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A DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA's UNIVERSITY MAKES A DIFFERENCE OUTREACH PROGRAM (UMaDOP): REPORT No. 1

Lisa Smith
Debbie Devis
Maesie MacGillivray
Tanya Weiler
Simon N. Leonard

THE EDUCATION FUTURES ACADEMY (EFA)

In a field that is constantly evolving and complex, the need for innovative and adaptable education systems has never been more critical. The *EFA* embraces this challenge head-on, developing dynamic and inclusive communities where the learning sciences flourish, boundaries are pushed, and new educational paradigms are born.

We work with our partners and clients to make sense of existing data, identify gaps, and explore new terrain using emerging research. Our work is grounded in a deep understanding that education is not a one-size-fits-all model – it must evolve with context, culture, and community.

Our vision is to co-create an education that provides all students with the capabilities they need to thrive in 2030 and beyond. We do not come with simple solutions. Rather, we work towards sustainable and systemic change that makes a meaningful difference.

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EFA'S DEVELOPMENTAL EVALUATION APPROACH

EFA's evaluation framework draws from Patton's (2021) developmental evaluation (DE) approach. DE is distinct from traditional evaluation as it supports innovation and adaptation to emergent and dynamic realities in complex environments (Leonard et al., 2016). Traditional evaluation approaches, on the other hand, advocate for clear, specific, measurable outcomes that are to be achieved through a linear logic model. The programs we evaluate, including university outreach – what the EFA refer to more accurately as 'connect' programs as they are capacity building programs rather than those based on marketing the university – are working with degrees of uncertainty, turbulence, and emergence that traditional evaluation does not account for. As developmental evaluators, we help to surface and 'make sense of emergent problems, strategies, and goals as the social intervention *develops*' (Patton, 2021, p. 24). This enables us to provide timely feedback that can be used to adapt and improve aspects of a program. In future stages of a DE, we can then use evaluation data – for example, survey instruments, interviews, observations, learning artefacts, etc. – to work to identify patterns and new information that can be used in a feedback loop, i.e. a cyclical process whereby the output of a system, action, or decision is used to modify future actions or decisions. Essentially, we use DE to support ongoing real-time decisions about what to change, expand, close out, or further develop in the connect work.

Our DE approach applies a contribution analysis lens to examine how an intervention or program influences practice and outcomes over time. Contribution analysis is designed to test and refine a program's Theory of Change (ToC) by exploring whether, how and under what condition an intervention is contributing to desired outcomes (Mayne, 2008). Rather than seeking simple attribution ('did it work?'), it builds a plausible, evidence-informed narrative of a program's role in change processes within complex systems such as schools, communities, or higher education settings.

A central feature of our approach to contribution analysis is through the surfacing of tensions (Leonard et al., 2025). In complex educational initiatives, tensions frequently arise between

competing priorities or between different actors' expectations and practices. Identifying and analysing these tensions does not imply deficit; rather, it helps us clarify real-world constraints and opportunities shaping implementation.

Through workshops, focused conversations, and review of program documentation, we work collaboratively with stakeholders to map these tensions and analyse how they impact on the intended outcomes. This process allows a ToC to be tested and refined as new insights emerge, creating an evidence-base for adaptive decision-making and continuous improvement. As a result of our approach, we shift our focus from *'Does this program work?'* to *'What elements of the program enable the outcomes to occur?'*

The evaluation methodology as set out above follows a set of six grounding principles. These principles enable evaluation-based collaborations that are responsive to the immediate needs of our partners, while also supporting the generation of important knowledge about what is working and for whom in relation to our student equity groups as defined by the *Australian Universities Accord* (2024) – including people from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people from regional and remote areas, people with disabilities, people from non-English speaking backgrounds (also referred to as 'culturally and linguistically diverse'), and women in non-traditional areas of specialisation. It follows that our developmental evaluations are:

1. **Theory-informed –** the evaluative work is informed by the contemporary learning theories and learning sciences, providing all stakeholders with current and relevant research.
2. **Collaborative –** evaluation is designed and scoped in collaboration with relevant stakeholders, ensuring different perspectives are appropriately considered.
3. **Meaningful –** produces knowledge that is relevant, timely, and insightful.
4. **Sustainable –** the evaluation incorporates the organisation and system capacity development to ensure the translation of findings into practice is sustainable.
5. **Aligned –** the evaluation process informs organisational priorities and aims in a manner that enables the achievement of the program's goals.
6. **Iterative –** the evaluation design includes early and timely reporting so it can evolve and adjust to changing needs and circumstance.

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UMaDOP

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Centre for Change and Complexity in Learning (C3L)
UniSA: Education Futures
University of South Australia
https://unisa.edu.au/research/c3l/

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This evaluation report presents the initial formative evaluation of the *University Makes a Difference Outreach Program* (UMaDOP), a University of South Australia (UniSA) widening participation program delivered in the pre-access student life stage as outlined in *The Student Equity in Higher Education Evaluation Framework* (SEHEEF) (Johnstone et al., 2021). UMaDOP is designed for students who are engaged in the South Australia's Department for Education's (DfE) Tailored Learning program, which specifically supports young people who have disengaged from schooling, or have poor attendance at school (Department for Education, 2024). This may be due to complex personal barriers that negatively impact on schooling.

The evaluation serves three key purposes:

1. To construct a clear and testable Theory of Change for the program along with the assumptions on which it has been built.
2. To identify initial tensions and enablers in the program as indicators of the key relationships, activities and mediating factors that influence how the program operates in practice.
3. To inform ongoing program development through the use of evidence-informed insights and recommendations.

UMaDOP: Program Overview

Co-designed with students and educators, the UMaDOP is underpinned by the delivery of 'Understanding the Social World of Generation Z', a scaffolded short course delivered by university academics, with student support provided by second year Master of Teaching mentors. The course develops students' understanding of the role universities play in solving societal issues through research. Curriculum is scaffolded across six workshops to build students' academic literacies as they investigate a research problem of their interest. Students complete a negotiated assessment task, which presents their findings, with the potential for this to contribute to their SACE credits.

Purpose of the Evaluation

The primary purpose of this evaluation is to construct a clear, testable *Theory of Change* (ToC), which sets out the pathways through which change is anticipated to occur. A theory-based approach to evaluation is particularly useful in education programs because it encourages us to move beyond simply asking whether an initiative 'worked' to instead considering how and why certain components or arrangements might work, for whom, and under what conditions. As Moore et al. (2022, p. 60) explain, theories of change allow evaluators and practitioners 'to hypothesise about the mechanisms that might generate positive changes for the target groups, in which context and why'.

By setting out this logic clearly, the evaluation provides a shared framework for our stakeholders by clarifying the purpose of the program activities, identifying the intended outcomes, and making the assumptions underpinning the work transparent. This is important because when assumptions remain implicit, they cannot be tested or improved. In contrast, a clearly articulated ToC allows us to test whether the program is achieving what it set out to do, adapt the design in response to the evidence in future iterations, and ensure that it continues to serve equity goals in UMaDOP.

Summary of Recommendations

- **Recommendation 1:** Define what academic identity means within the context of alternate education, and what would be considered sufficient to enable the outcomes.

- **Recommendation 2:** Incorporate a structured overview of 'hot', 'warm' and 'cold' knowledge and their differing roles in shaping how L-SES students perceive and navigate pathways to HE within mentor induction.
- **Recommendation 3:** Assess the impact of 'warm' and 'cold' knowledge exchange. Evaluation questions might include: Which forms of warm knowledge provided through UMaDOP are most influential in shaping students' perceptions of HE? Are students now seeking out further warm (e.g., from UMaDOP mentors or facilitators) or hot knowledge from their immediate social networks? How do students act on cold knowledge after program participation (e.g., exploring pathways, seeking out further information directly through official HE channels, applications to UniSA College)?
- **Recommendation 4:** Assess if/how the diversity of facilitators is supporting remediation to deliberately structure facilitator training and responsibilities and define future expectations.
- **Recommendation 5:** In order to facilitate agentic action following the interaction with UMaDOP, design structures that support and motivate students to continue themes and ideas that arose from their project beyond its conclusion.
- **Recommendation 6:** Draw explicit links on the mechanics of how academic identity leads to belonging, so as to avoid potential detrimental feedback loops.
- **Recommendation 7:** Invite community members beyond the school to be involved in and design for UMaDOP. This may also include inviting local community members and stakeholders to see student projects and establish connections to action student ideas.
- **Recommendation 8:** Formalise opportunities for UMaDOP participants to showcase their projects to and mentor future cohorts. This could produce multiple benefits including the extension of students' civic impact, embedding a culture of youth voice, and legitimising student knowledge in both educational and community domains.
- **Recommendation 9:** In 2026, draw on expertise from Adelaide University's College of Education, Behaviour and Social Science to design and deliver explicit training for facilitators and mentors to navigate vicarious trauma and manage the emotional intensity of working with students' heavy funds of knowledge.
- **Recommendation 10:** Design program activities that continue to 'drip-feed' collaboration as an explicit object of learning; e.g., structured peer feedback or co-presentations, so that students can experience the benefits of co-design, shared meaning making, and collective problem-solving.
- **Recommendation 11:** Develop and trial strategies for gradually building students' comfort for working interdependently, not just independently.

UMADOP: AN EQUITY IMPETUS

UMaDOP operates in alternative – also referred to as second or last chance (Te Riele, 2007) – education contexts. Australian research shows that these sites cater for students who have not been well served by, and more often than not, have been sequestered out of mainstream schooling (Howard, 2023; Mills et al., 2013; Smith, 2024; Smyth & Hattam, 2004). Alternative school student populations largely comprise of those from disadvantaged communities, and in South Australia in particular, students located in the northern suburbs of Adelaide (Bills & Howard, 2016).

For a number of young people, educational exclusion – in this case, from the mainstream schooling system – causes such a strong emotional experience that it can result in what Furlong (1991) refers to as 'hidden injuries of schooling' (p. 296). He proposed that for some students 'their emotionality will be a product of their educational experience' resulting in 'hidden injuries' (p. 296). Elaborating on Furlong's concept, Slee (1995) observes that:

> As students experience three sets of educational structures – the production of ability; the production of values; and the production of occupational identity – these "hidden injuries" are inflicted by pedagogy, curriculum, school culture and practices, and the calibration of students on an occupational scale. (p. 114)

Hidden injuries generate myriad student responses, some of which include disaffection, rejection of schooling, anger, recalcitrance, truancy, low self-worth, fear, frustration, and self-doubt about their ability to succeed in school and further education. Alternative schools tend to understand and respond to prior hidden injuries of schooling through an ethic of care and by working to develop 'attitudes, values and dispositions that enable students to raise their confidence and self-worth' (Smyth & McInerney, 2013, p. 48). And while this environment may support students who have been disaffected with the mainstream schooling system with the means for reconnecting and developing a renewed sense of belonging in an education setting, it does not appear to be enough in enabling their completion of secondary education. For instance, students enrolled in alternative education in South Australia have been found to have low South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) completion rates. Only 7 per cent of those in what was previously referred to by the South Australia's Department for Education (DfE) as Flexible Learning Options – now the Tailored Learning model – completed their SACE Stage 1, and only 2 per cent completed their SACE Stage 2 (the final year of school) (Bills & Howard, 2016). While these figures are somewhat dated, they remain the most recent available for South Australia and paint a sobering picture of the challenges faced by alternative education settings in supporting students to complete their secondary schooling.

Problematically, alternative education programs have also been found to primarily focus on a 'narrow, vocationally oriented curriculum' (Bills & Howard, 2016, pp. 50–52). Narrowing curriculum acts as a systematic barrier for blocking students' possible future pathways and delimiting those pathways that may involve higher education (HE). In Australia there continues to be a disparity in representation in HE participation with students from low socioeconomic (L-SES) contexts persistently underrepresented (King et al., 2022; Sellar et al., 2011; Smith, 2011; Wilson et al., 2025). Importantly though, and especially for disadvantaged communities, HE attainment is linked to 'higher total incomes, more diverse sources of income … reduced reliance on the aged pension' (Department of Education, 2019), improved health, and increased access to safe and healthy housing (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare & National Indigenous Australians Agency, 2023). Furthermore, Australian research shows that young people who successfully complete secondary school are far more likely to continue with further study – and in particular, higher education – which indicates that

school completion, a significant issue in the alternative education space, is a critical precursor to accessing the long-term benefits associated with HE (Bills & Howard, 2016; Lamb et al., 2015).

In response, UMaDOP serves a dual purpose. Firstly, it provides a number of curriculum-aligned tasks that can be used to supplement students' Stage 1 and 2 SACE credits which supports their progress toward secondary school completion (i.e., SACE attainment). Secondly, it seeks to broaden students' pathways beyond vocational education by introducing and legitimising HE as a viable and attainable pathway. Through this design, UMaDOP works to address two interrelated barriers – low secondary school completion rates in alternative education, and limited exposure to HE pathways and the social capital required to navigate them – by embedding outreach activities within the familiar structures of students' schooling experience.

As a pre-access outreach initiative – i.e., one that operates in schools and communities prior to HE access (Johnstone et al., 2021) – UMaDOP aligns closely with the evidence base on effective outreach practice. For instance, Australian research indicates that outreach programs are most impactful when they are tied to curriculum (Bennett et al., 2024), use a people rich approach by prioritising ongoing relationships between young people and those who are in a position to provide tailored guidance (Gale et al., 2010; Wilson et al., 2025), are developed in partnership with schools (Gale & Parker, 2013), utilise a mentorship model (especially mentors who share a similar background with participants) (Bennett et al., 2024), and recognise difference and the range of knowledges and learning capacities of students from disadvantaged communities as an asset (Gale et al., 2010). Additionally, Bennett et al. (2024) cite pre-access student engagement in campus activities as an important feature of effective outreach work. However, Smith (2011) and Stone et al. (2022) contend that campus visits can instead result in negative L-SES student perceptions of HE. Smith found that instead of 'enhancing the "fit" between L-SES students and HE', campus visits left students with the impression that they were 'outsiders looking in' (p. 172). Whilst Stone et al. cautions that without clear purpose and relevance to students' lives, campus visits not only create a mismatch between university intentions and school and student expectations, but more concerningly, create the perception that they are 'marketing exercises and hence to be treated with suspicion' (p. 73). As such, campus visits in UMaDOP have been designed to have clear purpose and alignment to students' negotiated assessment task.

EVALUATION OVERVIEW

Purpose and scope of the evaluation

The purpose of this developmental evaluation (DE) is to provide a foundation for understanding how UMaDOP contributes to equity-focused outcomes in the access/participatory stages of higher education. More specifically, the evaluation aims to make explicit the program's underlying Theory of Change (ToC), highlight the assumptions that inform it, and begin to map the situational dynamics of the systems in which the program operates. This work is intended to be formative, providing a platform for ongoing empirical inquiry and refinement. As such, this DE has been guided by the following overarching questions:

- *What elements of UMaDOP hinder and/or enable its outcomes?*
- *What assumptions underpin UMaDOP and how do these inform its intended outcomes?*

Cohorts of interest

The primary cohort of interest in this evaluation are the UMaDOP Program Officers (research and teaching academics), program designers, professional staff, and program mentors. For brevity, this report (where required) refers to the collective cohort as 'UMaDOP staff'.

For future evaluative work, cohorts of interest should extend to program participants who are, or have previously, engaged with UMaDOP.

Parameters of the evaluation

This DE is bounded by its focus on the ToC, its assumptions, and the tensions which impact upon it. It incorporates qualitative insights drawn from the initial workshop and subsequent conversations with UMaDOP Program Officers.

What is not being evaluated

This evaluation does not assess:

- The overall effectiveness or scalability of UMaDOP as a program; or
- Student achievement outcomes as a result of involvement in UMaDOP.

METHODOLOGY

All educational sites are complex. They are eco-systems in which many actors engage – educators, learners, community members – to achieve numerous and diverse goals. Given this reality, our evaluation approach goes beyond assessing whether an innovation 'worked', and investigates what worked, from whom, and in what contexts. When outcomes fall short, we aim to examine why in order to better refine and improve program design.

Our approach builds upon an increasing body of scholarship in evaluation making use of complexity science to engage with complex problems in public policy domains such as education. This scholarship has shown that most public policy problems are non-linear and do not respond to simple interventions. The problems we are dealing with today behave like an eco-system, so our approach explores the complex interactions, feedback loops, and emergent properties we find in complex systems like UMaDOP and the schools in which it operates.

Our process involves using contribution analysis to surface tensions that influence how a program operates and what outcomes it can reasonably achieve. Tensions may reflect competing priorities, resource constraints, or differences in expectations between actors. Mapping these dynamics in addition to the program's ToC helps make explicit the assumptions underpinning an initiative and provides evidence for refining its design and delivery.

In July 2025, we conducted an interactive and intensive four-hour workshop with the staff responsible for the design, administration, coordination, mentoring, and delivery of UMaDOP. Guided by an equity agenda, the workshop created a structured space for participants to articulate their understanding of the program, identify its key activities/components and anticipated outcomes, and begin to explore factors influencing program effectiveness. The insights generated have been used to identify current tensions and to make explicit a preliminary Theory of Change (ToC), providing a structured means of bringing together assumptions and intentions that had until now remained largely tacit within the program design. Following the workshop, the evaluation team engaged in further informal conversations and reflective discussions with the Program Lead to refine both the modelling and the ToC.

EQUITY BY DESIGN: THEORY OF CHANGE

Our initial stakeholder conversations with the UMaDOP staff, together with recent literature, informed the causal links and assumptions in this recommended ToC. Assumptions and evidence that informed this ToC are outlined in detail below.

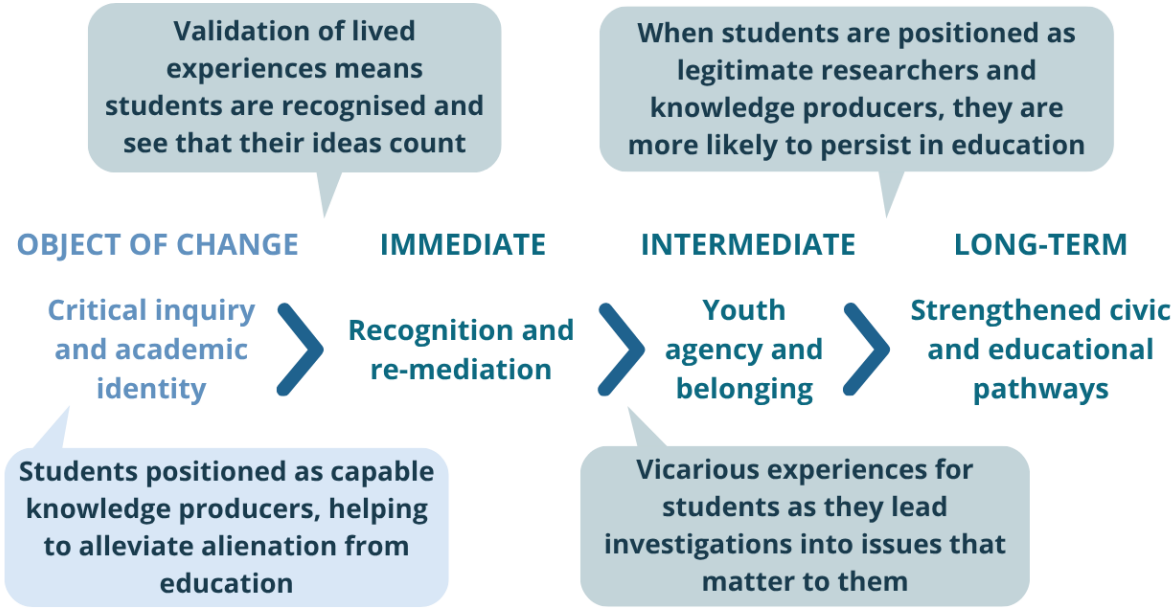

Figure 1: Theory of Change using research informed assumptions

A Theory of Change works when its assumptions are met, allowing the expected outcomes to transpire. These assumptions are represented in the model in the coloured boxes. The Object of Change of UMaDOP, i.e. critical inquiry and academic identity, is an enabler for some of these assumptions, suggesting a strong Theory of Change.

Object of Change: Critical Inquiry and Academic Identity

An object of change within in an activity or program is a specific aspect that is being intentionally changed. The outcomes of the activity or program emerge as a consequence of this specific change. In UMaDOP, two objects of change were identified: Critical Inquiry and Academic Identity. It is worth noting that the program centres around these objects as practicable targets of pedagogy and iterative design, from which larger outcomes (e.g., belonging or remediation) arise.

UMaDOP supports the development of critical inquiry and problem-solving skills. Working with university mentors and researchers provides students with vicarious experiences (Bandura, 1977) including modelling the process of framing questions, collecting and analysing data, and generating solutions. Students engage collaboratively with peers and academics in cycles of inquiry and action, as drawn from youth participatory action research (YPAR) methodologies. YPAR 'promotes critical thinking and investigation that leads to social impact and change' (Keddie, 2021, p. 381)

Research on YPAR indicates that when young people lead investigations into issues that matter to them, they develop not only analytical and critical skills but also a heightened sense of confidence in their ability to influence change. For UMaDOP participants, these outcomes are expected to extend beyond the immediate project including the building of academic literacies, preparedness for further education pathways, and 'active and informed critical citizenship' (Keddie, 2021, p. 381).

Positive academic identities – also referred to in the literature as 'student identities' and 'learner identities' – arise when young people come to see themselves as capable participants in academic communities (MacFarlane, 2018; Stokes, 2024). This identity is not a by-product of academic success; rather, it is cultivated through repeated opportunities to practice their autonomy and YPAR within socially and academically supportive environments. However, for many students in alternative schooling and disadvantaged contexts, such opportunities are limited or fragmented, making the early development of an academic identity more consequential. UMaDOP addresses this object of change by deliberately positioning students within authentic university spaces and academic learning relationships. Through the implementation of structured inquiry, collaborative problem-solving and modelling from mentors and researchers, students are gradually introduced to the dispositions and capabilities that underpin successful engagement in and transition to HE, e.g. confidently posing research questions, navigating unfamiliar academic expectations and recognising their own capacity to contribute ideas.

- ***Recommendation 1:*** *Define what academic identity means within the context of alternate education, and what would be considered sufficient to enable the outcomes.*

Immediate Outcome: Recognition and Remediation

UMaDOP seeks to 're-mediate'[1] (Gutiérrez et al., 2009) young people with their learning. For young people in alternative settings, the validation of their lived experiences and knowledge is critical for re-establishing a connection with learning (Zipin et al., 2015). Through the co-identification of problems that matter, students experience a sense of recognition and legitimacy. Following the positive increases in inquiry skills and academic identity, students begin to see that their ideas 'count' as they develop projects that respond to real personal and community concerns.

Belonging, borrowing from Noble (2020), refers to a set of interrelated *practices*: *situated*, *relational* and *scaled*. Belonging is *situated* in that it takes shape within specific social and institutional contexts; *relationa*l because it depends upon mutual recognition and acknowledgement by others; and *scaled* because experiences of belonging vary across different spaces – school, community, leisure, and work – with each carrying its own expectations and possibilities (Noble, 2020, p. xvii). Belonging then is a practice that requires a form of negotiated labour and is sustained through ongoing interaction within particular settings.

UMaDOP generates belonging to HE through multiple mechanisms including:

- University mentors who draw from a range of backgrounds to engage with L-SES students through sustained contact and offering support and encouragement for each of their mentees as they work to develop their projects.
- University facilitators and mentors share different kinds of 'warm knowledge' of HE with students and at the same time, act as decoders of 'cold knowledge' about alternative access pathways, including the UniSA College. Warm knowledge can be described as informal 'word of mouth' knowledge gained from social sources outside one's personal circle (Slack et al., 2014), whereas cold knowledge is comprised of the formal knowledge produced by institutions such as schools, universities, and governments, and appears through mediums

[1] We align our use of 're-mediate' with Gutiérrez, Hunter and Arzubiaga's (2009) notion which involves students developing 'new ways of learning, drawing on their newly expanded repertoires of practice to re-mediate the inequities of their previous schooling experiences and their identities as learners' (p. 18).

such as official websites, league tables, and educational access eligibility and processes (e.g. South Australian Tertiary Admissions Centre applications for HE) (Smith, 2011). The vicarious experiences of HE gained through social networks play a 'significant role in the decision-making of low-SES students' when imagining whether they 'fit' and belong within HE spaces (Smith, 2011, p. 166).

- Tailored campus visits which involve UMaDOP participants visiting various UniSA campuses that align with their areas of interest. This provides an opportunity to build awareness in students of the differences between school and university, and the facilities and resources available in HE. For many UMaDOP participants, negative associations with the physical school environment may influence their willingness and motivation to continue studying. Bringing students onto campuses, providing tours through facilities such as nursing practice wards, photography studios, social work studios as well as more traditional teaching spaces of lecture theatres and tutorial spaces provides students with an insight into how university differs from schooling.
- At the culmination of the program, students' work is showcased at UniSA's City West campus with an audience comprised of UMaDOP staff and mentors, university academics, families, school teachers, and community members and leaders. The showcase provides participants an opportunity to reflect and share their experience of being part of the UMaDOP program. At the recent inaugural UMaDOP showcase, students reflected on the positive impact the program had made in their lives, while staff outlined how it had provided greater focus for students in Tailored Learning. Beyond these individual gains, the presence of senior university leadership and other members of the university community emphasised the importance of equity and access as central to the mission of the university, reinforcing the sense of belonging fostered in the program.

Since practices for shifting L-SES students' perceptions of and relationships to HE are already in place, the recommendations are:

- ***Recommendation 2:*** *Incorporate a structured overview of 'hot', 'warm', and 'cold' knowledge and their differing roles in shaping how L-SES students perceive and navigate pathways to HE within mentor induction; and*
- ***Recommendation 3:*** *Assess the impact of 'warm' and 'cold' knowledge exchange. Evaluation questions might include: Which forms of warm knowledge provided through UMaDOP are most influential in shaping students' perceptions of HE? Are students now seeking out further warm (e.g., from UMaDOP mentors or facilitators) or hot knowledge from their immediate social networks? How do students act on cold knowledge after program participation (e.g., exploring pathways, seeking out further information directly through official HE channels, applications to UniSA College)?*
- ***Recommendation 4:*** *Assess if/how the diversity of facilitators is supporting remediation to deliberately structure facilitator training and responsibilities and define future expectations.*

Intermediate Outcome: Youth Agency and Belonging

UMaDOP works with young people in alternative schools who have been disaffected from mainstream schooling. Its purpose is to strengthen participating students' sense of agency, belonging and capacity to act on issues that matter to them and their communities. Drawing from Cook-Sather's (2021) definition, agency is understood here as 'students' ability to exert influence in their learning context, to transform their own and others' learning experiences, and to expand learning' (p. 182). UMaDOP adopts Zipin and Brennan's (2024) *problems that matter* pedagogical approach which develops student agency and at the same time, positions students' lived experiences not as deficits,

but as legitimate, knowledge-rich starting points for inquiry. This approach acknowledges the importance of *funds of knowledge* (Moll et al., 1992) and *funds of identity* (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014) by recognising that the cultural experiences and practices of students can be mobilised as rich educational resources. By working alongside university researchers to investigate and respond to these identified problems, students are positioned as capable knowledge producers. Zipin et al. (2015) argue that this way of integrating lived-cultural knowledge into curriculum helps to alleviate the alienation experienced by students who are otherwise confronted with content that continues to privilege the cultural capital of elite social groups (p. 237).

Because of this, the recommendations are:

- ***Recommendation 5:*** *In order to facilitate agentic action following the interaction with UMaDOP, design structures that support and motivate students to continue themes and ideas that arose from their project beyond its conclusion.*
- ***Recommendation 6:*** *Draw explicit links on the mechanics of how academic identity leads to belonging, so as to avoid potential detrimental feedback loops.*

Long-Term Outcome: Strengthened Civic and Educational Pathways

The long-term aspiration of UMaDOP is to foster sustained civic participation and expand educational opportunities. When young people are positioned as legitimate researchers and knowledge producers, they are more likely to persist in education and are empowered to 'proact towards better futures' (Zipin & Marie, 2024, p. 13). This is particularly important in the context of alternative schooling, where there are low South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) completion rates and transitions to HE or training are often fragile (Bills & Howard, 2016; Howard, 2023). Australian research indicates that young people who complete their schooling are more likely to continue with further study, particularly HE (Bills & Howard, 2016; Lamb et al., 2015).

Through UMaDOP, students not only build individual skills and confidence but also contribute to strengthening community capacity by developing solutions that respond to local challenges. Windle et al. (2025) explain that education *for* citizenship 'involves broader learning experiences that support students to actively participate and contribute to society' (p. 30).

As such the recommendations are to:

- ***Recommendation 7:*** *Invite community members beyond the school to be involved in and design for UMaDOP. This may also include inviting local community members and stakeholders to see student projects and establish connections to action student ideas.*
- ***Recommendation 8:*** *Formalise opportunities for UMaDOP participants to showcase their projects to and mentor future cohorts. This could produce multiple benefits including the extension of students' civic impact, embedding a culture of youth voice, and legitimising student knowledge in both educational and community domains.*

UMADOP: TENSIONS AND ENABLERS

Initial tensions and enablers identified through the workshop and subsequent conversations with the UMaDOP staff are presented below. These tensions and enablers highlight the key relationships, activities, and mediating factors that influence how the program operates in practice. Mapping them has directly informed the Theory of Change by clarifying how activities are expected to interact with contextual factors to generate immediate, intermediate, and long-term outcomes. Collection of further empirical data will enable confirmation and/or advancement of the identified tensions.

Tension and Enabler 1: The role of the UMaDOP facilitator and their emotional labour

Facilitators and mentors in UMaDOP occupy a role as trusted adults in the student's life. Within this role, they provide 'warm knowledge' – experiential knowledge that is not directly embedded in students' personal networks, but is derived from 'strangers with which there is a perceived synergy' (Slack et al., 2014, p. 119) – for students, assisting in the decoding of the hidden curriculum of the university system [enabler]. However, students often come with 'heavy funds of knowledge' – 'cultural knowledge and experiences of oppression, poverty, crime, violence and so on' (Archer, 2018, p. 170) – with facilitators and mentors experiencing high degrees of emotional labour, which they may feel under-prepared for [tension]. The UMaDOP facilitators and mentors who engage in the program often do so for more altruistic reasons [enabler], leading to their emotional investment, which is an unspecified division of labour in the program [tension].

- ***Recommendation 9:*** *In 2026, draw on expertise from Adelaide University's College of Education, Behaviour and Social Science to design and deliver explicit training for facilitators and mentors to navigate vicarious trauma and manage the emotional intensity of working with students' heavy funds of knowledge.*

Tension and Enabler 2: Facilitating for interaction and collaboration

Students in alternative schooling spaces are often required to engage in highly individualised modes of learning [tension]. This emphasis on self-paced, independent learning can also be understood as both a response to and a consequence of their experiences of exclusion from mainstream schooling. Within this context, UMaDOP's focus on personal projects can inadvertently reinforce this hyper-individualised approach [tension].

At the same time, UMaDOP provides deliberate opportunities for students to work collaboratively with mentors and university researchers to investigate problems that matter to them and their communities [enabler]. These forms of interdependent learning experiences introduce students to the relational and dialogic dimensions of learning which supports the program's broader intention to re-mediate students with formal education.

- ***Recommendation 10:*** *Design program activities that continue to 'drip-feed' collaboration as an explicit object of learning, e.g., structured peer feedback or co-presentations, so that students can experience the benefits of co-design, shared meaning making, and collective problem-solving.*
- ***Recommendation 11:*** *Develop and trial strategies for gradually building students' comfort for working interdependently, not just independently.*

UMADOP: SUMMARY AND OPPORTUNITIES

This developmental evaluation (DE) has provided a detailed Theory of Change (ToC) for UMaDOP – including the underlying assumptions which inform it – along with the initial tensions of the UMaDOP activity. As the first in a planned series of formative evaluations, this DE provides a foundation for further empirical work aimed at refining the modelling and testing the ToC.

Building on the insights gained from this report, the following section highlights potential opportunities for enhancing the program's impact. The opportunities outlined here are not intended to be exhaustive or prescriptive, nor is it suggested that all instruments be administered within a single delivery cycle of UMaDOP – doing so would place undue burden on participants. Instead, the instruments and approaches should be viewed as a menu of options to be selectively and strategically applied over time. This would allow for iterative testing of the program's ToC and refinement of outcomes and program design as it evolves.

Evaluation Framework

The development of a clear Evaluation Framework will help to test the ToC. It is recommended that the framework breaks down UMaDOP into its distinct components – mentoring model, facilitator delivery, university campus visits, showcase, etc. – to determine how each contributes to the program's intended immediate and intermediate outcomes. As a starting point for this activity, the SEHEEF's *Continuous Quality Improvement Tool* (see Johnstone et al., 2021, p. 13) may prove useful. This tool can support program facilitators and evaluators to work collaboratively to identify program activities and outcomes (as developed in this report) and to map the indicators and data sources to each outcome.

Student Agency

UMaDOP's Object of Change (OoC) is to strengthen student agency. Evaluation of this OoC, as well as UMaDOP's outcomes, would, where possible, benefit from the use of validated quantitative instruments as a part of a mixed methods approach. However, instruments that have been designed to specifically measure student agency in alternative school sites, and at the same in widening HE participation contexts (i.e. UMaDOP), do not exist. Existing measures that capture aspects of students' abilities to influence their learning, make decisions and engage with challenges, can be used but will require adaptations to reflect the unique experiences of L-SES students' participation in the UMaDOP. A sample of existing measures which may be suitable for adaptation include the *Agency of University Students* (AUS) *Scale* (Jääskelä et al., 2017) and *Agency for Learning Questionnaire*[2] (AFLQ) (Code, 2020).

It is recommended that the agency instrument be administered at two or three points – i.e., beginning and end, or beginning, midway, and end – during UMaDOP's delivery so as to track the shifts in students' perceptions of agency.

Survey data can be complemented with semi-structured interviews which explore:

- Examples where students felt able to influence their project or learning environment;
- Times where students felt a sense of ownership in the decision-making or an ability to exercise action within the community, university, or school context (in relation to or as a part of UMaDOP); and

[2] Note: See Appendices A and B (pp. 14–15) in the citation provided for the AFLQ's short and long form versions.

- How participation in UMaDOP shaped their confidence in their learning.

Sense of Belonging

For students in alternative education, developing a sense of belonging in formal education environments like HE is an important intermediate outcome. Validated instruments such as the *Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM)* Scale (Goodenow, 1993) or the *Sense of Belonging Scale* (SBS) (Hoffman et al., 2002) could be adapted to measure students' sense of recognition, legitimacy, and inclusion in UMaDOP. As with the previous instruments, it is suggested that the PSSM or SBS is administered at multiple points to capture change over time.

Survey data can be complemented with semi-structured interviews which explore:

- Students' experiences of recognition and validation within UMaDOP;
- The role of relationships with mentors, facilitators, research academics, and peers in developing belonging; and
- Students' sense of legitimacy of and social belonging to HE.

School Teacher Insights

In addition to gathering data directly from student participants, it is recommended that future evaluation cycles incorporate insights from teachers within participating schools. Teachers are uniquely positioned to observe shifts in students' attitudes, engagement, and confidence that may not be immediately captured through self-report measures. Teachers' reflections can be collected through short observation templates, reflective interviews, or end-of-program focus groups (if feasible).

Final Remarks

As this report represents the first formative evaluation of UMaDOP, the focus of the initial data collection has been on understanding the environment in which the program operates, developing a testable ToC and identifying its underlying assumptions. As Mayne (2008) points out, assumptions are one of the three forms of evidence required to validate a ToC, the remaining include observed results and the influencing factors (p. 16). This developmental approach lays the groundwork for future evaluations that should include teachers' and students' perspectives. Future stages should also integrate validated instruments alongside qualitative insights to provide a mixed-methods assessment of UMaDOP's outcomes and program impact.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Sense of Belonging Scale – Revised

Hoffman, M.B., Richmond, J.R., Morrow, J.A. & Salomone, K. (2002-2003). Investigating 'sense of belonging' in first-year college students. *Journal of College Student Retention*, *4*(3), 227–256.

Revised scale has 4 factors; original scale was 5 factors (Perceived Faculty Support was 2 factors).

Individual factors were created by adding their respective items and calculating their mean. There are no weights.

No questions are reverse scored.

Completely Untrue	1
Mostly Untrue	2
Equally True and Untrue	3
Mostly True	4
Completely True	5

Perceived Peer Support (8 items)

1. I have met with classmates outside of class to study for an exam.
2. If I miss class, I know students who I could get notes from.
3. I discuss events which happened outside of class with my classmates.
4. I have discussed personal matters with students who I met in class.
5. I could contact another student from class if I had a question.
6. Other students are helpful in reminding me when assignments are due or when tests are approaching.
7. I have developed personal relationships with other students in class.
8. I invite people I know from class to do things socially.

Perceived Classroom Comfort (4 items)

9. I feel comfortable contributing to class discussions.
10. I feel comfortable asking a question in class.
11. I feel comfortable volunteering ideas or opinions in class.
12. Speaking in class is easy because I feel comfortable.

Perceived Isolation (4 items)

13. It is difficult to meet other students in class.
14. No one in my classes knows anything personal about me.
15. I rarely talk to other students in my class.
16. I know very few people in my class.

Perceived Faculty Support (10 items)

17. I feel comfortable talking about a problem with faculty.
18. I feel comfortable asking a teacher for help if I do not understand course-related material.
19. I feel that a faculty member would be sensitive to my difficulties if I shared them.
20. I feel comfortable socialising with a faculty member outside of class.
21. I feel that a faculty member would be sympathetic if I was upset.
22. I feel that a faculty member would take the time to talk to me if I needed help.
23. If I had a reason, I would feel comfortable seeking help from a faculty member outside of class time (office hours etc.).
24. I feel comfortable seeking help from a teacher before or after class.
25. I feel that a faculty member really tried to understand my problem when I talked about it.
26. I feel comfortable asking a teacher for help with a personal problem.

Appendix B: The Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSSM) Scale

Goodenow, C. (1993). The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates. *Psychology in the Schools*, *30*(1), 79-90. https://doi.org/10.1002/1520-6807(199301)30:1<79::AID-PITS2310300113>3.0.CO;2-X

The Psychological Sense of School Membership (PSSM) Scale measures students' sense of belonging within their educational setting. The scale consists of 18 items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = Not at all true to 5 = Completely true.

Items 3, 6, 9, 12 and 26 are negatively worded. These items must be reverse-scored prior to calculating the total score. For a 5-point scale, recode as follows:

- 1 → 5
- 2 → 4
- 3 → 3
- 4 → 2
- 5 → 1

After reverse-scoring the necessary items, calculate the sum for all 18 items for each respondent. Total PSSM score = Sum of all 18 item scores.

Final PSSM mean score = Total PSSM score ÷ 18

This produces a mean score ranging from 1.0 to 5.0 with higher scores indicating a stronger psychological sense of membership or belonging.

Interpreting the results[3]:

- 1.0–2.0: Low sense of belonging
- 2.1–3.4: Moderate sense of belonging
- 3.5–5.0: High sense of belonging

Instrument items:

1. I feel like a real part of (name of school).
2. People here notice when I'm good at something.
3. It is hard for people like me to be accepted here. (*reversed*)
4. Other students in this school take my opinions seriously.
5. Most teachers at (name of school) are interested in me.
6. Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong here. (*reversed*)
7. There's at least one teacher or other adult in this school I can talk to if I have a problem.
8. People at this school are friendly to me.
9. Teachers here are not interested in me. (*reversed*)
10. I am included in lots of activities at (name of school).
11. I am treated with as much respect as other students.

[3] Note: Interpretation ranges can be adjusted based on sample distribution.

12. I feel very different from most other students here. (*reversed*)
13. I can really be myself at this school.
14. The teachers here respect me.
15. People here know I can do good work.
16. I wish I were in a different school. (*reversed*)
17. I feel proud of belonging to (name of school).
18. Other students here like me the way I am.