DEBATE CLUB PROGRAMME:

2023/2024 IMPACT EVALUATION REPORT

Attainment Raising Programmes

Network for East Anglian Collaborative Outreach (neaco)

Project description

Debate Club is an 8-week programme designed for Year 10 students. Participants were selected by their schools based on their receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) and/or being from underrepresented groups (UGR). The programme was delivered across 5 schools in East Anglia, with groups of 6 to 15 students in each session. A total of 60 students participated, with one school being unable to attend the final session. We partnered with Debate Mate to co-design the sessions. Debate Mate are a non-for-profit organisation with expertise in working with young people to raise oracy skills. The programme was delivered in partnership with our Higher Education Champions based in schools in the East of England, and our Debate Mate colleagues.

The main aim of the programme is to increase students' attainment levels through increasing their effective spoken language and listening skills as well as non-verbal communication skills and improve a range of higher-order thinking skills and non-cognitive abilities such as confidence, teamwork, and leadership. The oracy skills developed in the programme are also expected to affect all subjects across the curriculum. Moreover, the skills developed in debating, such as reasoning, comprehension and evidence building, are transferable to other areas outside of it, such as interviews, meetings or work life in general.

The programme consists of 8 sessions, with their respective delivery type, content and desired outcomes summarised in Table 1 below:

Session	Delivery type	Focus/Content	Outcomes
1	In-school, HEC delivery	To introduce students to debating in a fun way	• Learning the fundamentals of making effective arguments
2	In-school, HEC delivery	To explore ways to skilfully make an argument	• Understanding and finding their own 'style' • Identifying ways to make a successful argument
3	In-school, HEC delivery	To explore the structure and importance of creating a clear argument	• Building confidence in speaking

			• Creating clearly structured and credible arguments
4	In-school, HEC delivery	To respond and challenge arguments	• Understanding and using rebuttal • Developing solid and persuasive arguments • Understanding the difference between making and responding to arguments
5	In-school, HEC delivery	To understand the rules and different roles within a debate	• Understanding the structure of debates
6	Online, Debate Mate run	To apply and practice what they learnt in sessions 1-5 in a local setting (with schools in their county)	• Applying the skills and knowledge gained • Demonstrating progress and improvement in confidence • Preparing for the final event
7	In school, HEC delivery	To complete a formal debate for the first time	• Practising their skills • Preparing for the final debate • Building excitement for more debates in the future
8	Campus visit, Debate Mate run	To compete in a final debate competition with all the schools participating in the programme	• Applying and practise the debating skills acquired throughout the programme (e.g., argumentation and

| | | | | rebuttal skills, and roles and structure of a debate)

•Showcasing improvement in confidence and speaking abilities

• Experiencing the excitement of competitive debate |

Table 1: Session outline of Debate Club programme.

Evaluation approach

The programme was underpinned by a Theory of Change. All activity was logged on the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) and made use of the HEAT Attainment Raising Typology to code activity. The evaluation focused on a pre-and-post design, looking at student oracy skills (and how these affected the learners' confidence), cognitive strategies, academic self-efficacy and sense of belonging. Additionally, some open-ended qualitative questions were included to capture the learners' main takeaways from the project, allowing them to reflect on their experiences more freely. The evaluation tracked the changes in these specific skills and outcomes before and after the intervention, and collected information on the learners' perceived impact of the project.

Pre- and post-project surveys were sent to 60 Year 10 students in five schools (7 to 15 students per school) of East Anglia before and after their participation in the Debate Club programme. Surveys were available in either electronic or paper format, with paper format being the preference – this helped mitigate issues around access to technology in the classroom and support a higher return rate.

This amounts to an OfS Standards of Evidence Type 2 approach that generates empirical evidence but cannot provide an insight into the specific causal impact of the project. Survey questions used were based on TASO's Access and Success Questionnaire (ASQ).

To analyse impact, a paired Wilcoxon test was done to compare pre- and post- survey results. However, due to the low response rate and small sample size, the conclusions drawn from the analysis are limited, and results may not be representative of the student population.

Results

Participants

Out of the 60 participants, 54 completed the pre-programme survey (90% response rate) and 27 completed the post-programme survey (45% response rate). In total, 25 students completed both the pre- and post- surveys, accounting for a 41.67% overall response rate.

Findings and discussion

The figures below, constructed from the 25 matched pre- and post- survey data, reflect one of the main key findings of this programme:

> **KEY FINDING 1**: Learners' responses shifted towards more neutral or moderate self-reported perspectives on their oracy skills, academy self-efficacy and sense of belonging after taking part in the Debate Club programme.

Although the statistical test did not yield statistically significant results for any of the outcomes evaluated (see the figures' captions below) – likely due to the small sample size –, some notable observations emerge that provide valuable insights. The learners' responses in the post-survey questions show a skewing towards the middle of the Likert scale across all oracy skills (see Figures 1-4), self-efficacy (see Figures 5-6) and HE perception and sense of belonging (see Figures 7-9), and on both ends of the scale.
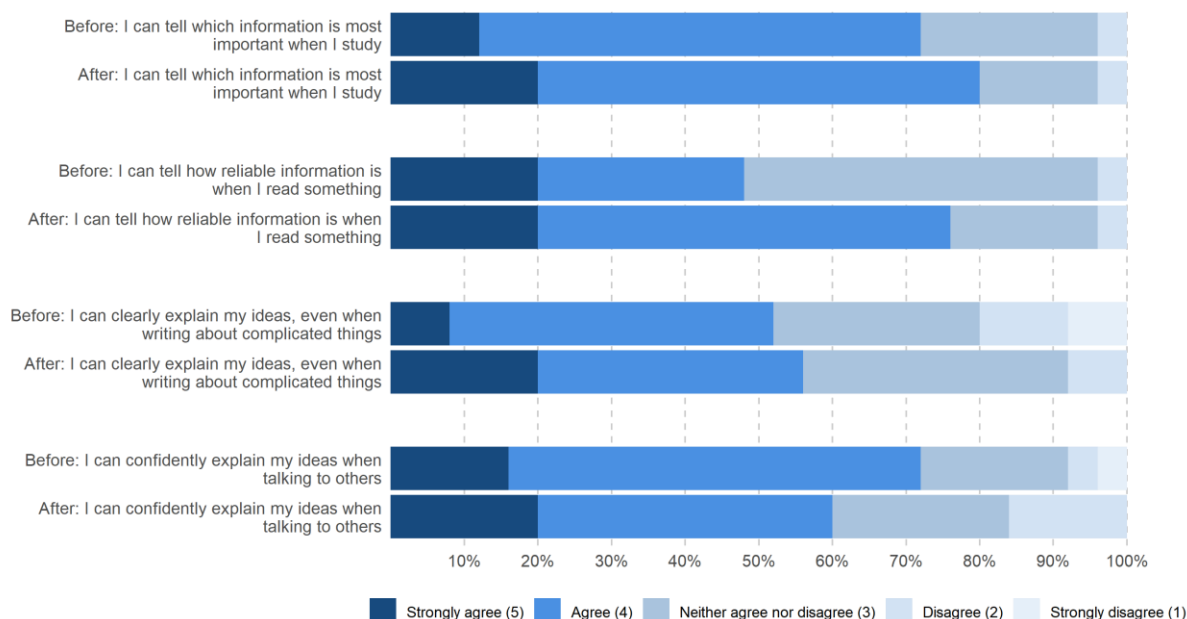
Figure 1: Cognitive skills. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed no significant differences between the pre- and post-survey results for any of the cognitive skills questions (*p = 0.129, p = 0.115, p = 0.168* and *p = 0.626*, respectively). No significance was found when questions were combined and treated as a separate data point for the overall 'Cognitive skills' category (*p = 0.256*).
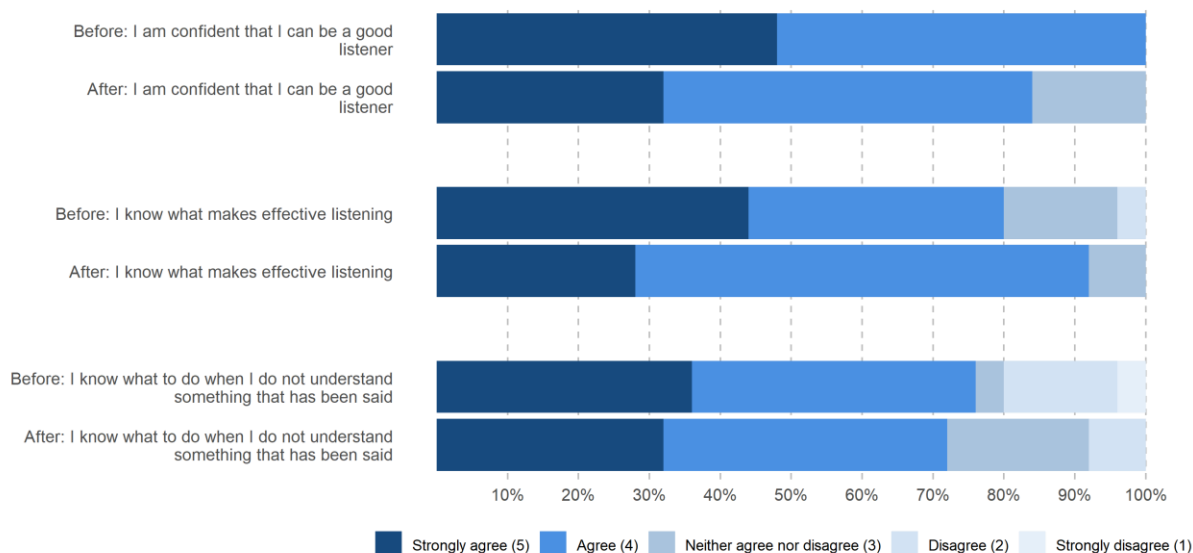

Figure 2: Listening skills. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed no significant differences between the pre- and post-survey results for any of the listening skills questions (*p = 0.064, p = 1* and *p = 0.683*, respectively). No significance was found when questions were combined and treated as a separate data point for the overall 'Listening skills' category (*p = 0.564*).
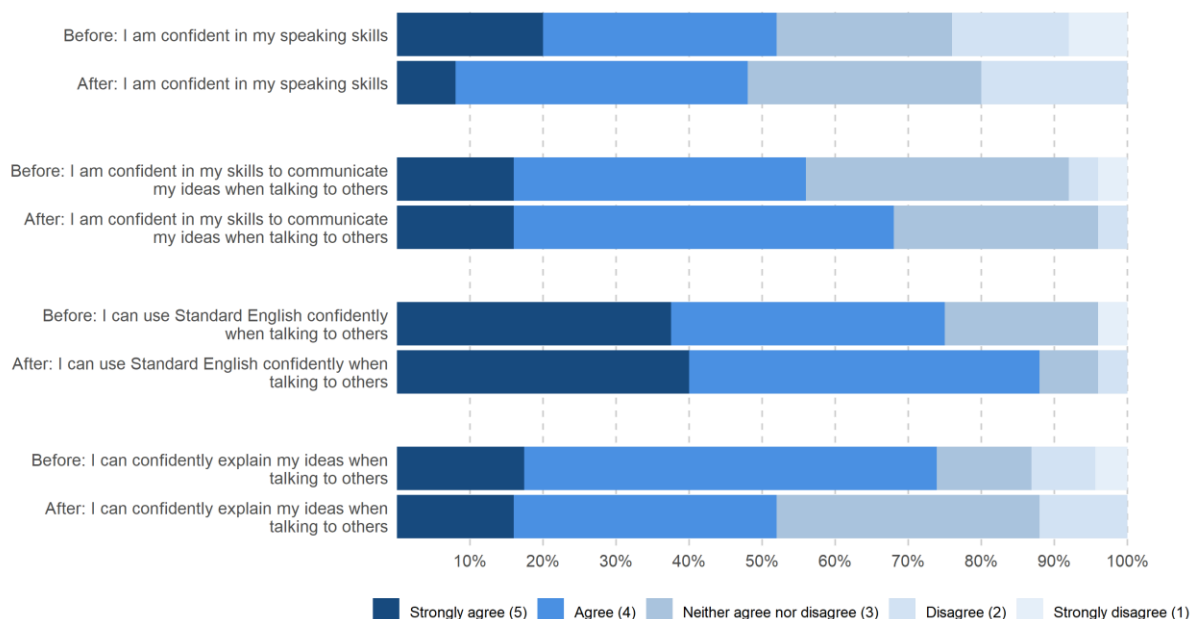
Figure 3: Speaking skills. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed no significant differences between the pre- and post-survey results for any of the speaking skills questions ($p = 0.763$, $p = 0.415$, $p = 0.642$ and $p = 0.352$, respectively). No significance was found when questions were combined and treated as a separate data point for the overall 'Speaking skills' category ($p = 0.904$).
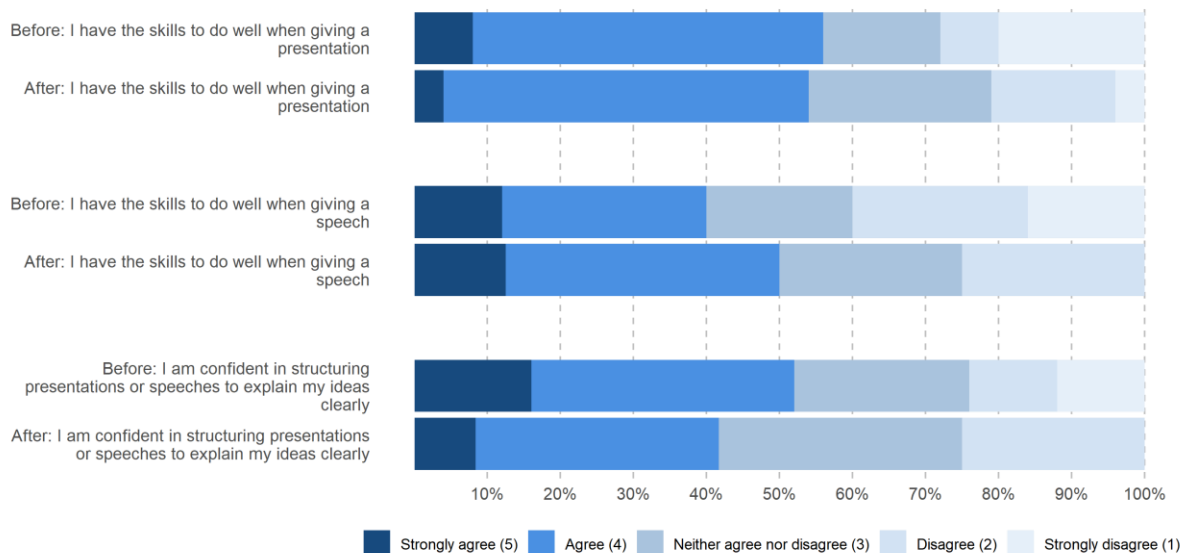

Figure 4: Presentation skills. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed no significant differences between the pre- and post-survey results for any of the presentation skills questions ($p = 0.464$, $p = 0.226$ and $p = 0.626$, respectively). No significance was found when questions were combined and treated as a separate data point for the overall 'Presentation skills' category ($p = 0.491$).
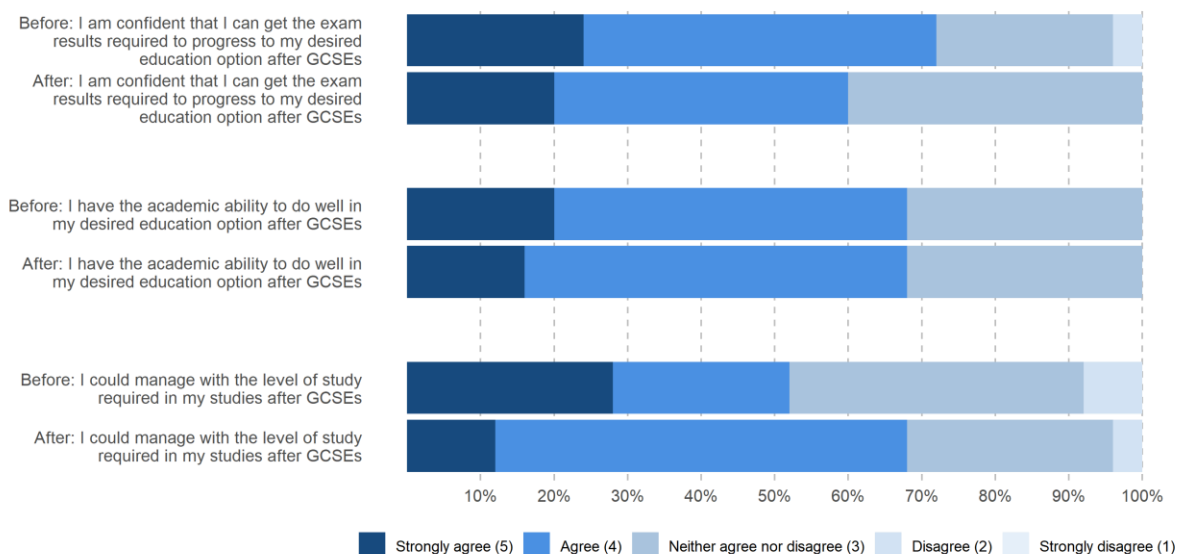
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Figure 5: Self-efficacy (post-16). Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed no significant differences between the pre- and post-survey results for any of the self-efficacy (post-16) questions ($p = 0.437$, $p = 0.824$ and $p = 0.674$, respectively). No significance was found when questions were combined and treated as a separate data point for the overall 'Self-efficacy (post-16)' category ($p = 0.758$).
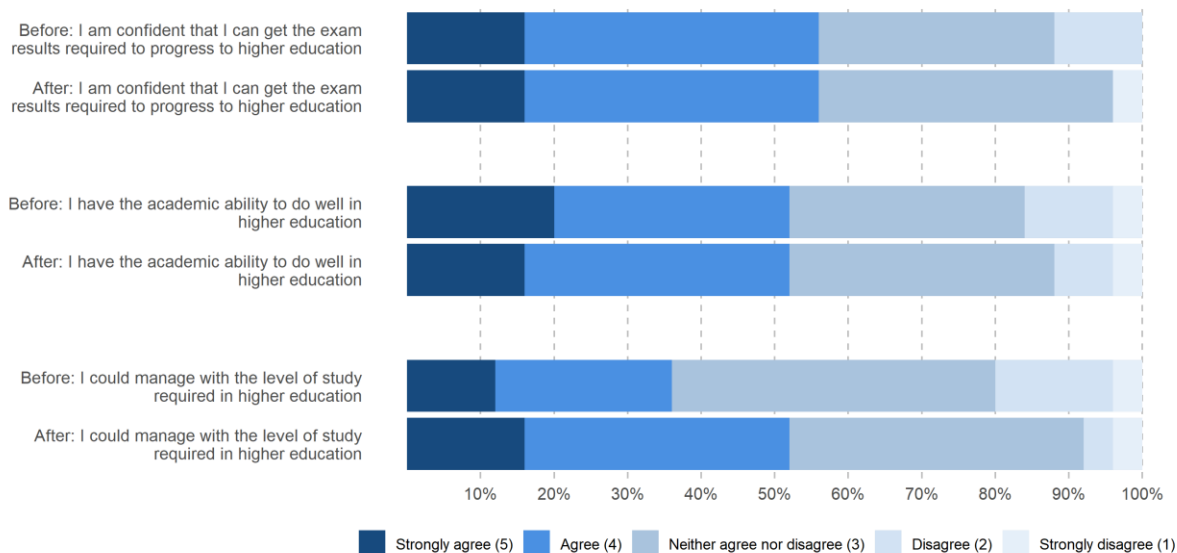

Figure 6: Self-efficacy (HE). Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed no significant differences between the pre- and post-survey results for the first two self-efficacy (HE) questions ($p = 0.851$, $p = 1$, respectively), but it was found for the third question ($p = 0.036$). No significance was found when questions were combined and treated as a separate data point for the overall 'Self-efficacy (HE)' category ($p = 0.476$).
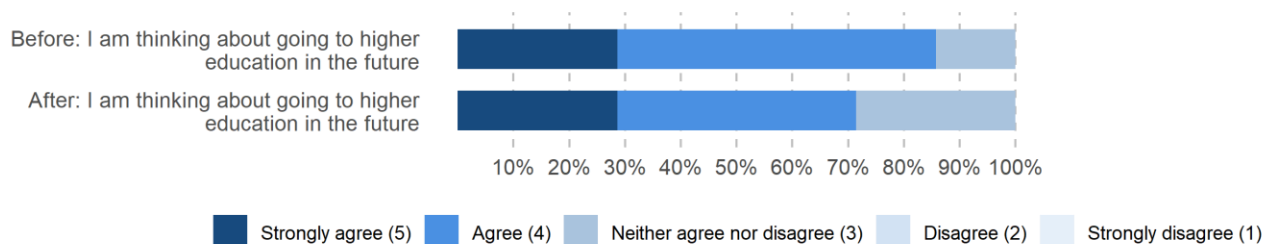
Figure 7: HE expectation. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed no significant differences between the pre- and post-survey results for the question on HE expectations (*p = 0.666*).
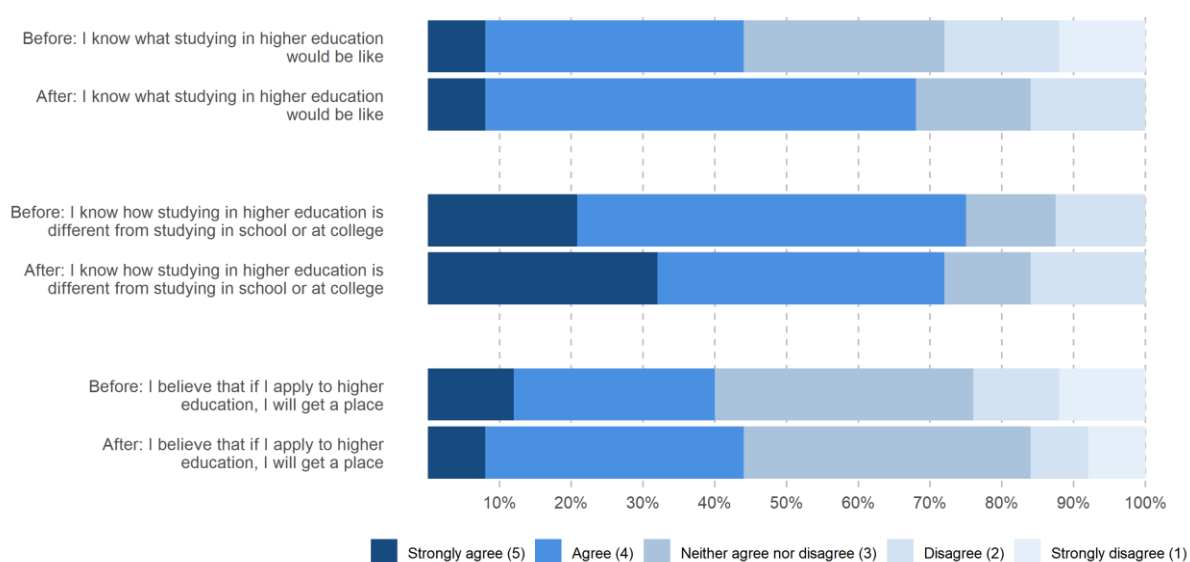

Figure 8: HE knowledge. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed no significant differences between the pre- and post-survey results for any of the HE knowledge questions (*p = 0.092, p = 0.523* and *p = 0.407*, respectively). No significance was found when questions were combined and treated as a separate data point for the overall 'HE knowledge' category (*p = 0.22*).
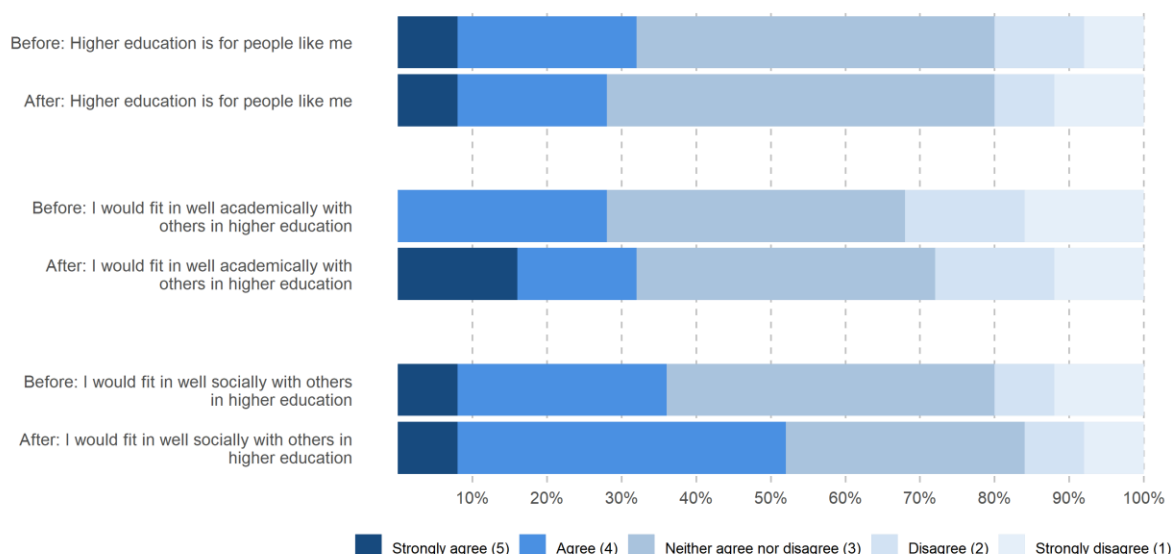
Figure 9: Sense of belonging. Wilcoxon signed-rank tests revealed no significant differences between the pre- and post-survey results for any of the Sense of belonging questions ($p = 1$, $p = 0.111$ and $p = 0.342$, respectively). No significance was found when questions were combined and treated as a separate data point for the overall 'Sense of Belonging' category ($p = 0.395$).

Participants who initially perceived themselves as lower on the scale seem to have benefitted more from the programme as they shifted towards the middle, suggesting an increase in confidence and skills. Conversely, those who perceived themselves higher in the scale at the start of the programme also moved towards more moderate self-reports by the end of it, possibly due to the recognition of knowledge gaps they had not previously acknowledged, which prompted an adjustment in their self-perception in the post-programme responses. This skewing can also be linked to the four stages of learning framework (Howell, 1982; Cannon et al., 2010). Participants with initially lower self-assessments may have recognized their lack of knowledge (aligning with *conscious incompetence*), which might have led to greater awareness and improvement by the end of the programme. On the other hand, those who were more confident in their skills at the outset might have moved to a state of *conscious competence*, where they became aware of the gaps in their understanding, prompting them to reassess and recalibrate their abilities.

This potential explanation of our results, based on different dynamics within the presented framework, is further supported by the programme's impact and qualitative data, which provide further insights into the quantitative observations and leads to a second key finding:

KEY FINDING 2: Learners reported a development and improvement of their public speaking skills and confidence after participating in the Debate Club programme.
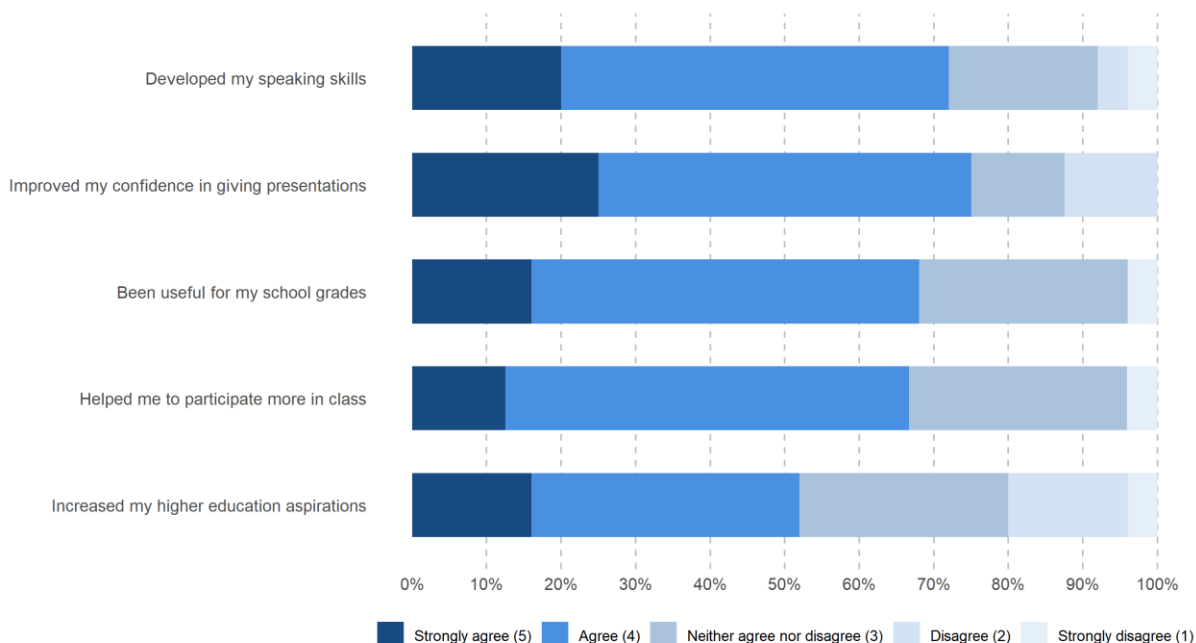

Figure 10: Perceived impact of the Debate Club programme.

Despite the shift towards more neutral and moderate responses to questions about the learners themselves (e.g., their skills, self-efficacy, sense of belonging), the picture changes when the focus of the questions moves to the programme's impact on the learners. The results of the latter indicate that 72% of students agreed that Debate Club has developed their speaking skills, followed closely by 75% agreeing that it improved their confidence giving presentations. Regarding the programme's impact on their performance at school, 68% of students agreed that Debate Club was useful for their school grades, with 66.7% reporting it helped them participate more in class. The lowest percentage of impact is found in the question concerning the increase in students' HE aspirations, to which 52% answered positively.

This contrasts with the quantitative results illustrated in Figures 1-9 above, where the quantitative data about the learners' self-perception of their skills indicated a shift towards more neutral or moderate positions in the scale, rather than a general increase on the positive side. However, as shown in Figure 10, when students were asked directly about their perceived impact of the programme on their skills, a strong majority reported positive impact, particularly regarding their oracy skills. This suggests that the programme did have a positive impact on the learners' public speaking skills and

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confidence, while making them aware of their own areas for improvement. This could help explain the apparent contradiction between the results.

Moreover, this discrepancy could also be due to a lack of clear understanding of the self-perception survey questions, whereas the more direct question about the programme's impact may have been clearer and more accessible. This is further supported by the qualitative data, where learners were asked open-ended questions regarding the key takeaways and most significant aspects they gained from the programme.

Most useful part of the programme	Percentage of responses[1]
Improved confidence	24%
Improved public speaking skills	24%
Being able to give their own speeches and presentations	12%
Exploring their own points and arguments	12%
Speaking to lots of people	8%
Expressing their own ideas better	8%
Teamwork	4%
The debate heats	4%
The mentors' feedback	4%

Table 2: Summary of topics raised in the learners' responses to open-ended questions.

As shown in Table 2, 24% of the students pointed out the fact that Debate Club had improved their confidence and public speaking skills, while 12% emphasised their new or improved abilities to give their own speeches and presentations, and to explore their own points and arguments. These responses are in line with the improvement in speaking skills and confidence in public speaking reported in Figure 10 above, and provide a more nuanced understanding of the apparently contradictory quantitative results. These qualitative reflections also highlight the complexity behind the quantitative data and underscore the importance of integrating qualitative methods into evaluation – for further suggestions, see the Recommendations section.

In addition, the qualitative responses of the learners also align with the feedback provided by the teachers about the impact and noticed changes in the students after participating in the programme:

"Students involved in the programme have developed both their debating knowledge and communication skills." – Nicola Daintith (Queen Katherine Academy), Literacy Coordinator

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[1] Please note that only 19 out of 25 students decided to answer the open-ended questions.

"[The Debate Club programme] gets them to compare themselves to other students in a positive light – 'I am like them', whereas before they could be very negative about their ability." – Nicola Daintith (Queen Katherine Academy), Literacy Coordinator

"The students definitely had an increase in confidence and an increased understanding that university IS accessible for all." – Carolyn Mahan (Queen Katherine Academy), Lead of International, community, EAL and Home Languages

"Students have built on their communication and collaborative skills - it was really nice to see them working together so positively." – Ellie Barrow (Pakefield High School), Teacher of English

"The programme [allowed] the students to increase their confidence and skills while building an understanding of the structure, terms and expectations of a debate." – Jane Emerson (Hewett Academy), Careers Coordinator

Lastly, in addition to the discussed and evaluated intended outcomes, the Debate Club programme also led to the following unintended outcome:

> **UNINTENDED OUTCOME 1**: Some schools expressed interest in setting up their own debate clubs.

Although this was not an explicitly intended or measured outcome of the programme, it highlights its positive reception and impact. The fact that several schools (4 out of the 5 participating schools) expressed interest in establishing their own debate clubs suggests that the programme's goals resonated beyond individual participants, fostering a culture of debate and oracy skills development within the schools themselves. This organic interest not only reinforces the perceived value of the programme but also points to its potential for long-term sustainability. Moving forward, exploring ways to support and facilitate these emerging debate clubs could further enhance the programme's legacy and reach.

Recommendations

1. **Strengthen the evaluation, for example, by deploying a before-and-after questionnaire for both an intervention group and a control group that could be matched in terms of personal characteristics.** This would still constitute Type 2 evidence, but stronger than the one used in this report.

2. **If dealing with a small sample size again, incorporate qualitative and/or small-N methodologies, as well as implementation and process evaluation.** The present results illustrate the importance and clarity that qualitative insights can bring to the discussion of findings, particularly given the limitations of small-scale quantitative data. Moreover, since, as discussed in Table 2, not all participants are equally willing to complete open-ended questions, future evaluations could also explore qualitative methodologies beyond the written medium, such as interviews or focus groups, to ensure richer insights into students' experiences and true perceptions are captured.

3. **Introduce an objective assessment in addition to a revised version of the before-and-after survey questions.** The current evaluation relies entirely on the learners' self-perception which, as shown in the Results and Discussion section, can yield some contradictory findings. To enhance the reliability of results, an additional objective measure, such as a structured assessment of students' speaking skills, could be incorporated. Furthermore, the wording and structure of the before-and-after questions themselves should be reviewed to ensure clarity and accessibility for the pertinent age group, minimising potential confusion in both the learners and the results.

4. **Consider and incorporate an IAG component**. While our findings show considerable student agreement on an increase in HE aspirations (see Figure 10), this remained the lowest perceived impact and was the least explicitly addressed aspect of the programme**.** Incorporating and enhancing a more structured IAG component could help strengthen the students' HE knowledge, expectations and aspirations.

5. **Maximise opportunities for students to apply and practise the knowledge acquired during the programme's sessions.** While the Debate Club programme offers several opportunities for students to put their debating and public speaking skills into practice, feedback from students emphasised how valuable this aspect was to them and requested that it be prioritised in the future of the programme.

6. **Explore the unintended outcome of schools expressing an interesting in setting up their own debate clubs.** Although not a formally measured outcome of this evaluation, the fact that some schools have shown interest in establishing their own debate clubs opens up the possibility of a wider, lasting impact of the programme. Future developments of Debate Club could move in the direction of supporting and exploring ways to sustain these initiatives, such as providing resources, training, or a network for schools interested in continuing debate activities independently.

References

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Howell, W. S. (1982). *The empathic communicator*. Wadsworth Publishing Company.