

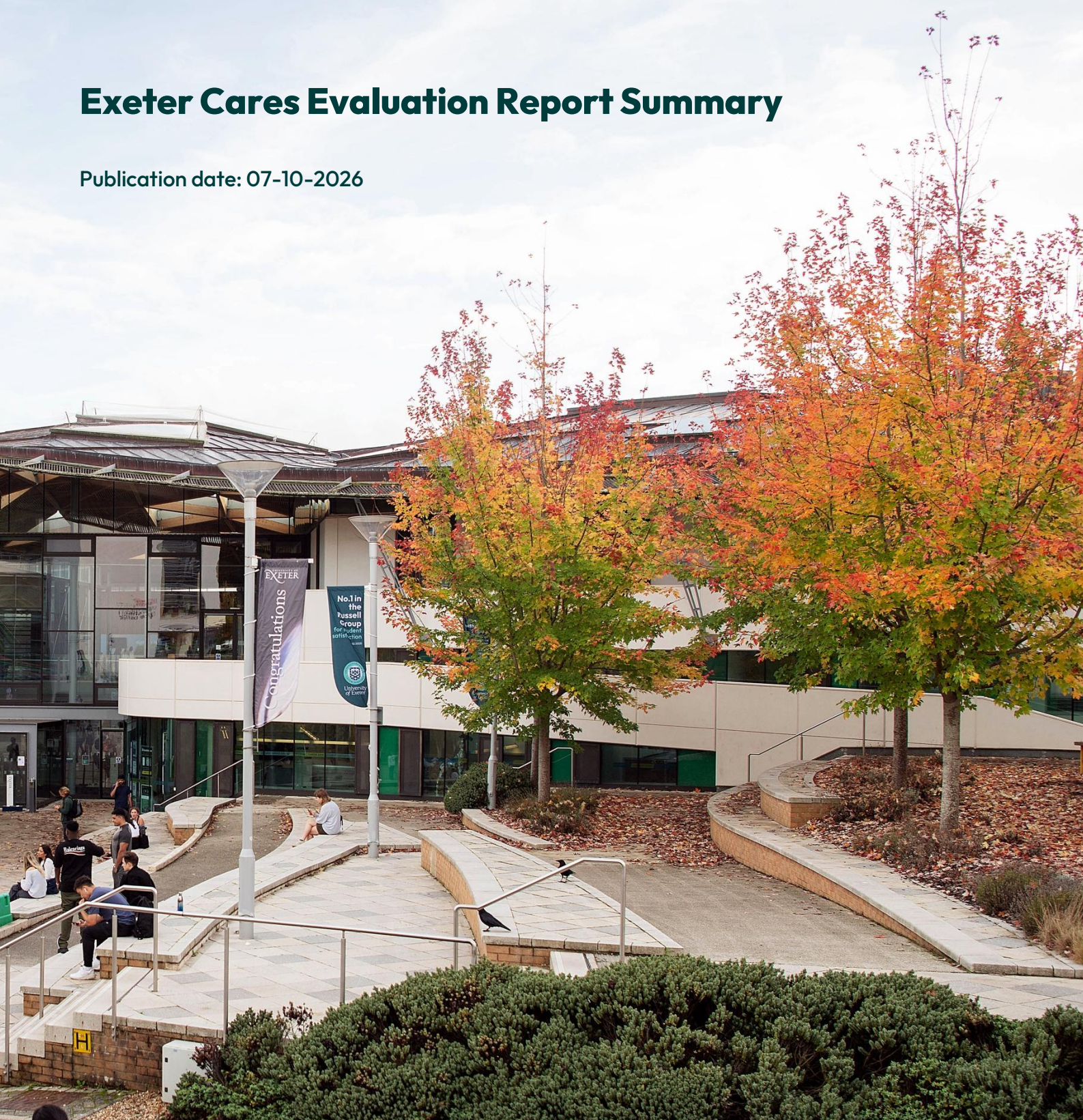


University
of Exeter

SUCCESS
FOR ALL

Exeter Cares Evaluation Report Summary

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About the programme

Exeter Cares is the University of Exeter's support hub for student groups who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education and because of their personal circumstances or atypical journeys into higher education may have additional needs. Specifically these include care experienced students, student carers, estranged students, mature learners, asylum seekers and refugees. It aims to reduce the barriers to successful educational outcomes that these underrepresented groups often face, such as disrupted education, lack of support networks, feeling out of place in higher education, or additional financial and life commitments.

Exeter Cares is delivered by a small, dedicated team that includes a welfare consultant, access and participation roles and the Students Guild Advice Service. It brings together several previously separate services to combine financial, practical, informational and wellbeing support. This includes the disbursement of bursaries and scholarships, provision of information, advice and guidance related to wellbeing and general practical support, such as accommodation and academic processes.

Formally launched in the academic year 2022/23, by 2025/26, 1,462 students were eligible for Exeter Cares support.

This report provides a summary for external audiences of the key findings from the full Exeter Cares evaluation report.

The evaluation design

Evaluating the impact of Exeter Cares presents an inherent challenge because the offer is broad and students engage with it in varied ways according to need and choice and to differing extents (e.g. some may benefit from financial support, others from wellbeing support, or both). It is not a discrete programme with a defined start and end point, nor does it involve a cohort experiencing a similar level of intervention. As such, there is no single, definitive finding that can demonstrate the overall impact of the service or quantify its effect size. This evaluation therefore draws primarily on students' own accounts of their university experiences to better understand the programme's theory of change and how Exeter Cares contributes towards the expected benefits and positive outcomes.

The evaluation set out to answer these research questions:

RQ1: What specific belonging, financial, academic and retention outcomes do students experience through Exeter Cares and to what extent does this support or challenge the theory of change?

RQ2: To what extent does a single integrated Exeter Cares service provide greater impact and efficiency compared to multiple dispersed services?

An independent evaluation specialist was commissioned to conduct semi-structured interviews with students who were eligible for Exeter Cares provision (n=23). Interview transcripts were analysed in NVivo to explore key themes and sentiments. The sample cut across a range of student background characteristics and experiences thus drawing out detailed insights from different perspectives.

An internal evaluation survey was also sent to all Exeter Cares eligible students (n=47), this aimed to supplement the qualitative research with a broader range of participant responses.

The data were triangulated and reported on in thematic way to generate insights around outcomes related to student experience identified in the Exeter Cares theory of change (RQ1).



Service provision data collated during a concurrent service review relating to enquiry management, bursary provision and participation in elements of the service such as wellbeing interventions were also taken into consideration.

The Exeter Cares team participated in semi-structured interviews (n=3) which explored the strengths and weaknesses of the current Exeter Cares model of a single integrated service (RQ2). This was an important component of the evaluation, as it incorporated staff reflections and experiences of interacting with students and delivering Exeter Cares.

Finally, longer term outcomes including continuation, completion and degree awards were analysed, drawing on institutional data.

Key findings

Feedback from students via the interviews and survey increased understanding of the ways in which Exeter Cares contributes towards a positive and successful student experience.

- **Belonging – facilitators not generators.** Exeter Cares students develop belonging primarily through the same routes as other students: academic programmes, friendships, clubs, and societies. While events and newsletters are appreciated and can spark moments of connection, they are too infrequent to form a self-sustaining community. However, Exeter Cares can – and has – played a role in connecting students to mainstream sources of belonging by offering tailored support and by reducing the financial or practical barriers that can inhibit participation.
- **Academic success – establishing foundations.** Exeter Cares supports academic outcomes mainly through advocacy and guidance around complex processes such as mitigation, deadline extensions, and independent learning plans. It does not directly provide academic skills support, but it does help students focus academically by reducing administrative and institutional burdens that can disrupt learning.
- **Financial and personal support – highly valued.** These forms of support are essential for many Exeter Cares students. Students frequently report that financial help and personal support have improved their experience, stability, and ability to concentrate on their studies – and in some cases were critical to remaining at university.
- **Awareness and accessibility.** A core assumption in the theory of change is that students know what support is available and understand what they are eligible for. Feedback suggests this is not always the case. There is therefore scope to improve institutional awareness of Exeter Cares, its purpose, and the support on offer.

University data shows that gaps in continuation and completion between Exeter Cares students and the wider home undergraduate population persist, with the largest disparities observed among care leavers and care-experienced students. There is no clear indication that Exeter Cares has so far shifted these trends; however, the service is still relatively new and has undergone changes over time, meaning it may be too early to observe measurable impact. In the long term, a narrowing of the gaps would signal progress, however there will be inherent difficulty in establishing a causal link given the varying levels of engagement and the many factors influencing withdrawal or interruption.

At this formative stage, the evidence suggests that Exeter Cares is contributing to retention and student success. Student feedback makes it clear that the financial, personal, and practical support provided has improved individual experiences and that, without these supports, some students would have been at



significantly greater risk of withdrawal. However, it is not possible to estimate the overall size of this contribution.

Review of the service highlighted clear advantages to maintaining a dedicated Exeter Cares service – such as recognition and visibility, collaboration, holistic problem solving – t rather than dispersing support across the wider university. In this model, Exeter Cares delivered both embedded, systemic improvements to mainstream services and bespoke, wrap-around support where needed. However, there remains scope for strengthening how the model is embedded, how it operates, and how it is resourced.

Conclusion

This evaluation finds evidence that Exeter Cares supports the foundations that enable students to engage more fully with both belonging and academic success. It offers practical and material support through financial assistance, wellbeing resources, and by acting as a central point for information, advocacy, and problem-solving. It is reasonable to suggest that these forms of support may positively influence retention and degree outcomes. However, at this stage it is not possible to estimate the scale of this contribution, nor to conclude with confidence that engagement with Exeter Cares causes improved continuation.