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The Converge evaluation project 2020-22

Summary of our findings
September 2022



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

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Visit yorks.ac.uk/converge for full details of the Converge programme in York and Newcastle.

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 ill health.

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 ill health 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 ill health and higher education are being challenged through the collaboration of Converge students and York St John University

(YSJU) 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 summary 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

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

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

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

'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

Converge students went on to higher education, community volunteering, arts-based practice, 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

'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

This data comes from the Converge evaluation project (2020-22), funded by the Office for Students and Research England: see yorks.ac.uk/converge for the full findings and to get involved in our next steps

About the Converge evaluation project

THE CONVERGE CONTEXT

The Converge programme offers free educational courses to local adults with experience of mental health challenges ('Converge students'), supported by university student volunteers. Founded in 2008 at York St John University, since 2016 it has also run at Northumbria University in Newcastle. In York, Converge students are supported in their learning journeys by the Discovery Hub, a support team made up of occupational therapists and peer Learning and Access Workers. Converge in York also hosts a choir ('Communitas'), a theatre company ('Out of Character'), and a research group made up of people with lived experience of mental ill health (the Converge Evaluation and Research Team, or 'CERT').

ABOUT THE CONVERGE EVALUATION PROJECT

This independent evaluation (2020-22) aimed to build and showcase a strong, holistic evidence base about the impact of Converge at York St John University and Northumbria University on university students, people who use mental health services and the lead organisations running the programme (the universities and the NHS). In particular, it aimed to produce evidence of the distinctive and specific way that knowledge exchange takes place within the programme.

"I think Converge in its purest form is "Come on campus, be with people."

(Past Converge staff member, York St John, UCYSJ190)

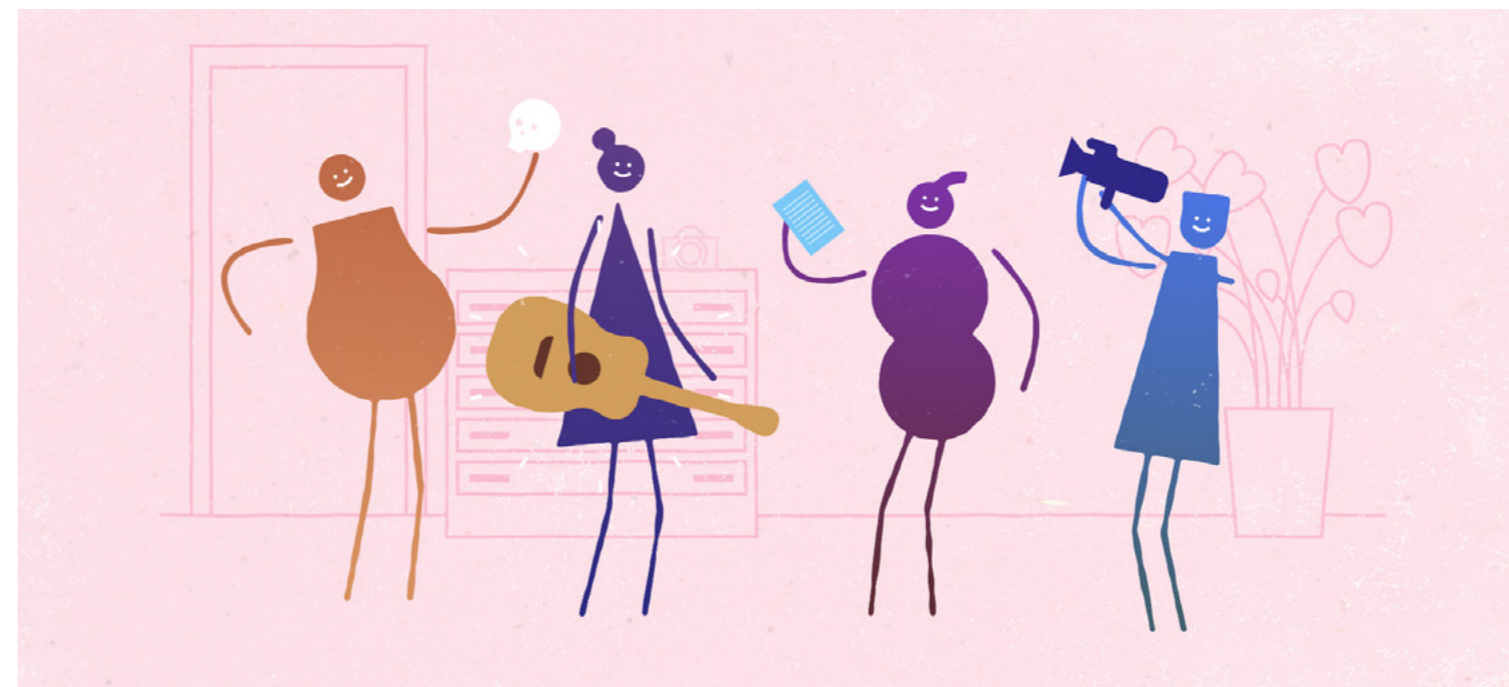
APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

Our primary methods were surveys, qualitative 1:1 interviews, group workshops, and autoethnographic research by Converge students and university students (spanning journaling, arts, music and more). We embraced a coproduction approach founded on participatory research, creative methods and collaboration, and involved university students, Converge students, staff and stakeholders in its design, delivery, analysis and dissemination.

In total, 174 people took part across 214 individual responses during 2021. These comprised 63 past and current university students, 62 past and current Converge students, 26 external partners and 23 Converge and university staff members. This is a total of 141 participants based in and around York and 33 based in or around Newcastle.

SHARING OUR FINDINGS

This summary booklet was given out at an end-of-project conference in York on 5th September 2022. We also showcased several new arts commissions produced in response to the research data: a new musical composition commissioned from Ewan East, an MA Musical Composition student at York St John University; a new mixed media mural by Northumbria University BA Fine Art student Lyndsey Turner; a new film by Converge's Out of Character theatre company; and two three-minute animations encapsulating key findings. During the data collection stage of the project, we also held one drop-in community event and three academic seminars, as well as a thank you event for all research respondents and governance groups.



Key findings

The Converge evaluation project has shown that Converge 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, people-focused, creative model of a 'community of learners' for other universities and healthcare bodies to use.

1. **Converge offers an innovative model of reciprocal knowledge exchange and community engagement which jointly benefits universities, students, people with experience of mental health challenges, healthcare bodies, and community partners. 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.**

University students and Converge students alike appreciate the way that both groups 'come together' around learning, exploration and creative exchange. University students did however note that their role could sometimes be better clarified and supported across the university, particularly in the York programme.

University staff and external partners report improved internal and external collaboration, a strengthened sense of connection to their own local networks, a route to joint public sector bidding, and an improvement in what they are able to offer to students and communities as part of their employability and social justice aims.

'There's something about it being a university setting. My self-esteem was on the floor. 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)

'It's a unique thing within a university facility, with university students and Converge students coming together. And it's like a symbiosis of two parties, which I think is better for both people.'

(Current Converge student, York St John, CCSYSJ134)

'I feel like there's real kindness and thought put into how things are organised, how things are run, how things are communicated.'

(Current Converge student, York St John, CCSYSJ247)

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.

University students report a new-found interest in learning, an appreciation of the 'real world' experience Converge provides, and an increased awareness of the applicability of creative approaches to their wider practice and within everyday life. Converge students report that the motivating factor of the courses themselves, and the implicit learning they take from others with similar experiences, helps them with their own self-management and self-care skills – something that enables broader benefits of the Personalised Care agenda.

Alongside subject-specific and professional skills such as leadership and facilitation, both groups emphasised that Converge helped their confidence, self-esteem, and communication skills. They often attributed their ability to undertake a wide range of 'next steps' – into work, education, volunteering, or more personal progression – directly to their time with Converge.

'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)

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 an alternative model of knowledge exchange is both possible and crucial: 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.

'I'm at such a prestigious drama school on a prestigious course, because I talked about Converge so much during my interviews and what I learned from these people and working with, quote unquote, vulnerable people, and me teaching them, them teaching me.'

(Past university student volunteer, York St John, UAYSJ001)

4. Converge has a positive impact on participants' wellbeing, and also helps to reinforce understandings of mental health and recovery as non-linear processes. It strongly supports the growth of a sense of personal identity, supported by individual strengths and assets. In turn, this increases self-esteem, self-worth, and engagement with future opportunities.

Both university students and Converge students said that it was important to be on an equal footing without a hierarchical structure between them; in turn, this supports the spread of a more inclusive model of practice as those individuals go on to work or collaborate elsewhere.

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.



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 and cared for, 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.

Being identified as students, not service users, helps people to feel valued as a whole person with distinct strengths, not reduced to their diagnosis. Their access to other facilities on campus was understood as helping to 'level out' the potential for participants to feel a provider/patient power dynamic.

Embodied in the form of open access to the university setting, its resources and its people, 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 made up of NHS bodies and local authorities.

'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 is lovely to bring Converge students in, 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)

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.

Respondents perceive that, in Converge, lived experience is granted equal status to subject knowledge. CERT's research opportunities promote coproduction approaches more widely, provide skills development opportunities, and reinforce the message of social justice in the workplace. CERT itself was seen as ripe for further development, particularly around increased fundraising activity for standalone member-led projects.

'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.'

Current Converge student, Northumbria University (CCSNU106)

7. Education is perceived as a primary support to the growth and maintenance of good mental health, and also supports expansive approaches to learning, teaching and community engagement.

The importance of easy access to learning opportunities was a constant theme across the data. In particular, this is perceived as a key part of how to bring about widespread system change in the context of an increasing awareness of the benefits of community-based models of healthcare delivery. While at Converge the vast majority of courses take place in the arts (a small number cover areas such as horticulture, Human Rights and physical activity), research participants across all groups share a sense that learning in any subject is of benefit far beyond its disciplinary content.

However, the arts are seen as a particularly good route to widening access and increasing engagement, due to their collaborative nature and the emphasis on 'safe' risk-taking and exploration with no set outcome or fear of judgement. In the context of the national deprioritisation of the arts, humanities, and social sciences, these findings also offer a way to make the case for continued investment in these areas as a wider social good.

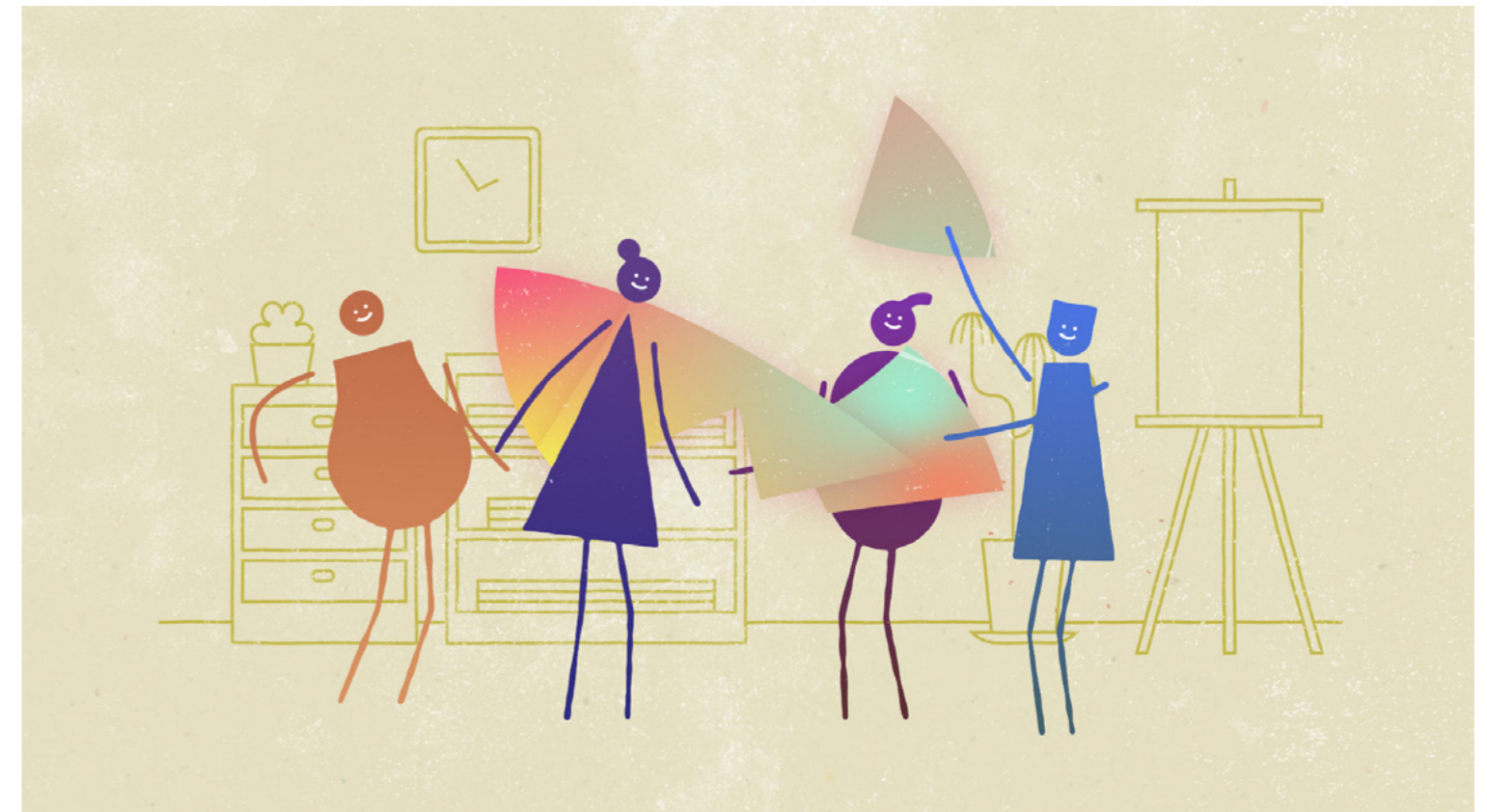
'I think the arts and culture are really important in terms of the therapeutic aspect. I think any sort of learning and upskilling and education is great –and I think the arts is a really, really valid one. Because of that cathartic, therapeutic aspect to them.'

(External local government partner, York, EPYSJ118)

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.

The vast majority of respondents would like Converge to be available to many more people at a national level, with a cautionary note about any growth taking place in line with the capacity of the current team. 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.

University student volunteers with Converge who are part-time, registered as overseas or mature students, from non-professional socio-economic backgrounds, male, or from ethnically diverse communities are under-represented in comparison to their wider student cohorts. This points to a need to consider diversity, access, representation, and potential barriers to engagement more directly in volunteer recruitment and support - something from which Converge student recruitment could also benefit.



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.

In order to protect its core principles and values and to position itself carefully in relation to emerging HE and healthcare policy, Converge needs to strengthen its governance arrangements and to raise its profile in terms of both local visibility in York and Newcastle and national case-making. Some stakeholders felt that Converge needed to articulate its impact more clearly to its funders, particularly as more and more organisations who use similar funding routes are choosing to focus on community-led mental health support structures. However, it was felt strongly by many respondents that this should not be at the cost of Converge's 'whole person' ethos and approach.

2. Converge should undertake ongoing work to position itself as a national case study that answers strategic priorities in the higher education and health care sectors, as part of the wider drive for system change and community-based delivery.

There are clear opportunities for Converge to articulate itself as a workable, evidence-based, person-centred model that answers national-level need across the agendas of social justice, Personalised Care, Integrated Care Systems, research impact, student employability, and universities' civic engagement. This messaging should highlight Converge's ability to build and support communities of learners that are embedded in particular places and neighbourhoods, while being connected across cities and regions.

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 in Newcastle.

Many staff members and strategic partners stressed the risk of outreach programmes being vulnerable to changes in strategy and senior management staff changes. Ways in which further embedding might take place include more formalised Careers Department involvement and stronger links with Alumni teams to help widen awareness of opportunities across the full student base, and increasing capacity for student support in the form of training, networking, and progression routes. 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 as evidence to broaden ongoing work on measurement and metrics).

'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)

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 spanned 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. Research respondents were clear that, though the vast majority wanted to see Converge grow in order to benefit more people, they did not want this to endanger existing delivery or to jeopardise Converge's value system.

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 might be done in partnership with organisations with similar values and routes to more diverse client bases. This recommendation is also linked to the need for increased internal support with university student engagement from other departments, particularly in York, and to the need to demonstrate impact. As in Key Recommendation 1, this work would need to be undertaken with careful attention to Converge's 'whole person' approach, so that people feel valued and respected at all stages.



Next steps

The Converge evaluation project demonstrates that the Converge approach is a workable and high-impact model that is ripe for replication in other areas. As such, the project's findings will be used to raise awareness of the Converge model and to develop new partnerships.

If you would like to be involved in Converge's next steps – whether as a Converge student, a university student, a university partner, a third sector or voluntary partner, or in another way – please do get in touch with us. You can find contact details and further information on the back of this booklet.

Thank you

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), Converge tutors, and university colleagues.

In particular, our thanks go out to the Converge Evaluation and Research Team (CERT) and to all members of our Discussion Group, both of which 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.

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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

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Finally, on behalf of the main Converge teams, 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

Ruth Lambley, CERT Coordinator

Holly Sloan, Research Administrator and Converge Office Coordinator



Converge is proud to be a finalist in the Arts and Health category of the Royal Society for Public Health's Health and Wellbeing Awards 2022.



Are you interested in joining a Converge course as a participant or working with us as a partner, or do you just want to find out more?

Join the discussion here:

- Visit yorks.ac.uk/converge
- Join our Facebook groups at facebook.com/converge.york and facebook.com/convergeNU
- Follow us on Twitter at @ConvergeYork and @convergeNU
- Contact the York team at converge@yorks.ac.uk or 07764 337 116, and the Newcastle team at ally2.hunter@northumbria.ac.uk or 01912 437393



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