

Evaluation of the pilot phase
of the HE Champions'
Coaching Programme for
Looked After Children

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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by

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*“People need to know not just about the
young person’s history in care,
but about where they can go in life.”*

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“They empower themselves but we can help inspire them.”
(Coach, Stage 2 focus group)

Introduction

Aimhigher London South commissioned an evaluation of the pilot phases of the *HE Champion's Coaching Programme*, a widening participation (WP) intervention designed to support young people in the care system and currently involved in making decisions about progression to university. The specific objectives agreed were:

1. To draw on the perspectives of young people participating in the *HE Champions Coaching programme* and the coaches and key adults working with them in order to better understand:
 - The needs addressed by the programme
 - Which aspects are most useful and why
 - The qualities and experiences most valued in a coach
 - The implications for the development of similar programmes in the future
2. To explore any differences in the young people's experiences of the programme linked to whether coaches have care experiences themselves or not.

Background to the intervention

Providing improved access to HE for young people from disadvantaged groups has been a long-standing priority at policy level in England because of its association with improved future life chances. The *HE Champions Coaching programme* took place within the context of continuing concerns about the poorer educational outcomes experienced by young people in the care system in England. Nationally they continue to be one of the lowest attaining groups at GCSE level. Within widening participation programmes there is some history of targeting support to young people who have been in the care system. Nevertheless rates of progression to university amongst LAC remain low and they are also more likely to progress to HE later. Mentoring programmes - sometimes confused with coaching programmes - are quite common within WP and it is also not uncommon for young people in Year 12 (aged 16-17) to be identified for pre-entry and transition support. A life cycle approach to intervention recognises the need to look beyond the point of admission and also consider retention, completion and opportunities for employment.

The HE Champions Coaching Programme

The *HE Champions Coaching programme* developed out of a collaboration between *Aimhigher London South*, a partnership involving seven Local Authorities¹ and eight universities.² It also involved collaboration with two partner organisations: *Kaizen* and the *BrightsideTrust*. The programme was designed to fit around an initial launch event and a final celebration. The coaching element incorporated a pyramid design involving coachees, coaches and supervisory coaches. *Kaizen* led the training and supervision of the coaches and delivered key programme events. Coaches and coachees were expected to meet together on 10 occasions over a six month period but in reality patterns of engagement were more varied. The ethos of the programme was for it to be led by the goals and needs of the coachee, supporting and empowering them to take control of their own futures.

Evaluation methodology

A two stage approach to data collection was adopted with a view to drawing on the widest possible range of perspectives and experiences. This ensured access to all programme events other than the recruitment and training of coaches.

Stage One involved attendance at programme launch and sign-up events. Data were collected via an initial questionnaire and phone calls to key adults involved in the coachees' care, located in Virtual Schools and Local Authorities (LAs). This stage of data collection involved 31 participants: coachees ($n=5$); coaches ($n=8$), key adults ($n=12$); adults involved in the development and delivery of the programme ($n=6$).

Stage Two involved attendance at the final session for coaches and the celebration event for coaches and coachees. Methods of data collection included: focus group discussion and mind maps, completed by coaches attending the final coach event ($n=11$) and coachees attending the final celebration event ($n=6$); a follow up questionnaire completed by coaches attending the celebration event ($n=12$); telephone interviews with key adults ($n=8$) and adults involved in the development and delivery of the programme ($n=5$).

Limitations

Ethical considerations were given careful consideration throughout. This included ensuring that requests to contribute to the evaluation were clearly separated from participation in the programme. Some coachees chose not to complete the Stage One questionnaire and not all

¹ Croydon, Hammersmith and Fulham; Kensington and Chelsea; Lewisham; Merton; Wandsworth; Westminster.

² Goldsmiths; Kingston University London; London South Bank University; SOAS; St George's University London; St Mary's University Twickenham; University of Roehampton; University of Sussex.

were present at the stage two celebration event. The evaluation therefore draws on the perspectives of coaches who were particularly engaged. There was no opportunity to access the perspective of foster carers as none attended key programme events.

Summary of findings

In all 40 undergraduates applied to work as coaches and 31 attended the initial training. Of these 15 went on to work as coaches with the 16 learners recruited to the programme and another three were employed as supervisory coaches. Coaches closer in age and with firsthand experiences of similar challenges in life were appointed with the aim of ensuring increased empathy and engagement. Employing young people to work as coaches was considered by key adults to provide a safe space within which to initiate conversations about HE access that would not otherwise occur.

i. Recruitment and engagement

Specific motivations for participation in the programme described by the coaches included help getting into university to study specific subjects to being able to *feel more confident in the suitability of higher education*. The strategy of organising participation around invited launch and celebration events was questioned by key adults as potentially undermining of engagement. As some coachees started late they had less than the full six months on the programme. It was noted that recruitment events held in more familiar settings might have better supported involvement, also allowing the programme to be more cost effective. It was noted that LAC have many experiences of endings and the celebration event provided an opportunity to reflect on these. The majority of coaches were said to have elected to maintain contact with their coach beyond the life of the programme.

ii. Underpinning expertise

This was a bespoke intervention, developed in collaboration with the funders to meet their specific requirements. It nevertheless built on established practices that derived from a therapeutic model. All programme events were led by experienced trainers. Both had a history of working with LAC as well as coaching. This ensured that the coaches had access to a clearly defined support structure underpinned by considerable expertise throughout. This was important given the backgrounds of the coachees and some of the coaches.

iii. Balancing programme aims with individual goals

There was a consensus that to optimise the success of the intervention individual goals must be allowed to emerge out of the particular needs of the individual coachee. Areas of focus that emerged throughout the process were as diverse as practical help completing a UCAS form, or sharing a trip to a stationery shop to buy equipment including a calendar to 'get organised'. The coaches highlighted a reflexive and empowering process that involved questioning the

rationale of learners' objectives in order to produce nuanced insights and a sense of greater personal responsibility. As one care experienced coach wrote: *your social workers do not define your life you define it!* One coachee noted that while the relationship with the coach had initially involved being challenged, it had ended with *challenging myself*.

iv. Key elements in a successful coaching relationship

Key adults and peer coaches alike identified a major contribution of the programme as being around offering an alternative source of support and information to the many adults that these young people often have in their lives. As one participant noted: *For children in care, what's missing is not teachers, but that friend, outside the system* (Key adult, Stage 1 Questionnaire). The relationship between the coach and coachee was clearly central to the young people's experiences of the programme regardless of how much time spent on it.

v. Benefits of providing access to care experienced coaches

A key aspect of the programme was the commitment to offering care experienced undergraduates the opportunity to work as coaches. A desire to '*give back*' and benefit others was a strong part of their motivation for getting involved and having these firsthand experiences was seen to provide a particularly strong foundation from which to identify need and recognise how it could be met from within the programme.

vi. Benefits to coachees

There was a consensus that coachees had made positive progress as a consequence of their participation in the programme. Areas of development acknowledged by the coaches at the celebration event included: *ambition and confidence; strong will and determination; growth; self-motivation and willingness; patience and perseverance*. Coachees highlighted progress in areas of knowledge that would contribute to more informed decision making around HE, with the coach being seen to have taken the coachee closer to a multidimensional understanding of the reality of university. Such insights have the potential to mitigate key adults' concerns that some LAC are under-prepared for university and struggle to integrate once there.

vii. Reciprocal benefit

Coaches made it clear that they also directly benefited both personally and professionally from their involvement with the programme. The longer term transferability of these gains was clearly suggested. This is particularly important given that several had experienced considerable disadvantage in their own lives.

viii. Collaborative working and systems level issues

The strong emphasis placed by coaches and trainers on encouraging the coaches to take responsibility for themselves comes out of a sense that this would better equip them to deal with lives in which adults come and go and systems sometimes let them down.

Insights to inform future interventions

Overall there are many positive findings to report as well as a sense of specific areas that might be developed to improve specific aspects of the programme in the future. Consistent with the broader focus in widening participation practice on the importance of developing a life course approach, some recommendations require reflection around the support required for LAC both prior to this transition point and also later following entry to HE.

Administrative systems

There is an identified need within the programme to continue exploring the user-friendliness of administrative procedures, particularly for young people, eg: through mobile phone apps.

Communication and engagement

It will be important to reflect on the opportunities that can be offered to maximize the potential contribution of both key adults and foster carers.

Recruitment and maximising numbers

Event attendance and participant feedback alike suggest that programme attendance would be improved if events at the recruitment phase focused around more accessible and familiar local settings. This could also improve consistency in terms of time spent on the programme. Reviewing the timing of key events might also improve engagement.

Care experienced coaches

Utilising care experienced coaches is a mutually beneficial *powerful tool* providing a *success story* and *role model*.

Towards a life course approach to LAC in HE

Bespoke support for LAC at the point when they are preparing to apply for university is important given that they often lack access to such support within their own networks. Nevertheless there is also an argument for extending the reach of intervention back further in the education lifecycle as a means of bridging entry to the programme.

Pre-entry support and guidance

While some care experienced young people will be able to navigate HE without particular difficulty, others would benefit from informed reflection on the support available within

universities and how this relates to institutional and course specific factors (eg. cohort size, lecture or seminar based teaching etc).

Maintaining contact post entry to HE

Opportunities to disseminate identified good practice in supporting LAC in HE are important and include ensuring that key adults working with LAC have access to information about university designated contacts provided in websites such as *Propel*. Problems with accommodation and finance emerged as two key areas of concern and such contacts can ensure a transferable network of support.

Bespoke support within universities

A holistic institutional framework for LAC is necessary to prevent them slipping through the net of care once they arrive at university. Universities should consider ways to address social isolation through meaningful opportunities for social networking, personal and professional development and high-value part-time employment opportunities.

Final reflections

This was a pilot programme and it provides only a window into the lives and experiences of the small number of young people involved. While this evaluation brought a range of important systemic concerns to the surface it also provided some more positive messages around how working together can empower young people in the care system. It also highlighted a number of points relevant to the development of widening participation practice with LAC more generally including:

- The value of collaborative approaches to WP outreach that incorporate holistic understandings of known challenges
- The importance of engaging all stakeholder groups as part of a lifecycle approach,
- The need to ensure direct, efficient communication pathways between LA staff and universities to ensure continuity of support
- The benefits of LAC being targeted for bespoke, personalized and flexible support
- The reciprocal benefits of near peer relationships, recognizing that the potential to empower both coachees and coaches makes the targeting of care experienced coaches a particularly important strategy
- The value of critical self-reflection amongst those involved in programme development, informed by a willingness to hear from LAC about their particular needs and experiences
- The additional importance of the quality of the underpinning resource (knowledge, finance, skills, position of empathy etc) when working with LAC.