

EMBEDDING CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION: A UK BUSINESS SCHOOL CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Achieving sustained improvement in undergraduate education requires more than isolated interventions; it demands a systematic, data-informed approach grounded in educational evidence. This case study from Westminster Business School, London, demonstrates how a structured continuous improvement model was embedded across five undergraduate programmes, enrolling over 1,100 students annually, including full-time, part-time, and apprenticeship learners.

The model follows three interconnected stages: problem identification, pedagogically informed curriculum development, and tutor-led reflection. Initially, teaching teams analysed first-attempt pass rates and attainment gaps to determine priority areas. These insights drove collaborative curriculum redesign, enabling staff to adopt evidence-based practices over individual preferences. Tutors took ownership of improvement, reflecting on student outcomes and refining their practices through structured review cycles.

Guided by three core principles, aligning interventions with educational evidence, enhancing the student experience, and improving the colleague experience—the model fostered a culture of collaborative change. Module-level actions were collectively agreed and owned by teaching teams. They were reviewed annually, with progress transparently monitored and shared each semester.

Over two academic years, the approach delivered measurable institutional gains: first-attempt pass rates increased by 7.8%, and awarding gap narrowed by 13%. In addition, qualitative feedback revealed greater tutor satisfaction and professional engagement, contributing to improved student progression rates.

This study contributes a transferable framework for embedding continuous improvement in higher education practice. By combining data-driven analysis, collaborative curriculum design, and sustained tutor engagement, the model demonstrates how measurable improvements in student success and staff experience can be achieved at programme and institutional levels. The approach aligns with sector-wide priorities on inclusive curriculum design, evidence-based pedagogy, and continuous enhancement of learning and teaching.

Keywords: Continuous improvement, higher education, curriculum development, attainment gap, institutional change.

1 INTRODUCTION

Delivering sustained improvements in higher education requires more than ad-hoc interventions or reliance on individual teaching initiative [1]. Increasing pressure from bodies such as the Office for Students (OfS) and enhanced scrutiny of awarding gaps, progression, and student belonging have pushed UK universities to move from reactive problem-solving toward systematic, organisationally coordinated enhancement models. Yet, while continuous improvement methodologies are widely established in corporate and public-sector contexts, there remains a limited body of empirically grounded frameworks designed specifically for higher education settings, particularly those that account for the complex interplay between student experience, academic practice, and distributed accountability across teaching teams.

This paper presents a structured, data-informed continuous improvement model implemented within Westminster Business School, London, across five undergraduate programmes with approximately 1,100 registered students. Unlike individual module enhancements, the model operationalises improvement at module and programme level using institutional metrics. It delivers improvement by integrating three core stages: problem identification using metrics such as first-attempt pass rates and analysis of student attainment based on student demographics; pedagogically informed curriculum redesign driven by scholarly evidence rather than individual view; and iterative tutor-led reflection embedded in appraisal processes.

The significance of this contribution is twofold. First, it offers a practical, transferable framework demonstrating how evidence-based improvement can be embedded without reliance on central directives or external consultants. Second, it provides measurable impact, evidencing increases in pass rates, narrowing of awarding gaps, and improved colleague engagement. In doing so, the paper directly responds to sector-wide calls for strategic enhancement approaches that promote inclusive curriculum design, collaborative professionalism, and sustainable quality assurance cultures in higher education [2].

2 METHODOLOGY

This study adopts an applied qualitative case study methodology to examine the implementation of a structured continuous improvement model across five undergraduate programmes within a UK business school. Case study methodology is appropriate where the objective is to generate practical insights from real-world implementation in complex organisational environments [3]. The design followed a phased, iterative enhancement cycle across two academic years (2022/23 and 2023/24), engaging teaching teams, programme leaders, and senior quality leads.

2.1 Phase 1: Data-driven problem identification

Module-level datasets, including first-attempt pass rates, awarding gap analysis, and student grade metrics, were analysed to identify priority areas. The approach aligns with sector calls for precision-targeted interventions based on data disaggregated by student characteristics and course type [4]. Emphasis was placed on identifying pockets of poorer performance within an overall provider performance.

2.2 Phase 2: Scholarly-informed curriculum redesign

Following institutional benchmarking, teaching teams engaged in structured curriculum review workshops that explicitly required all proposed interventions to be underpinned by pedagogic literature rather than personal preference [5]. Facilitated debates were used to surface implicit assumptions, challenge established practices and accelerate the collective adoption of evidence-based approaches. The process also included inviting guest scholars in higher education pedagogy to provide external critical insight.

2.3 Phase 3: Tutor-led reflection and accountability

Phase three started with a short reflective one-to-one meeting with module leaders and the initiative lead in order to reflect on data collected in phase 1 which relates directly to their module or programme. In addition, module leaders also produced concise SMART action plans embedded within annual Professional Development Review (PDR) process. These plans were reviewed termly through structured group peer-dialogue and again annually via the PDR process. This approach aligns with recognised continuous improvement frameworks in the sector [6], [7]. Progress was shared transparently across programme teams to strengthen collective accountability and minimise siloed innovation.

Data were collected through institutional performance dashboards and a structured tutor-reflection initiative. Documented objectives from the PDR action plans were subjected to peer review, and module-level student evaluations were monitored. This multi-source triangulation enhanced the validity and depth of the evaluation [6]. Analysis focused on identifying patterns relating to the effectiveness of the model in improving student outcomes, professional engagement, and operational scalability.

No student-level identifiers were accessed; only aggregated, routinely collected institutional data were used. The methodology was explicitly designed to align with sector expectations for evidence-based enhancement, with potential for scalability beyond the case institution. The overall aim was to improve student outcomes which, in turn, would enhance institutional performance metrics.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Quantitative outcomes: pass rates and progression

Across two academic years (2023/24–2024/25), first-attempt pass rates increased by 7.8% at overall module level compared with the academic year 2022/23. Actual progression rate to the next level of study improved by 9.1% mirroring the direction of change in pass rates. Continuation following the year

of entry also improved by 4.1% over the same period. These improvements were most marked where teams implemented *paired* actions (assessment redesign plus formative feedback routines), rather than single, isolated adjustment. The emphasis on iterative, data-driven cycles is consistent with established continuous-improvement literature that links structured cycles of inquiry to measurable gains in educational settings [1] and aligns with sector expectations that enhancement be evidenced through outcomes-focused indicators such as those foregrounded in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) [10].

3.2 Equity impact: narrowing of the awarding gap

The ethnicity awarding gap, measured as the proportion of top degree outcomes, narrowed by 13% for the target group across the participating programmes. The largest improvements occurred in modules that combined transparent marking rubrics with scaffolded formative feedback. These results align with wider sector evidence showing that data-informed changes to curriculum and assessment design are critical to closing differential outcomes [11]. They also reflect emerging theory-of-change work, which highlights the importance of programme-level levers, such as ownership, accountability and transparent monitoring, rather than diffuse, generic interventions [12].

3.3 Tutor experience and professional engagement

Qualitative analysis of 28 structured reflections indicated higher levels of professional motivation, shared ownership of outcomes, and confidence in using evidence to guide practice. Tutors reported that data-anchored debates reduced reliance on individual preference, while peer reviews normalised reflective, improvement-oriented dialogue. These patterns are consistent with international guidance on building a sustained “educational quality culture,” in which collective sense-making, transparent feedback loops, and local ownership are the primary drivers of durable change [13].

3.4 Process fidelity and adoption at scale

Fidelity checks showed 73% completion of SMART action plans and 100% of termly (semester) evidence review was carried out. Adoption spread beyond the original five programmes, with other programmes piloting the model. The observed relationship between disciplined process use (regular measurement, peer review, and visible reporting) and outcomes echoes broader continuous-quality-improvement syntheses that identify leadership, feedback cycles, and data transparency as core facilitators of impact and scalability [1], [14].

3.5 Interpretation

Taken together, the results suggest that measurable gains in student success and equity can be achieved when (i) priority problems are identified via disaggregated outcome data, (ii) proposed actions are explicitly anchored in pedagogical evidence, and (iii) reflection and accountability are embedded into routine academic practice. Beyond local improvement, this approach strengthens a programme-level quality culture that is understood by external stakeholders (e.g. OfS) and consistent with contemporary regulatory narratives which prioritises student outcomes and experience (e.g. TEF) [9]. This also addresses sector-wide priorities to reduce awarding gaps through targeted, evidence-led interventions [12], [13].

4 CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that a structured and data-informed continuous improvement model can generate measurable gains in student outcomes, narrow differential awarding gaps, and strengthen a collaborative quality culture in higher education when implemented at programme level. Crucially, the model moved overall improvement beyond isolated individual practice and positioned it instead as an embedded, accountable and evidence-anchored process owned collectively by teaching teams.

The findings indicate that three design features were critical to impact: the early use of disaggregated student performance data to prioritise issues; the explicit requirement that interventions be justified by scholarly evidence rather than preference or habit; and the integration of reflective review and accountability mechanisms into routine staff practice. Together, these features created the conditions for sustainable improvement rather than one-off change.

Moreover, the model proved operationally scalable, with further uptake beyond the initial programmes and demonstrable alignment with regulatory expectations on student outcomes, progression and equity.

Its practical design and minimal dependence on external resource suggest high potential transferability across institutional contexts.

Overall, this research supports the view that continuous improvement in higher education is achievable when it is strategic, evidence-driven and genuinely co-owned by academic teams, not mandated or reactive, but embedded and sustained.

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