



Project Access' Theory of Change

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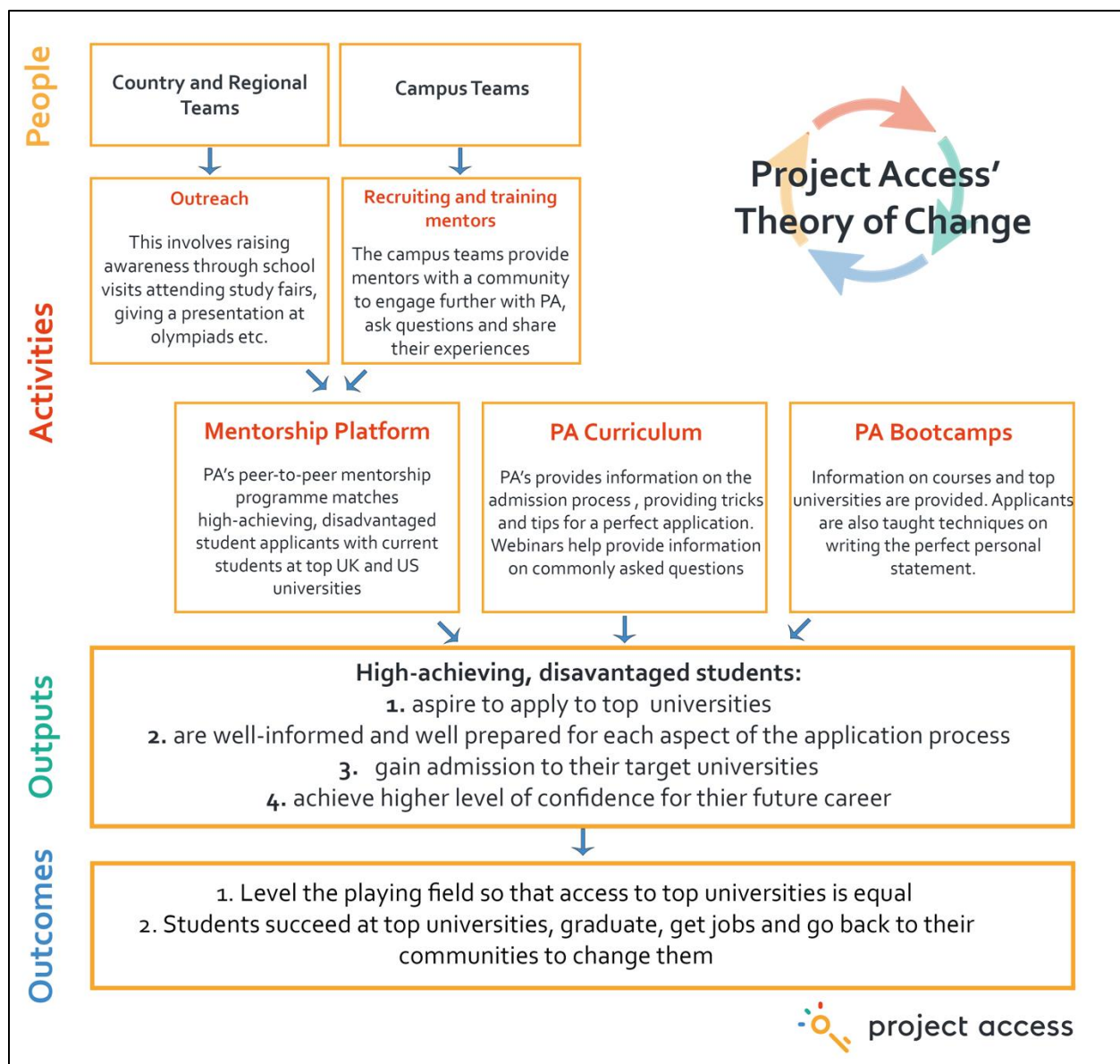
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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
1. Introduction to Project Access	2
1.1. Mission	2
1.2. Vision	2
2. Key issues	3
2.1. Why are disadvantaged students under-represented?	4
3. Theory of Change: An Introduction	8
4. Inputs, Activities, and Strategies	9
4.1. Outreach and Recruitment Strategies.....	9
4.1.1. Applicant Outreach Teams (Regional/Country Teams).....	9
4.1.2. Campus Teams	9
4.2. Mentorship platform	10
4.2.1. Screening criteria	10
4.2.2. Pairing of mentees and mentors	10
4.2.3. Role of mentors	10
4.2.4. Guidance for mentors	11
4.3. Other resources for disadvantaged students	12
4.3.1. PA's Curriculum	12
4.3.2. Webinars	12
4.4. Alumni network	13
5. Outputs	14
6. Outcomes	14
7. Infographic.....	15
8. Next steps (Monitoring, evaluation etc.)	16
8.1. Sources of Data to Monitor and Evaluate	16
8.2. Potential Methods for Monitoring and Evaluating Data	16
References	17

Executive Summary

Project Access' (PA) Theory of Change (TOC) identifies PA's long-term goal, outcomes needed to achieve said goal, as well as the strategies PA implements to achieve these outcomes. Following this, the next steps for PA to take are stated. These include methods to monitor PA's interventions and evaluate the impact PA has, as well as the sources of data required for monitoring and evaluating. Ultimately, the TOC should be continuously refined as PA receives new data and evidence that will enable PA to improve its interventions and impact.



1. Introduction to Project Access

Launched in 2016, PA is a global non-profit start-up with activities in more than 20 countries. By using its own network of mentors, PA conducts outreach activities such as school presentations, study fairs, and preparing information for schools. These activities enable us to reach students who would otherwise struggle or even not consider an application to the best universities in the UK and the USA, which is particularly pertinent in the rural regions of some countries we are involved in (e.g. see Chankseliani, 2013).

These applicants are then supported through our tech-enabled mentoring programme. This allows us to help international students from disadvantaged backgrounds build the confidence to apply to a top university, support them during their application, and help them succeed after enrolment.

Besides the mentoring programme, PA also has complementing interventions such as the PA Curriculum and webinars to better prepare disadvantaged students for university applications. PA also complements the mentoring programme with a series of country and region specific bootcamps, which educate mentees on the application process.

1.1. Mission

We fight inequality in higher education by widening access to top universities for disadvantaged students.

1.2. Vision

A world where passion and potential — not socio-economic background, ethnicity or any other cause of disadvantage — define a young person's future.

2. Key issues

Higher education has a pivotal role for society as it provides an opportunity for social mobility (Haveman and Smeeding, 2006). Disadvantaged students are disproportionately under-represented at the top universities¹ in the UK and the US. For example, in the UK, the most advantaged students were 15 times more likely than the most disadvantaged students to enter top universities (Jack, 2019). This effect has also been observed among young people, where students with a more privileged socio-economic background are more likely to enjoy international education mobility (Waters, 2006; Brooks and Waters, 2009).

This is a pertinent issue, because the inequality in higher education prevents sufficient social mobility and perpetuates societal inequalities (Social Mobility Commission, 2019). The importance of tackling this issue has also been recognised by universities, governments and other organisations through a “Widening Participation” agenda (Burke, 2017). This has led to an observed increase in the implementation of such interventions by these various stakeholders to level the playing field within higher education.

Therefore, it is crucial to first understand how these systematic inequalities within Higher education have come about, which our next section discusses by explaining the reasonings behind under-representation of disadvantaged students in these top universities.

¹ We refer broadly to “Ivy League” and “Russell Group” universities that have obtained ‘prestige’ in higher education for their research and/or teaching excellence.

2.1. Why are disadvantaged students under-represented?

1) Many high-achieving, disadvantaged students are not applying to the top universities.

Hoxby and Avery (2012) found that across a sample of Americans, the majority of students from less affluent backgrounds (despite having an excellent academic record) apply to less selective universities that have significantly lower grade requirements. This effect has also been observed in the UK, where a majority of working-class students tend to not apply to top universities despite achieving the same grades (Wyness, 2017).

This pattern can be attributable to the issue where the majority of high-achieving, disadvantaged students are “doubly disadvantaged” (Jack, 2019). This means that on top of their socio-economic disadvantage, they also face opportunity barriers to enrol in selective high schools, which are touted as pipelines to the top universities in the UK and US (Coughlan, 2018b). Such students fail to gain admission to selective high schools because these high schools both require good grades for admission (Mansfield, 2019; Hoxby & Avery, 2012), charge expensive school fees, and have limited availability of scholarships (Jack, 2019). As a result, many of these students are unlikely to have interacted with individuals (teachers, school counsellors, older students etc.) who have attended top universities (Hoxby and Avery, 2012). This connotes a lack of exposures to these advantageous circumstances that could potentially inspire and motivate these students to apply to the top universities.

Particularly, students who come from international backgrounds face additional barriers, including language barriers, anxieties surrounding leaving family, and a general lack of awareness in navigating the complex application processes of an institution abroad (Walker, 2015). Within those individual countries, access to the relevant information might also vary geographically.

Facts:

- In the US, only 23% of high-achieving, disadvantaged students even apply to a selective school, compared with 48% of high-achieving, high-income students (Giancola and Kahlenberg, 2016).

2) “Doubly disadvantaged” students are not getting offers, because they lack the intensive application support more fortunate students are receiving.

More fortunate students² based in highly selective high schools can access various advantageous support mechanisms, such as guidance counsellors with the know-how on gaining admission to top universities and intense interview practice sessions (Waal, 2015). Particularly, affluent students also have the option to utilise private tutors who intensively help students attain stellar grades (Anderson, 2011).

In comparison, “doubly disadvantaged” students often do not have access to these advantageous resources and tailored guidance, thereby affecting the quality of their applications to universities (Jack, 2019).

Facts:

- In the US, high-achieving, disadvantaged students are half as likely as more affluent students to take ACT/ SAT preparatory courses, even though it has been proven that they raise scores (Giancola and Kahlenberg, 2016).
- According to Jack (2019), of the elite universities studied, 50% of the low-income students were among the “privileged poor.” He also estimates that roughly 20% of low-income students are able to attend an elite private school.

² Fortunate students here are defined as (1) students from affluent backgrounds, and (2) the “privileged poor”; a minority of high-achieving, socioeconomically disadvantaged students in selective high schools (Jack, 2019).

3) Another barrier faced by low-income students is the issue of financing their education in top universities (Sutton Trust, 2019).

Affluent students are able to afford the accommodation and living costs associated with studying at top universities, but this may not be the case for the disadvantaged students. Therefore, disadvantaged students may be more inclined to live at home while attending university, geographically restricting their university options (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). Additionally, despite having an offer from a top university, disadvantaged students may be hesitant about accepting the offer or even miss conditional offers because of their inability to secure sufficient finances.

This is further emphasised in case of students coming from countries that have less purchasing power. This describes the situation where a middle-class family from one country can have a purchasing power equivalent of lower income families in the UK (World Bank, 2019). For example, a student from Polish middle-class family applying for Cambridge might be eligible for the bursary because of its household income is identified as "low" when pegged to UK household income levels.

Facts:

- Harvard and other elite institutions continue to be places for the privileged. At the most selective colleges in the US, students from the richest quarter of the population outnumber the poorest quarter by 25 to 1 (Sanchez, 2018).

4) A significant number of “doubly disadvantaged” students perform poorly and even drop out from top universities due to a sense of marginalisation and a lack of supportive social communities (Jack, 2019).

The culture in many top universities is shaped by affluence and privilege (Thiele et al., 2016). Since “doubly disadvantaged” students are less likely to have interacted with students from a more privileged background (before and during university), they may experience a culture shock and a sense of alienation when entering and studying at these universities. This has been reported by studies who outline how disadvantaged students often feel left out (e.g. Reay, Crozier & Clayton, 2010), causing some of them to drop out of university (Doward, 2017).

For example, in Ivy League universities, approximately 5% of students drop-out (Vedder, 2019), with social isolation being one of the reasons for their decision to drop out (Doward, 2017).

Facts:

- Disadvantaged students are more likely to drop out of university without completing their degree. In academic year 2016/2017 in UK 8.8% of the disadvantaged students dropped out of university, compared to the overall figure of 6.3% (Turner, 2019).

3. Theory of Change: An Introduction

The TOC serves as a framework to explicitly map out the long-term goals of PA, the outcomes required to achieve these goals and the strategies used to achieve these outcomes. The TOC is a collaborative framework in that it incorporates inputs from the various stakeholders involved.

Ebrahim and Rangan (2010) suggests there are two types of TOC, a focused one and a complex one. This refers to the nature of causality in an intervention. If the relationship between cause and effect is linear, then a focused theory of change is used. A complex TOC refers to a cause-effect relationship where there are multiple causal factors at play (i.e. PA's objective to increasing access to university).

Descriptively, the TOC follows a 'logic model' that outlines the following:

- Inputs
- Activities
- Outputs
- Outcomes
- Impacts³

PA's TOC model aligns with that of a complex one since PA utilises a range of interventions that have diverging causal pathways, which are outlined in the next section.

³ Impact, in this usage, only considers long-term ones. Given the complex dynamics involved in the "Widening Participation" agenda within higher education which have significant time lags to observe long-term impacts, this aspect of the TOC is currently omitted from this research report.

4. Inputs, Activities, and Strategies

4.1. Outreach and Recruitment Strategies

4.1.1. Applicant Outreach Teams (Regional/Country Teams)

The applicant outreach teams are split into different countries and organised in regions. These teams recruit mentees both online and on-the ground (i.e. during outreach events). They also organise bootcamps which entail helping applicants with the admissions process or exposing them to informed university choice making. Additionally, applicant outreach teams organise school visits and hold workshops which promote PA as a brand and serve as a platform to reach out to potential mentees.

4.1.2. Campus Teams

Besides recruiting and training new mentors, the campus teams also create a social community for all PA team members, mentors, and former mentees. Community participation gives disadvantaged students a sense of connectedness and belonging, thereby strengthening their social identity (Cotterell, 1996). These are crucial given that a significant number of disadvantaged students drop out from top universities because of a lack of belonging. As such, the social community created by the campus teams could help tackle this specific issue.

4.2. Mentorship platform

PA's peer-to-peer mentorship programme matches high-achieving, disadvantaged student applicants with current students at top UK and US universities.

4.2.1. Screening criteria

The screening criteria is necessary to ensure that PA is reaching out to the desired target group (high-achieving, disadvantaged students). This screening criteria will ensure that the mentees that PA takes in meet the criteria used to measure disadvantage.

PA is currently working on the measures/indicators of disadvantage specific to the various local contexts.

4.2.2. Pairing of mentees and mentors

PA's algorithm pairs mentees and mentors according to attributes such as: country, university and course.

4.2.3. Role of mentors

PA's mentors provide mentees with information, application feedback and support throughout the application process. Depending on the needs of the mentee, guidance from mentors could include the following:

- Decision-making regarding the universities and courses to apply to
- Crafting the personal statement
- Test-taking advice
- Interview preparation
- Support on financial aid and scholarship/bursary applications

Some mentors also deliver workshops and talks at schools and talent across the countries we work in. Students' overall confidence also improves when interacting with a mentor, which can benefit it them at university and in career (UpReach, 2019).

4.2.4. Guidance for mentors

PA provides the mentors with guidance on the aspects of the application process to cover with their mentees. There are follow-up emails and reminders throughout the mentorship period to remind the mentors about the aspects they are to focus on, such as personal statement writing, interview preparation etc.

The campus teams also train mentors and provide them with a community where they can engage further with PA, ask questions and share their experience.

4.3. Other resources for disadvantaged students

4.3.1. PA's Curriculum

PA's Curriculum is a compilation of admission process tips. It provides disadvantaged students with an insider's perspective on all aspects of crafting the perfect application to a top university.

More specifically, the Curriculum provides students with advice on decision-making regarding where and what to study, an overview of the admissions processes, and detailed step-by-step specific guides for these applications. For example, it offers advice on the application process including help on personal statements and admissions tests to more general advice such as financing one's education and UK Higher Education in the light of Brexit.

We acknowledge that mentors have limited time to guide their mentees. As such, they can direct their mentees to the PA Curriculum, to ensure that their mentees have at least a basic understanding of the applications process. This allows mentors to better value-add by spending time guiding their mentees on more specific issues that may not be covered in the PA Curriculum.

4.3.2. Webinars

PA has frequent webinars to address topics of concern or commonly asked questions on a larger scale, which is useful given the limited time of mentors.

4.4. Alumni network

Some of the students we target, even if they succeed at the application stage, can still struggle to succeed at university or later in the career.

To tackle these issues, we are introducing an Alumni network, which will connect the PA mentors and former mentees at university campuses more closely. This will give mentees access to mentors' advice after their admission to university.

This network will also support its members in job or postgraduate studies applications, ensuring that the success in access goes beyond the university admission.

5. Outputs

- 1) High-achieving, disadvantaged students (HADS) aspire to apply to the top UK and US universities.
- 2) HADS are well-informed about the application processes to the top universities and are well-prepared for each aspect of the application process.
- 3) HADS gain admission to their target universities.
- 4) HADS achieve higher level of confidence in academics and career.
- 5) HADS and their mentors receive the support from the Alumni Network to excel in academia and career.

6. Outcomes

At PA, we strive to help bright students who are underprivileged in their local context gain admission to top UK and US universities, levelling the playing field for disadvantaged students so that access to higher education can be made equal.

In addition, we are making sure that disadvantaged students succeed at top universities after enrolment, graduate, gets jobs and return to their communities to change them.

7. Infographic

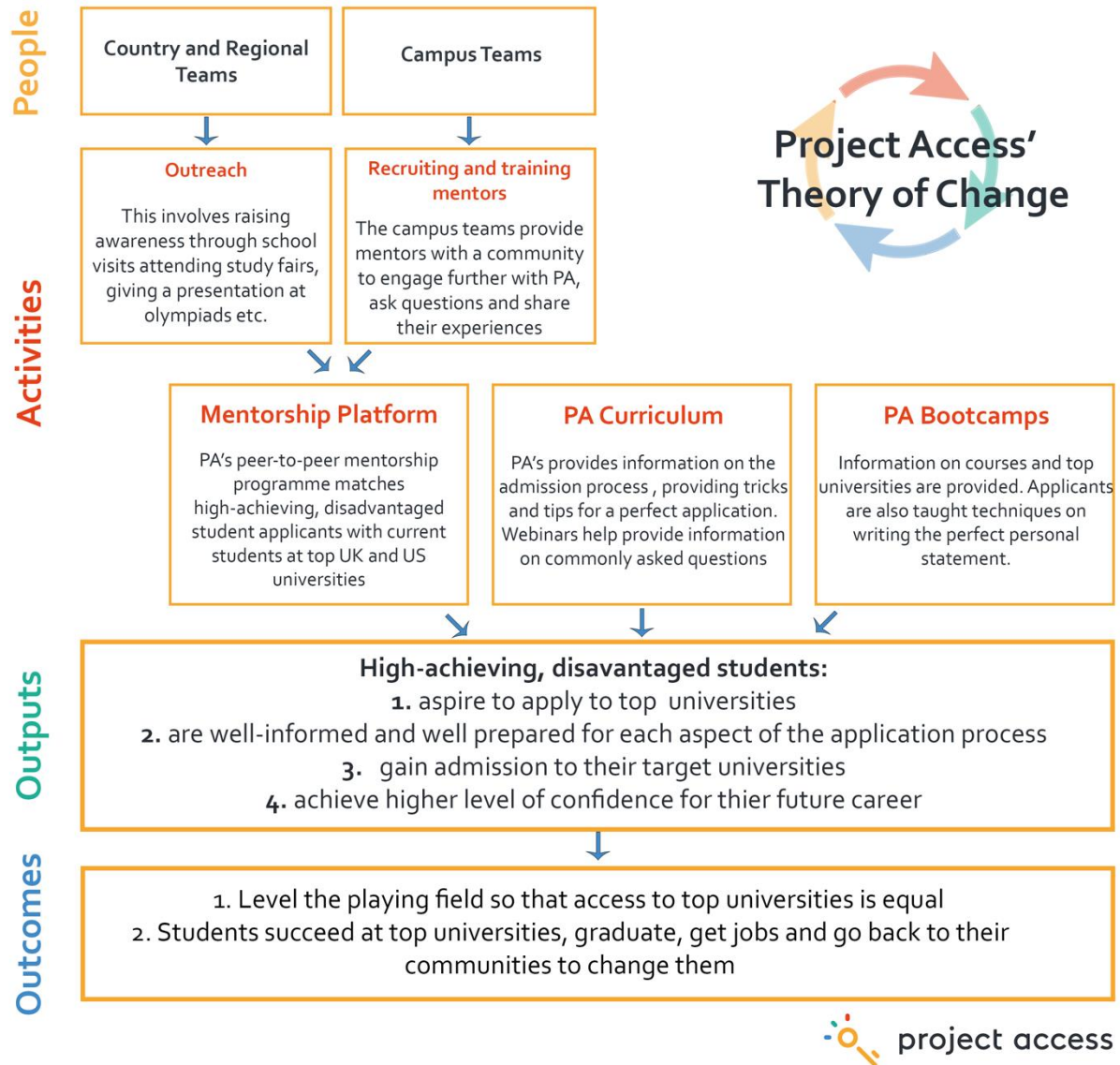


Figure 1. PAI's Theory of Change visualised.

8. Next steps (Monitoring, evaluation etc.)

In order to ensure that we are informed by our TOC, PA will employ impact measurement methods in order to monitor and evaluate relevant data points that can capture our impact well. These methods will be more elaborately explored in our next research report, but we have identified the main sources of data to track and the potential methods possible for this. They are listed in the sub-chapters below.

8.1. Sources of Data to Monitor and Evaluate

- 1) Mentee Sign-ups via Together
- 2) Engagement data from Together
- 3) Underprivilege score using the Screening Criteria
- 4) Mentee feedback collected using TypeForm
- 5) Mentor feedback collected via TypeForm

8.2. Potential Methods for Monitoring and Evaluating Data

1. Surveys
2. Interviews
3. Quasi-experiments
4. Randomised Control Trials
5. Passive Data Collection via Together Platform

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