative skills** such as zine-making and 'found poetry'.



IMAGE 7: Storyteller musical composition – ‘Hopes and Aspirations’ (Current Converge student, Northumbria, CCSNU100)

Discussion Group members said that they enjoyed their time in the group and were able to reach different levels of understanding through **collaboratively sharing thoughts and ideas**. As we focussed on a specific aspect of participants’ experiences with Converge each week (for example, by looking together at interview extracts on a particular theme, or at Storytellers’ work), we were able to take a **more in-depth look** at the journey through Converge.

‘Being part of the group made me reflect on my own experience of Converge. The creative responses we looked at made me think further about the importance of Converge in people’s lives – that we didn’t have names against the pieces made them somehow more affecting. The Discussion Group felt safe and fair, and the range of voices was refreshing for me.’ (Reflection from Discussion Group member, 12th July 2022)

‘Being part of the discussion group had an impact on me. I find it difficult to articulate my thoughts and feelings in an instantaneous way but felt boosted by other people in the discussion group. We were ‘making sense’/interpreting /responding to pieces together.’ (Reflection from Discussion Group member, 12th July 2022)

In both the Storytelling project and within the Discussion Group, this chance for deeper reflection led to a **better personal understanding** of how Converge had influenced participants. The ability to step back from the experience and to consider it collaboratively from a **different perspective**, by exploring it through a more reflective lens, allowed participants in both groups to develop an awareness of the different aspects of Converge and its effects on them.

Research skills and knowledge

Storytellers noted the chance to **learn research skills** and generate a basic understanding of coproduced research through this work. This naturally had an effect on their belief in themselves and their own capabilities. Several Storytellers shared their **initial sense of confusion** around the idea of autoethnographic research and the unique position of researching and exploring their own experiences. However, as we continued through the process many Storytellers shared their happiness that they could **use their own experiences to help others** (a sentiment shared by discussion group members), and that they were capable of more than they thought. Although some initially found the process nerve-racking, by the end of their period of work Storytellers were able to feel that they had made a **meaningful contribution to the research**. This also made **research as a concept more accessible** to them, and one in particular went to take up a **higher education course at the Open University** as a direct result.

Discussion Group members also valued the chance to learn research skills and extend their understanding of different methodologies. This was especially relevant for those members of CERT who took an **active role in the analysis** portion of the project. This gave them **training and experience** in data analysis software and data interpretation. There was, however, quite a high drop-out rate from this work, potentially because the NVivo software was often seen as off-putting. This may indicate a need for the development of less conventional analytic methods within coproduced projects.

‘I chose to be involved [in the Discussion Group] because I wanted to learn how to do thematic analysis and what it was. Once we started, I enjoyed seeing the themes emerge and the creative elements, what is different about Converge and how it does things, emerging in the interviews.’ (CERT Away Day discussion, 12th July 2022)

Being part of a community

Both groups of Storytellers (spring term and autumn term 2021) created **communities of mutual understanding and respect**, facilitating safe spaces where researchers (both traditional researchers and Storytellers) felt comfortable and able to share sensitive aspects of their experiences. The discussion groups also facilitated a **sense of community and shared ideas**. These relationships were bi-directional, with each person who was an active member of the group contributing to a sense of closeness and togetherness, especially in the face-to-face events in which we were able to take part.

FINDING: Being involved in the evaluation project’s coproduced activities enabled participants to enhance their research skills, reflect upon their own progress within the Converge programme (thus supporting their self-esteem and confidence), and develop a collaborative community

9.2 Benefits of coproduction to the project approach

Centring participants

Involving the wider Converge community, especially CERT researchers, from the initial development of the project through to the analysis of data with the Discussion Group helped us in our aim to make sure that the research methods the project adopted were **the most appropriate for exploring the experiences of Converge students, university students, staff and partners**.

CERT’s tagline is ‘**insight through experience**’. Storytellers’, CERT researchers’ and Discussion Group members’ own insight, gained through their experience of being a Converge student, allowed the project to access a **deeper exploration** of their peers’ experiences of Converge in an **emotionally and socially safe way**. This ultimately resulted in **richer and more meaningful data**, while the **triangulation of the analysis work via a broad range of voices** increased the validity and credibility of the project’s findings and conclusions.

Adding to traditional research findings

The Converge Storytelling work facilitated important findings that would not have been uncovered using more traditional data collection methods like surveys and semi-structured interviews. However, it is interesting to note that many of the themes that emerged from those more traditional data collection methods were **further supported** by the findings from the Storytelling. Storytellers also **extended these themes** by providing a much deeper and more comprehensive understanding of Converge students’ journeys.

Due to the ability to build **trusting relationships** over several weeks, as well as simply having **more time to share thoughts and ideas** about their experiences, Storytelling work has the capacity to highlight more **complex interpretations of experiences**. It also helped to develop our understanding of the importance of creativity; through Storytelling we were able to understand **how creative means helped participants to make sense of their own experiences in new ways**.

For similar reasons, the Storytelling work allowed this evaluation project to **dig deeper** into the kinds of things with which Converge students struggle. Despite the researchers on this project being independent from Converge, we were often perceived by participants as being part of the programme. This could potentially be a barrier to honest accounts of what Converge might be weaker on; however, due to the longer-term relationships built up through the Storytelling work, participants felt **more able to share the negatives as well as the positives** of their experiences.

Addressing power dynamics in research and coproduction

We have been able to consider power dynamics in more nuanced ways as a result of the Storytelling project. As mentioned above, the length of this project allowed us to build trusting relationships with one another, which enabled more **frank discussions around power dynamics within research activity**, something which can be more difficult in one-off interviews. These discussions included the importance of Storytellers being able to **interpret their own work and being facilitated to do so** – a message which needed supportive, ongoing repetition.

The importance of **collaborative relationships**, in which both parties are able to be **appropriately vulnerable and open**, was also something that we explicitly considered in Storyteller coffee mornings. The traditional researchers on the project were often surprised at **how much of their own experiences they shared in these meetings**, and the way that they were also ‘seen’ by Storytellers. This can go some way to **levelling the power dynamics** inherent in mental health research.

The Storytelling project also highlighted many lessons about coproduction in mental health research, and the wider learning points for this kind of research are listed in ‘Section 9.3: Lessons around coproduction methodology for wider application’. On a project management level, we also learnt about how coproduction offers a **wide range of elements that enable the broader research work**, including an emphasis on creativity, clarity, support, community, structure, building real relationships, and allowing traditional researchers to be authentic and open about their own experiences, just as we hope participants were able to be.

FINDING: Our coproduction activities allowed us to produce richer and more meaningful data, to create a community of voices which deepened and strengthened our analysis work, to upskill all researchers involved, and to actively unpick traditional research dynamics and hierarchies.

9.3 Lessons around coproduction methodology for wider application

These coproduced elements of the Converge evaluation project offer several wider learning points that future researchers may want to integrate into their own coproduced projects. The first, and potentially one of the most important implications, is around methodology. In the Storytelling project, participants were able to **choose whichever artform** they wanted to carry out their creative responses to their experiences; the project team then **ordered and paid** for any materials that they needed so that they were not out of pocket. Having the **freedom** to choose methods that they were confident in, as well as to play with new materials, was especially **empowering** for Storytellers. Had we imposed a method, or set expectations for Storytellers to produce traditional research outputs such as written autoethnographies, it is likely that fewer people would have taken part or felt full agency over their work. **Creative methods and the autonomy to choose what works for them** likely makes being part of coproduced research **more accessible** for a wide range of individuals.

That being said, **too much choice can be overwhelming** for participants, especially those who have less experience in coproduced research. This can have the inadvertent effect of making the process less accessible to people. Related to this, **too little structure can also be a barrier** to participation. We learnt through the first of our two Storytelling phases that members appreciated some signposting from researchers to allow them a starting point. Maintaining the right **balance between clarity and choice** is difficult but important for coproduction, and it is important to have **explicit conversations about how much structure** is optimum for your group.

Relational dynamics

Coproduced research is by its nature collaborative, and **a sense of community facilitates this collaboration**. The development of meaningful, personal relationships is important in creating that community, and also contributes to the ways in which we can level power dynamics that are often found in research. Traditional relationships between researcher and participant, in particular in mental health research, have often been criticised for being **paternalistic**. **Meeting one another on an equal level** and developing relationships in which each person can **contribute meaningfully and share vulnerabilities** (an environment which we took care to nurture across the Storytelling work, the Discussion Group, and the involvement of CERT members in our data collection and analysis work) can help us to **challenge this dynamic**.

Researcher identities

Connected to these learning points are **thought-provoking questions** around the **blurred lines** that can exist in ideas of lived experience. Each of the core team of researchers who were employed by this project and coordinated the Storytelling work had their **own experiences of mental health challenges** and its effects on their lives. However, coproduction practices often **do not allow for dual experiences**; instead, group members are often seen as **either academics or lived experience experts**. Only rarely does research allow for individuals to **inhabit both worlds** and to present their specific experiences at a point of crossover. This tension calls us to re-examine the boxes and categories to which we assign people, and instead to **embrace the diversity of experiences** that individuals can have and what this might allow their unique contribution to research to be.

Practical considerations

All participants in our Storytelling and analysis work were offered payment for their time at York St John University's Research Assistant rate. However, we found that this can be problematic for a variety of reasons (see 'Section 7.1.3: Coproduction within Converge'). Many CERT researchers and Storytellers are **in receipt of disability benefits** which limit the amount they can earn – they often **choose not to claim any money** due to fears that they might trigger a benefits review. Another challenge is the feeling that claiming money **makes the work seem more formal**, causing a perception of there being higher expectations and pressure than is the case with a volunteering arrangement. This was a surprise and a useful learning point for the core research team.

Ultimately, this was resolved in our project by offering those who participated a choice between contracted payment and 'Love2Shop' gift vouchers, which are accepted in a wide number of high street shops. However, the **value of the vouchers was lower** than they would have received had they claimed for hours worked, in part because of internal caution over adherence to DWP regulations (namely not wanting to appear to be providing a 'replacement' salary). Additionally, where people did choose to claim full payment, they often found the university HR and Finance systems difficult to access (see 'Section 7.1.3: Coproduction within Converge').

This problem of payment for coproduced research work is a **persistent challenge across universities and other agencies pursuing coproduction work**. These issues should be given considerable thought by other research projects, and researchers should work collaboratively to find the best solution for their groups, which may differ from person to person.

FINDING: Coproduction approaches can help to broaden pre-existing perceptions of researcher identities for all concerned, whether 'experts by education' or 'experts by experience'.

RECOMMENDATION: Projects built upon coproduction approaches need to build in early discussions across the team around suitable methodologies and the optimum balance between collaboration, autonomy, and support for different groups.

RECOMMENDATION: Projects invested in coproduction need to dedicate time to getting their Finance and HR colleagues on board with making internal employment and payment processes as simple and accessible as possible, and to signpost support with benefits claims where appropriate.

CONCLUSION



10. Conclusion

10.1 The impact of the Converge model

The Converge evaluation project demonstrates that the Converge programme offers a distinct, high-quality model of knowledge exchange, community engagement and collaborative teaching practice that is ripe for expansion into other audiences, subjects and geographic areas.

By addressing the needs of several participant groups in tandem, it offers one clear way of answering multiple strategic aims across a range of organisations: universities' need to demonstrate a commitment to social justice and community engagement, and to provide their students with both work-related placement opportunities and examples of how to self-manage their own mental health; healthcare providers' desire to find ways to support their service users within the community, thus lightening the burden on statutory and clinical services; and policy-makers' need to access and share clear models of evidenced, on-the-ground delivery. These alignments take place within a broader national picture of constrained cross-sector resources and a shared interest in widespread system change throughout mental health delivery mechanisms.

These needs are provided for through Converge's deceptively simple focus on the convergence of interests between education and healthcare, in the form of joint learning and collaboration between university students and local community participants. Whilst there is an implicit focus on supporting and improving mental health and wellbeing, it is this foregrounding of educational and social opportunities that make Converge a strongly perceived success in the eyes of those who access and support its central offer. Its person-centred support structures, especially in the longer-standing York programme, are also key to the Converge model, from the Discovery Hub support team and voluntary Ambassadors to its wider referral partnerships in York and Newcastle.

The outcomes of this model for both university students and Converge students span the development of both personal skills (from increased confidence to improved communication skills) and professional skills (including arts practice and facilitation skills), increased progression opportunities, and an increase in individual wellbeing. This upskilling takes place across two distinct modes of knowledge exchange: a more conventional exchange of skills and knowledge, and a less well-recognised exchange of attitudes, outlooks, and mindsets. Our argument across this report, based on strong evidence across the thematic data collection of the evaluation project, is that the latter form of knowledge exchange enables the former. Indeed, we proposed that conventional knowledge exchange cannot take place without an attention – whether implicit or explicit – to the attitudinal and interpersonal environment in which that exchange takes place.

Within Converge, these environmental factors span the meeting places and the specialist resources of the university campus, the warmth of the community support amongst peers and from leadership level to teaching and administration staff, and the efforts that are put into training and support tutors and student volunteers appropriately. The success of the model also markedly highlights the value of the arts, particularly its attraction as a route to wider engagement and its emphasis on risk-taking, to wider teaching approaches (currently under threat in the national picture). However, respondents across the board shared the view that the Converge model could be equally successfully applied in other areas.

The impact of the Converge model, stemming directly from these processes of upskilling, community building and attitudinal shifts within a supportive setting, was consistently characterised by one word in particular: transformation. This applies across personal identity formation, individual wellbeing, and organisational culture. While several respondents – primarily external partners and senior university management – stressed the desire for greater quantitative measures to demonstrate Converge's impact, it is this emphasis on individual experiences and narratives that came through strongly across the full project dataset. Converge will need to continue to navigate a delicate balance between wider structural pressures of impact

monitoring and its community's need to feel treated as whole individuals. In particular, the data shows a shared interest in Converge paying greater attention to ensuring diversity, representation, and fair access across both Converge student and university student groups – something which would be supported by a careful and considered approach to tracking who is engaging and who is not.

More generally, the potential and appetite for Converge to grow was seen as dependent upon the retention of the flexible, location-specific nature of its model, as well as on a further embedding of institutional leadership and support in its current locations (though without losing its sector-straddling autonomy). Succession planning is seen as key, particularly in York, as is the need for regular strategic planning activity.

In summary, the Converge evaluation presents a unique model of educational delivery which fulfils the needs of several sectors at once and provides its participants with a wide range of personal and professional benefits. Its claim to be a 'convergence of interests' is borne out by the data collected here, and offers a model for much wider consideration and take-up.

10.2 Reflections on the Converge evaluation project process

The Converge evaluation project has itself acted as a process offering opportunities, challenges and learning points. It has led to several positive outcomes, such as: strengthened relationships with partners through in-depth reflection (particularly in York, in the form of workshops held jointly with the Converge Discovery Hub and Community Mental Health Teams); iterative programme development work on any pressing issues that arose through our data collection phase (such as tweaking student recruitment and support processes in the autumn term of 2021, following data gathered earlier that year); and upskilling CERT members and Converge students in autoethnography, interviewing and analysis skills (see 'Section 9: Impact of this project's coproduction activities').

In programme management terms, we faced several challenges with recruitment and delivery, primarily due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, we did not meet the ambitious targets originally set with the Office for Students and Research England. In part this was due to the very understandable fact of our sample groups being faced with other, unprecedented priorities, including increased physical and mental illness, fluctuations in the national job market, and the pressures on university students of navigating their studies during the pandemic. It was also, more positively, due to the fact that we had a much higher number of people interested in interviews and Storytelling work than in the shorter survey options. This meant that, though our overall target numbers were lower than expected, the depth and richness of the data collected was much deeper and richer than expected. This does mean that our sample sizes were sometimes small, particularly for the more quantitative measures included in our surveys; we have indicated in the main body of the report where we feel that findings should be considered in this context.

Overall, we were very pleased with the process, progress and outcomes of the project, and had the full support of all three of our governance groups throughout the two years over which it ran.

10.3 Collated findings and recommendations

In this section, we have pulled together all the findings and recommendations from across the report into one place for easy access. Please see individual sections for more in-depth discussion of each point, and 'Section 1: Executive summary' for the overarching findings of the project.

Section 4: The Converge model

Section 4.1: Conceptual model, principles, and ethos

4.1.1 Key features and perceptions of the Converge model

FINDING: The Converge model is well understood externally, and is seen as being founded in two-way learning between university students and Converge students. It is perceived as part of a wider national move towards a more community-based model of mental health support services, as well as a key example of universities' duty to support wider society.

4.1.2 Principles, values, and ethos

FINDING: All participant groups highlighted the environment of openness that Converge promotes. This translates into a shared understanding and acceptance of individual mental health experiences. In turn, participants felt that this led to a recognition of the different kinds of expertise that university and Converge students, and staff, bring to the community.

RECOMMENDATION: Within any future growth of Converge, measures should be taken to protect the level environment in which students feel able to approach staff members on equal footing.

Section 4.2: University student role and recruitment

4.2.1 Motivations for joining Converge

FINDING: University students – both those on placement and those volunteering – are motivated to join Converge by a desire for professional experience, their trust in those who suggest it (both lecturers and peers), and the desire to better understand mental health.

4.2.2 Understandings of the university student role

FINDING: There is a desire from both university and Converge students for greater clarity on what the university student role is, though it is perceived as being clearer at Converge Northumbria than at Converge York.

FINDING: There is a disconnect between what university student volunteers and Converge students value in the role; university students want flexibility, whereas many Converge students feel consistency helps create trust and form relationships.

RECOMMENDATION: Provide greater clarity on what the university student role is, as well as what it entails for volunteers and those on placement. This clarification could also address Converge students' concerns by providing detail on the levels of involvement and what they can expect from both sets of university students.

4.2.3 Training and support for university student volunteers

FINDING: The role of the Converge tutor is essential in the training and development of the university student.

FINDING: Converge university student volunteers largely feel supported, though would like more training, mentorship and socialising opportunities.

4.2.4 University student recruitment, accessibility, and representation

FINDING: Across the board, the involvement of university student volunteers and facilitators was perceived as a crucial, beneficial, and high-quality part of the Converge model, though many people said that the volunteer role could be more clearly communicated and supported.

RECOMMENDATION: Carry out increased strategic planning around university student communication, recruitment and support. In particular, there is a need to:

- Address the disparity in numbers of ethnic minorities in both locations amongst Converge student volunteers as compared to the wider student population.
- Consider methods for engaging more male and gender-diverse students is an area for Converge at both York St John and Northumbria to consider moving forward.

- Work with older students at both locations to formulate volunteering opportunities better suited to their needs and priorities.
- Part-time and overseas students likely face additional barriers to taking on volunteering commitments, so working with these groups at both York St John and Northumbria to create opportunities which fit their needs more closely may enable them to also benefit from the knowledge exchange activities in Converge.
- Work more closely with past Northumbria student volunteers who have a declared disability to find out more about their high levels of engagement, in order to identify strategies for increasing engagement in underrepresented student groups.

Section 4.3: Community, identity, and representation

4.3.1 Belonging: the Converge community

FINDING: The data shows that, for both university and Converge students, the Converge community makes them feel welcomed, accepted, comfortable, cared for, and not judged.

FINDING: Feelings of isolation and separation from the community are often linked to missing communication (some respondents speculated that this could be related to not receiving emails, not knowing about events, or not feeling 'in the loop' with other Converge students) or not feeling appreciated.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge should consider how it can ensure that all participants have access to information about events at Converge. It might also be useful to explore further how Converge students can be encouraged to be part of the wider community.

4.3.2 The importance of the university campus

FINDING: There was a strong shared sense of the importance of the university campuses themselves, which offer multiple spaces to form relationships and to 'level out' power dynamics.

4.3.3 Impact on identity

FINDING: By allowing the exploration and cultivation of new identities, Converge is perceived to avoid the trap that other mental health services can fall into of embedding somebody in their diagnosis and being a 'service user'.

FINDING: Not all Converge students feel able to identify as a student, which may be related to self-esteem, but also might be linked to not having equal access to facilities as university students.

RECOMMENDATION: Clearer guidance around which of the university facilities are open to Converge students might help with their feelings of belonging moving forward, especially in relation to the wider university community.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge should consider how it can preserve the importance of valuing students as individuals moving forward, especially within any future growth strategy.

4.3.4 Converge student recruitment, accessibility, and representation

FINDING: York St John is perceived as doing well on issues of equality and community engagement across the board, including Converge, though a small number of participants would like to see greater action on race equality. There is a shared perception amongst the six Newcastle-based external partners interviewed that, while Northumbria University aimed to increase inclusive access and participation at a strategic level, it could do more in this area university-wide.

RECOMMENDATION: Consider developing ways to monitor the demographic reach of Converge student recruitment in order to ensure fair access, as long as the Converge ethos is not threatened by data collection work.

RECOMMENDATION: Develop the Ambassadors' role in recruitment and support to widen participation and access for new Converge students.

RECOMMENDATION: Develop resources for new Converge students in both Converge locations that include videos of who they will meet and where they will go to increase accessibility.

Section 5: Knowledge exchange, upskilling, and formal progression

Section 5.1: Types of Knowledge Exchange

FINDING: The Converge model enables different types of knowledge exchange that are reciprocal, multi-directional and help develop interpersonal and professional skills for both university and Converge students. Central to Converge's own form of knowledge exchange is the environment it creates, based on mutual understanding, respect, and collaboration.

FINDING: The types of knowledge exchange created by Converge offer a model for understanding of knowledge exchange that complements but goes beyond that embodied by the Knowledge Exchange Framework.

RECOMMENDATION: Articulate to stakeholders how Converge helps to further understandings of what different forms of knowledge exchange could be in Higher Education.

RECOMMENDATION: Any development or growth of Converge should retain an emphasis on the factors needed to create the 'right environment' for different types of knowledge exchange to occur, especially in relation to the exchange of attitudes, outlooks and mindsets.

RECOMMENDATION: Promote the different types of knowledge exchange enabled in Converge at both York St John University and Northumbria University, especially in both institutions' KEF submissions.

Section 5.2: Personal skills and attributes

FINDING: Converge helps both university and Converge students to increase their confidence (93% of alumni university students either agreed or strongly agreed that engaging with Converge improved their confidence; Converge students' qualitative data also supports this finding).

Section 5.3: Professional and vocational skills and practice

FINDING: Converge provides 'real life' facilitation experiences for university students that help develop skills such as leadership, communication, and adaptability. These experiences support university students in their chosen career paths.

Section 5.4: Progression into work, education, or volunteering

FINDING: Converge provides a platform for personal and professional progression, with no pressure for there to be a formal outcome (except for university students on placement).

FINDING: Converge enables the development of personal and professional skills for university students and has a positive impact on career progression.

RECOMMENDATION: There could be scope for clearer guidance or support in relation to paths of progression for both university and Converge students. Any form of official outcome would need to be carefully considered to make sure it didn't deter either university and Converge students from participating.

RECOMMENDATION: Disseminate how the Converge model offers a different take on work experience/placements for university students, where a focus on personal progression is as important as professional progression.

Section 6: Wellbeing and personal progression

Section 6.1: The impact of Converge on wellbeing

FINDING: Overwhelmingly, participants report that being part of Converge – whether as a university student volunteer or a Converge student – has a positive effect on their wellbeing, especially their mental wellbeing. The programme is also perceived to understand and support non-linear trajectories of mental health.

6.1.1 University students' understandings of mental health

FINDING: 74% of past university student survey respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement 'Engaging with Converge changed my understanding of mental health'. The majority of university students also feel that their experiences with Converge give them a better and more nuanced understanding of mental health issues.

RECOMMENDATION: University students' new understandings of mental health are something they can apply to their own experiences. This may be a form of knowledge exchange that the programme wants to develop moving forward.

6.1.2 Creativity and wellbeing

FINDING: Both Converge students and university students specify that the arts provide a creative outlet for their emotions. This ability to express oneself in a safe and non-judgemental space through an artistic medium plays a key role in the positive effects that Converge has on members' wellbeing.

6.1.3 Comparison with mainstream mental health services

FINDING: The ability to access Converge alongside mainstream mental health services is valuable for Converge students.

RECOMMENDATION: The programme may wish to consider how it increase its profile within local mental health services, to ensure that opportunities with Converge are highlighted to more service users.

6.1.4 Motivation and recovery journeys

FINDING: Converge supports Converge students' wellbeing by providing an impetus and the motivation to be active and engaged in something.

6.1.5 Community and wellbeing

FINDING: The Converge community was felt to be relaxed, non-pressured, and accepting – a 'safe space' for learning and exploration.

6.1.6 Enablers and barriers for personal progression and recovery

FINDING: Both Converge students and university students feel that Converge helped them to progress personally, particularly by being encouraged to get outside of their comfort zone, which leads to increased confidence and feelings of accomplishment.

Section 6.2: COVID-19

FINDING: The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns and restrictions across 2020-22 had a negative effect on participant wellbeing, though many comment that Converge had offered a 'lifeline' through the pandemic.

FINDING: Participants felt that Converge adapted quickly and well to online delivery in both locations, including offering IT loans and support in York, though felt that this did not fully allow for the same experiences found in person.

Section 7: Organisational culture, partnerships, and community models

Section 7.1: Converge's organisational practice

7.1.1 Converge staff and support systems

FINDING: Both the core Converge office teams in York and Newcastle, and the Discovery Hub team in York, are seen as warm, approachable, and supportive. The York-based voluntary Ambassador role is also seen as beneficial but in need of some development.

7.1.2 Teaching approach

FINDING: Converge students reported a high level of satisfaction with the quality of Converge courses, while tutors found that it broadened their own teaching practice.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge tutors called for more specialised training related to understanding and supporting specific conditions such as autism.

7.1.3 Coproduction and CERT (the Converge Evaluation and Research Team)

FINDING: CERT (at Converge York) is seen as an impactful model for peer research leadership and involvement. However, beyond Converge and its host departments in both locations, both universities' wider understanding of, and practical support for, coproduction was perceived as patchy.

RECOMMENDATION: Internal university support teams, especially HR and Finance, to look at making contracting and payment less burdensome for peer researchers.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge should explore further how to make its member support and skills development offer even stronger and more consistent.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge to examine fundraising opportunities for standalone research projects led by CERT members that would help to develop broader coproduction methodologies and knowledge.

RECOMMENDATION: CERT to hold regular group discussions on its own direction of travel in order to make sure that members are happy with how it is developing.

7.1.4 Institutional support and leadership

FINDING: York St John is seen as providing the right balance of support and autonomy for Converge in York. Converge at Northumbria University was widely perceived both internally and externally to need to build capacity at an institutional level; this perception often emerged within the wider context of the programme still being in an early development stage and thus not directly comparable with Converge in York.

7.1.5 Impact on universities' organisational cultures

FINDING: There is a shared perception that Converge has changed York St John University culture for the better. At Northumbria University, Converge is seen to have had an impact at a localised departmental level, but has work to do across the university.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge NU to work more closely with health-related courses on the Coach Lane campus.

Section 7.2: Community models and system change

7.2.1 Perceptions of current health, social care, and community sector landscapes

FINDING: While respondents have mixed feelings about current health, social care, and community sector landscapes, feeling that funding constraints and competitive practices decreased the ability to collaborate, there is a shared feeling that Converge delivers excellent return on investment, though needs to demonstrate this impact more directly.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge to articulate both its impact and its model of 'convergence', whereby Converge students and university students benefit equally and support one another, more clearly to funders.

7.2.2 Local collaboration and competition

FINDING: Converge is seen as offering high-quality collaboration opportunities in both York and Newcastle, though its visibility is patchy.

FINDING: Referral routes in both York and Newcastle are often ad hoc, with greater NHS involvement in York and a higher number of third sector referrals in Newcastle.

FINDING: Converge is perceived to directly support successful transitions in and out of secondary care.

RECOMMENDATION: Raise awareness of the Converge model throughout local and national healthcare and community agenda, for example by liaising with Health and Wellbeing Boards (or equivalent) and by lobbying NHS England to include it as a case study in key publications.

RECOMMENDATION: Carrying out awareness-raising and relationship development work across the NHS and community sectors, including clearer communication around eligibility criteria and joint induction meetings/shared workflow with core NHS staff, would help referral routes into Converge in both locations.

RECOMMENDATION: Increased joined-up working across secondary care and community organisations is key to further supporting individual transitions.

7.2.3 The call for system change

FINDING: There is a strong shared desire for widespread system change throughout the mental health and social care sector, with more resource allocated to early intervention models

RECOMMENDATION: Converge and partners to build in a greater level of national-level case-making for community-based delivery models.

Section 8: The future of Converge

Section 8.1: Short-term development

8.1.1 Administration and communication

FINDING: The Converge administration teams in both locations were praised for their friendliness, readiness to help, and professionalism, though respondents pointed to reduced resources in Northumbria which acted as a constraint to more widespread activity.

RECOMMENDATION: Review enrolment forms, university inductions and individual support for new Converge students.

RECOMMENDATION: Create opportunities for Converge students to get involved in course development.

RECOMMENDATION: Consider a more structured staff training programme.

RECOMMENDATION: Clarify expectations amongst tutors around administrative support.

8.1.2 Data, systems, and tracking

RECOMMENDATION: Streamline enrolment and participant data tracking, for example by investing in a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. This would enable quick and easy analysis of participation and retention by course, term, and demographic group, helping Converge to ensure that its services are reaching its key audiences.

8.1.3 The hybrid campus/digital offer

FINDING: The data shows a high level of satisfaction with the new online and postal Converge offer ('Converge Connected') developed during the pandemic.

RECOMMENDATION: Maintain and grow the current hybrid offer, but not at the expense of face-to-face delivery.

RECOMMENDATION: Consider the feasibility of offering a more structured social programme for Converge students.

8.1.4 Partnership development

RECOMMENDATION: Carry out targeted awareness-raising and partnership development work between North Yorkshire-based CMHTs and the Converge Discovery Hub in York.

RECOMMENDATION: Further develop the Northumbria/NHS, ICS, and CCG partnerships, including considering a showcase event.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge Northumbria to consider integrating offers with the third sector where feasible.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge York and Converge Northumbria to share best practice more regularly.

Section 8.2: Long-term development and perceived enablers/barriers

8.2.1. Strategic management and planning

RECOMMENDATION: Carry out leadership and succession planning in both York and Newcastle, including reviewing Board/Steering Group memberships.

RECOMMENDATION: Formalising university student involvement (see 'Section 4.2: University student role and recruitment').

RECOMMENDATION: Carry out internal positioning and case-making work to further embed university awareness and support, including around use of spaces.

RECOMMENDATION: Explore new areas of collaboration with other university departments.

RECOMMENDATION: Continuing to consider and advocate for a variety of methods of demonstrating impact in strategic planning and partnership development work.

8.2.2 Range of courses and audiences

FINDING: Converge's demographic reach in terms of Converge student recruitment was thought to need attention, with racially diverse populations, young people, those in the criminal justice system, and people with learning disabilities cited in particular.

FINDING: The data shows a widespread interest across all groups in a greater range and number of Converge courses being offered in both York and Newcastle; respondents generally thought that any new courses do not need to be arts-based, as long as there is a clear interest in them, they are aligned with university provision, and they lend themselves to the group approach.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge in both locations to consider how to diversify both audiences reached and courses offered.

8.2.3. Geographic and institutional growth

FINDING: There is a strong shared appetite for Converge to grow at both local and national level, though not at the risk of diluting the ethos or quality of the existing model.

FINDING: The closure of the Leeds pilot (2017-2019) was perceived to have been due to issues with differing expectations around partnership structures, leadership and administration.

RECOMMENDATION: To carry out scoping work around the potential development of national-level partnerships with other higher and further education institutions, with a view to extending the Converge model to other locations.

RECOMMENDATION: To consider local growth in York without straying from the key principle of access to campus resources; this might include working with partners to assess any additional issues at play, e.g., anxieties about accessing a university campus, or the price of inner-city travel.

RECOMMENDATION: To take the learnings from the Leeds programme and the reasons for its closure on board when considering any future geographic or institutional growth, in particular around governance structures and making sure that institutions have shared expectations around leadership and delivery.

8.2.4 Perceived barriers to growth

FINDING: The most commonly-cited perceived barriers to the growth of Converge were the risk of over-reaching capacity or diluting the existing offer, the pull to expand into non-critical activity, the threat of becoming overwhelmed by NHS bureaucracy or higher education research culture, and cross-sector funding limitations.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge to carry out careful and consultative strategic planning for any growth plans, articulating the expanded scope and feasibility in clear terms.

Section 8.3: Policy positioning

8.3.1 Positioning within higher education policy

RECOMMENDATION: Converge to further embed and extend its work-based learning elements throughout York St. John and Northumbria Universities, and to broaden access to a greater range of university students. **RECOMMENDATION:** Converge is an effective model for supporting university students in their efforts to prepare for future graduate level careers, and should work to raise visibility within the Office for Students.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge to assess and develop opportunities for the CERT model of coproduced research to become more active at local and national level, and to articulate itself as a model for others to follow, for example by acting as a case study for UK Research and Innovation's own dissemination work.

RECOMMENDATION: The outcomes of this project can be used to inform the development of the Knowledge Exchange Framework and its approach to collating, measuring and valuing knowledge exchange.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge to continue to develop collaborative research opportunities to explore, develop and influence national and local application of shared models of good practice across health and social care provision.

8.3.2 Positioning within health and social care policy

RECOMMENDATION: Converge can act as a case study to inform the development of community involvement in service delivery at Integrated Care System 'Place' level in its communities and at multiple 'Place' level sites of delivery across the nation.

RECOMMENDATION: Converge should position itself as a model of good practice in relation to the role and application of valued non-clinical community assets as key to implementing personalised care approaches, particularly via NHS England's work in this area.

Section 9: Impact of this project's coproduction activities

9.1 Impact of CEP's coproduction methods on participants

FINDING: Being involved in the evaluation project's coproduced activities enabled participants to enhance their research skills, reflect upon their own progress within the Converge programme (thus supporting their self-esteem and confidence), and develop a collaborative community.

9.2 Benefits of coproduction to the project approach

FINDING: Our coproduction activities allowed us to produce richer and more meaningful data, to create a community of voices which deepened and strengthened our analysis work, to upskill all researchers involved, and to actively unpick traditional research dynamics and hierarchies.

9.3 Lessons around coproduction methodology for wider application

FINDING: Coproduction approaches can help to broaden pre-existing perceptions of researcher identities for all concerned, whether 'experts by education' or 'experts by experience'.

RECOMMENDATION: Projects built upon coproduction approaches need to build in early discussions across the team around suitable methodologies and the optimum balance between collaboration, autonomy, and support for different groups.

RECOMMENDATION: Projects invested in coproduction need to dedicate time to getting their Finance and HR colleagues on board with making internal employment and payment processes as simple and accessible as possible, and to signpost support with benefits claims where appropriate.

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Acknowledgements

We are grateful to each and every participant and supporter of this research project, including university students, Converge students, external partners, the Converge teams in both York and Newcastle (including the Discovery Hub and Converge Ambassadors in York), Converge tutors, and university colleagues. In particular, our thanks go out to the Converge Evaluation and Research Team (CERT) and to the members of our Discussion Group, all of whom provided invaluable input. Thank you too to Cat Catizone and Zoe Robinson at Converge Northumbria, who provided crucial peer support to university students and Converge students joining the research in Newcastle.

Our wonderful Storytellers – Alison Thorpe, Amelia Eatough, Birgitte Rustand, Brenda Hodgson, Dawn Skelton, Emma Weston, Janine Yardley, Karl Whillis, Laura Nellis, Maddy Fisher, Mary Catherine Palmer, Michael Crew, Michelle Cairns, Paul John Bodie, Sylkie de Waard, Tara Mason, Tobi Jefferson-Towner, Tony Scully, and Yvonne Clarke – added so much to the project. Thank you for all your enthusiasm and commitment, and for being so open to sharing your own experiences and reflections with us.

We are also very grateful for all the time and energy put into the project by the members of our three governance groups:

Design and Delivery Group – Professor Nick Rowe, Professor Matthew Reason, Professor Toby Brandon, Emma McKenzie, and Ally Hunter-Byron

Advisory Group – Joe Micheli, Steve Nash, Alisdair Cameron, Professor Norma Daykin, Dr Catherine Heinemeyer, Heather Simpson, Chrissy Bonham, Dr Alison Brabban, and Professor Brendan Stone

Oversight Group – Professor Rob Mortimer, Adam Hewitt, Dr Rob Wilsmore, Dr Heather Robson, Dr Elizabeth Goodwin-Andersson, Marc Fleetham, Sue Buckle, Dr Steven Wright, and Alison Thain

Finally, on behalf of the main Converge team, our sincere thanks to everyone who has taken part in Converge in York and Newcastle over the years, all of whom have helped the model to develop.

The Converge evaluation project team:

Dr Harriet Barratt, Senior Research Associate

Dr Ruth Knight, Research Assistant (Community Engagement)

Ethan Butteriss, Research Assistant (Student Engagement) – December 2020 to January 2022

Dr Hollie Gowan, Research Assistant (Student Engagement) – March to September 2022

Robert Bennett, Institute for Social Justice Research Assistant (Policy) – February to July 2022

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