

---

# NEXT STEPS

---

An Evaluation Report

Dr David Maguire

## Table of Contents

<b>1</b>	<b><i>Introduction:</i></b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>2</b>	<b><i>Context:</i></b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>3</b>	<b><i>Programme Design and Delivery:</i></b> .....	<b>4</b>
3.1	<b>Programme's Target Population:</b> .....	<b>4</b>
3.2	<b>Programme Overview</b> .....	<b>5</b>
3.3	<b>Coaching</b> .....	<b>5</b>
3.4	<b>Higher Education Institution (HEI) Visits.</b> .....	<b>7</b>
3.5	<b>Foster Carer/ Key Worker Sessions</b> .....	<b>8</b>
3.6	<b>Celebration Event</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>4</b>	<b><i>Evaluation Methodology</i></b> .....	<b>9</b>
4.1	<b>Participant Observation</b> .....	<b>9</b>
4.2	<b>Group Qualitative Interviews</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>5</b>	<b><i>Findings</i></b> .....	<b>10</b>
5.1	<b>Carers</b> .....	<b>10</b>
5.2	<b>Coaches</b> .....	<b>13</b>
5.3	<b>Young Participants</b> .....	<b>15</b>
5.4	<b>HEI visits</b> .....	<b>17</b>
5.5	<b>Coaching</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>6</b>	<b><i>Reflection</i></b> .....	<b>22</b>
6.1	<b>Cultural and Social Capital</b> .....	<b>22</b>
6.2	<b>Ripple impact</b> .....	<b>23</b>
6.3	<b>Critical Moments</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>7</b>	<b><i>Summary</i></b> .....	<b>24</b>

## **1 Introduction:**

This report is an evaluation of the *Next Steps* outreach programme that was delivered by Aimhigher London (AHL) between October 2017 and April 2018. Designed in collaboration with Richmond and Kingston Achieving for Children (AfC) Virtual Schools and working in partnership with six Higher Education Institutions (HEI)<sup>1</sup>, *Next Steps* combined a coaching approach with university taster events and targeted training workshops (for carers and key workers) to offer tailored support for progression to foster children and their carers.

*Next Steps*' key aims were to:

- Contribute to increasing the educational aspirations of young participants;
- Provide an opportunity for young people to explore the options that are available to them post-16/18 and to advise them about how they can access them;
- Increase post-compulsory educational awareness for Foster Carers and their young people by providing opportunities for them to experience what university life is like together and to find out more about subjects, student life, and career paths;
- Support positive relationships between foster carers and their young people through a 'learning together' approach.

This report is split into four parts. Firstly, it provides some context about fostered children and their educational progression before, secondly, offering an overview of the programme and its delivery. The third section outlines the methods used for data collection, followed by an evaluation of the findings. The report concludes with a final reflection and a number of recommendations.

## **2 Context:**

The hugely disproportionate representation of children and young people with care experiences, who are at the wrong end of the wrong tables, is well-documented. It is not in the scope of this evaluation to explore the reasons as to why in any real depth. For the purposes of this report, it is imperative to note that it has continuously been shown that children with care experiences face significant barriers in formal schooling that contribute to their poorer

---

<sup>1</sup> Goldsmiths; Kingston University London; London South Bank University; SOAS; St George's University London; St Mary's University Twickenham; University of Roehampton.

performance – when compared with their peers – at all key stage levels.<sup>2</sup> Those who have experiences of being in care are over five times more likely to be excluded from school and statistically go on to attain lower post-school academic qualifications when compared to other children (*ibid*). A recent Department for Education study found that more than 1 in 3 young care leavers were not in employment, education or training (or ‘long term NEET’) three years after completing their formal schooling.<sup>3</sup> Research shows that all young people with poor formal educational outcomes are much more likely to face extensive social exclusion and have increased encounters with criminal justice agencies.<sup>45</sup> When poor educational outcomes intersect with care experience, levels of social exclusion and criminalisation become much more pronounced. Data shows that looked after children are much more likely than their non-looked after peers to be charged for minor offences, much more likely to receive a final warning, and five times more likely to be convicted of criminal offences.<sup>6</sup> The Prison Reform Trust (PRT) found that just over half of all young people (51%) in prison have had some form of care experience.<sup>7</sup> Contrast this with the widely reported figure that there are just 6% of 19-year-old care leavers in HE (compared with 38% from the general population<sup>8</sup>), and what is clear – from this profoundly bleak comparison – is that much more needs to be done to ensure that university (or other forms of progression) become the more predictable route for this group rather than the current all too familiar pathways to exclusion and criminalisation.

There is a large body of research and commentary available which highlights the structures and complex processes behind these poor outcomes for those with care experiences. Key issues (specifically important to mention here) are that looked after children’s formal schooling and learning trajectories are often profoundly disrupted and fractured due to placement breakdown and uncertainty. This group’s academic performance can be significantly impaired as a result of pre-care trauma (in 2017, more than 60% of children were in care because of traumatic abuse and neglect).<sup>9</sup> Compulsory education and post-school transitions for children

---

<sup>2</sup> Department for Education (2018) Outcomes for Children Looked After by Local Authorities in England, as at 31 March 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Department for Education (2018) *Characteristics of young people who are long-term NEET*

<sup>4</sup> Nayak A (2003a) “Boy to Men”: masculinities, schooling and labour transitions in de-industrial times. *Educational Review* 55(2): 147–159.

<sup>5</sup> Webster C, Simpson D and MacDonald R (2004) *Poor transitions: social exclusion and young adults*. Bristol: Policy Press.

<sup>6</sup> Howard League for Penal Reform (2016) *Criminal Care: Children’s Homes are Criminalising Children* (also see ) Fitzpatrick, C and Williams, P (2016) ‘The neglected needs of care leavers in the criminal justice system: Practitioners’ perspectives and the persistence of problem (corporate) parenting. *Criminology & Criminal Justice*. Vol 17, Issue 2, pp. 175 - 191

<sup>7</sup> Prison Reform Trust (2016) *In Care, Out of Trouble: How the life chances of children in care can be transformed by protecting them from unnecessary involvement in the criminal justice system*.

<sup>8</sup> HM Government. (2013). *Care Leaver Strategy*.

(see also) Cocket, C (2017) Six times less likely: Care leavers and their paths to higher education. Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI). [www.hepi.ac.uk](http://www.hepi.ac.uk)

<sup>9</sup> Department for Education (2017) *Children looked after in England (including adoption), year ending 31 March 2017*

and young people in care have been found to be significantly negatively impacted through the lack of aspiration and ambition held for them from some carers and other professionals. This is further impaired by a lack of consistency in both placements and in carers and professionals during formative periods of their life. Furthermore, this is compounded by a lack of experience or poor knowledge of the Higher Education 'field' on behalf of many of the carers.<sup>10</sup> As the Policy Research Manager at the leading care leavers charity, *Become*, Chloe Cockett succinctly phrases it: 'aspiring to and applying to university are often the first barriers to overcome'.<sup>11</sup> The next sections explore whether, in design and delivery, *Next Steps* successfully targeted and minimised some of these commonly identified barriers.

### **3 Programme Design and Delivery:**

Inspired by a previous AHL outreach programme, *HE Champions Coaching Programme for Looked After Children* (ref), *Next Steps* was developed and refined in conversations with its commissioners, *Richmond and Kingston (AfC) Virtual Schools*. The vision was for a programme of support for progression through education and beyond which targeted both the young people and their carers, and that would extend support into young people's homes. The outcome was the *Next Steps* programme that integrated home-based coaching provision with Foster Care workshops and activities as well as Higher Education Institution (discrete taster) events for young people.

#### **3.1 Programme's Target Population:**

##### **3.1.1 Young Participants**

In collaboration with commissioners, *Next Steps* was tailored to young people who would benefit from a coach to improve their academic achievements. The *Next Steps* programme coordinator initially targeted Year 11 and Year 12 Richmond and Kingston foster children; due to increased interest from carers, this was extended to include Year 10 and Year 13.

A total of nine young people were selected to participate in the programme: five boys and four girls. In the first weeks, one young man dropped out, citing school work commitments – and another (unaccompanied) young man just absconded from all services. This left a core group

---

<sup>10</sup> Camaron C, Connelly G, Jackson S (2015) *Educating Children and Young People in Care: Learning Placements and Caring Schools*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers:London  
(see also ) Cockett, C (2017) *Six times less likely: Care leavers and their paths to higher education*. Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI). [www.hepi.ac.uk](http://www.hepi.ac.uk)

<sup>11</sup> Cockett, C (2017) *Six times less likely: Care leavers and their paths to higher education*. Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI). [www.hepi.ac.uk](http://www.hepi.ac.uk)

of seven young people, four girls (Year 11 and Year 12) and 3 boys (Years 12 and Year 13). Two of the young men were brothers: unaccompanied asylum seekers (from Eritrea) who experienced some language limitations.

### **3.1.2 Carers /Key Workers**

There was a core group of six carers and key workers who participated in almost all activities. Three were 'kin' carers (aunt and uncle/ grandmother), a foster carer and a key worker (for the unaccompanied brothers).

## **3.2 Programme Overview**

*Next Steps* was built upon three pillars: Coaching, Foster Carers Workshops, and Higher Education Institution events (HEI).

## **3.3 Coaching**

### **3.3.1 Approach/ Framework**

This coaching model and training were developed and delivered by Kaizen Partnership.<sup>12</sup> This approach to coaching is based on the coachee identifying a goal and, with help from the coach – who frames questions relating to how the said goal will be reached – the young person works to find their own route to achieving it. Coaches work in a triangular hierarchy of supervision, reporting to a supervisor for weekly coaching who, in turn, is coached by a more experienced coaching coordinator. A notable feature of this coaching hierarchy is that a number of supervisory coaches were recruited and worked their way up from a pool of coaches from AHL's previous targeted programmes

### **3.3.2 Coordinators and Supervisors**

Coaching coordinators have many years of experience, having worked with young people across a variety of spaces that include schools and community projects. For this particular project, a number of the key coach supervisors had personal experience of care; one was an unaccompanied refugee who was studying at postgraduate level, while another had navigated significant gender-, faith- and ethnicity-related barriers in the family home before finding herself in care.

---

<sup>12</sup> <http://wearekaizen.co.uk>

### **3.3.3 Selection**

Drawing from well-established university partnerships, AHL has a long tradition of working with the vast experiences found in undergraduate and graduate student bodies. Students from partner universities showed a great deal of interest in wanting to participate in this particular project. A richly diverse pool of coaches – studying a wide range of subjects, with relevant life experiences – were selected to undertake the training.

### **3.3.4 Training.**

A major element which underpinned the coaching approach was the comprehensive training provided to both the HE students (potential coaches) and the young participants. Students attended two full days of training sessions and, later, a refresher session. Training provider Kaizen delivered a session that centred on coaching philosophies and methods as well as all aspects of safeguarding protocols. In introductory sessions, HE students were encouraged to reflect upon and to share their biographies and experiences, and to recognise struggles and resilience in individual and collective life experiences and learning trajectories. Although it was a highly constructive and important element within the training session, which acknowledged the significance of individual and collective resilience, the training itself discouraged attendees from applying these direct experiences when coaching; instead, they emphasised the importance of posing questions effectively in order to allow the coachee to discover their own way of reaching their set goal. Perhaps these elements of life experiences are seen as generating the knowledge of how to ask the right questions.

Foster children also attended training days and, as with the students, were encouraged to reflect and to recognise the many assets and high levels of resilience that were born out of their collective and individual life experiences. A number of group activities were incorporated that encouraged participants to work in teams and to respect individual attributes. The foster children were introduced to the coaching models and philosophies together with strategies for working with a coach.

### **3.3.5 Matching**

Kiazen, drawing on their working knowledge – established in the coaching training workshops – paired the young participant with a coach with whom the former would, in their opinion, be best placed to work. The matching event involved an afternoon where young participants, trained coaches, carers and invited LA/ AHL staff gathered to celebrate the allocation of suitable coaches with their coachee. After the matching ceremony, activities were undertaken

which were designed to facilitate bonding between coaches and coachees and to enable both parties to agree a contract of terms. Carers and others were encouraged and supported to meet with their young person's coach and to generally network with all other staff and trainers in attendance.

### **3.3.6 Sessions**

Coaching sessions occurred fortnightly in the young person's home. A goal would be set by the coachee at each session, and ways of meeting this objective would be explored.

## **3.4 Higher Education Institution (HEI) Visits.**

A total of four HEI visits were arranged, purposefully designed to cover a broad geographical area as well as a multitude of experiences (e.g. central London and more suburban areas) and to encompass a number of universities which collectively offer a broad range of courses, qualifications and subject areas.

### **3.4.1 Goldsmiths University: Main Subject Area – Contemporary Art**

The second month into the programme (December 2017), Goldsmiths University hosted the first of three HEI visits. Situated in South East London, Goldsmiths has an enviable national and international reputation for the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences and boasts an impressive alumni that includes Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin and Damon Albarn. Working with arts students, the day's events mainly centred on the university's creative legacy. The main activities of the day included screen printing workshops, explorations of the 'making' process, and an introduction to the broad subject that is Fine Art.

### **3.4.2 St Mary's University: Main Subject Areas – Drama and Law (& Sport)**

The following month, in January 2018, a drama and Law HE event took place at St Mary's University. Based in Twickenham, South West London, St Mary's offers a more suburban experience to Goldsmiths and to other inner London universities. Here, the young people – accompanied by student ambassadors – took part in drama workshops where they explored voice projection techniques and stage warm-up exercises. In the second half of this session, the young people attended a brief lecture and seminar in Law, with the professor focusing upon sport and law to highlight the lesser-known aspects of law and the vast reach of the subject.

### **3.4.3 School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS) Main Subject Area – Word Music & Global Politics**

In February 2018, SOAS (University of London) hosted the third HEI event centred on world music, student identities and their global politics. With a more central London university experience – coupled with a more international and politically-engaged student body – SOAS offered a snapshot into the diversity of student identities and cultures, as well as how these can shape and inform subjects at degree level study. Much of this event was dedicated to touring the campus, meeting students and learning to play Korean Drums by way of a taster session for a degree in World Music.

### **3.4.4 Kingston University: Main Subject Areas – Science, Technology Engineering and Math (STEM) and Study Skills.**

In March 2018, the final HEI event took place at Kingston University. For the young participants, this university was a known or local institution. The first half of this session featured current and past graduates leading activities or brief experiments in subjects like physics, chemistry and forensic science. The second half of the session used a quiz format in order to highlight the range of undergraduate degrees available and the strategies for surviving HE study.

## **3.5 Foster Carer/ Key Worker Sessions**

An important thread running through the design of *Next Steps* was the inclusion of four targeted sessions for Foster Carer and Key Worker inclusion.

Taking place at the start of October 2017, the first session offered an introductory workshop which outlined the context of the project, its structure and a timetable for the *Next Steps* Programme. One of the main functions of this session was to provide an opportunity for the key workers and foster carers to meet all those involved in the design and delivery of *Next Steps*. A further important aspect of this session was to encourage – from the outset – a support network among the key workers and foster carers.

In November 2017, the second targeted session involved carers and key workers attending a coaching matching event. This was an opportunity for them to explore the coaching model and, alongside their young person, to meet the coach thought best suited to work with them.

The second part of this session was a Q&A activity on university life and budgeting with selected experts who work in the field of HE widening participation.

The third session took place in February 2018 and was an opportunity for foster carers and key workers to meet and to share their experiences as a group. This session was designed as a forum in which updates on programme delivery could be shared and as a space for reflection in which participants could identify what they wanted to get out of the individual meetings and the programme as a whole.

The fourth session for foster carers and key workers took place in April 2018. The session centred on an invited speaker, Priyah Clarke (Chair of National Network for the Education of Care Leavers), whose expertise included looked after children's pathways to HE, bursary entitlement and advocacy. After her presentation – highlighting support and challenges for young care leavers in HE – an interactive Q&A ensued which lasted for almost two hours.

### **3.6 Celebration Event**

In early April 2018, the final activity took place: a celebration hosted at Goldsmiths University in order to recognise the many achievements of *Next Steps* participants and to mark the end of the programme. It was a remarkable event that saw the coming together of participating foster children and family members, carers and key workers, social workers and commissioners, student ambassadors and the full cohort of coaches (including supervisors and coordinators).

## **4 Evaluation Methodology**

AHL sought to take an evaluative approach that would offer a fully immersive insight into delivery, content, participants' real experiences, and outcomes of the *Next Steps* programme. As an ethnographer with extensive experience working in and studying young people in educational and institutional environments, the researcher determined that the best approach to meet the evaluative aims would be to apply qualitative methods of participant observation (PO) and small group interviews.

### **4.1 Participant observation**

The research strategy PO is often described as a "written photograph" of the situation under study and is simply the art of discovering through immersion and participation. It is a method

which is well-suited to the evaluation process because it generates richly detailed description, charting behaviours, intentions, situations, and events as experienced by those under study.

The researcher was present and participated in almost all of the elements of the *Next Steps* programme. This included: targeted carer workshops; coaching/ coachee training; the matching activity; two HEI outings; the celebratory event at the end of the programme.

## **4.2 Group Qualitative Interviews**

Small group qualitative interviews allowed the researcher to further pursue the participants' thoughts, opinions and feelings on various elements and the programme as whole. A guide for the interview was partly shaped by PO data but, primarily, the interview framework was built upon the participants' responses and reflections.

A total of three in-depth qualitative small group interviews took place with leading programme participants: foster carers and key workers, young people and coaches.

Three foster carers and a key worker were interviewed in a session that lasted for around an hour and which explored their own experiences of education, their motivation for taking part, noticeable programme impact on themselves and on their young people. The second interview took place with five of the young people and lasted for over 50 minutes. The themes of motivation, aspiration, identity, thoughts on course content and what next were covered. The third and final interview was with a small number of coaches and this lasted for over an hour. It covered themes that included: personal motivation and background, impact of coaching on themselves and on the young coaches. All interviews were audio-recorded for later analysis.

### **4.2.1 Anonymity/ Confidentiality**

For the purposes of protecting the anonymity of participants, all identifying features – such as names and schools etc. – have been changed.

## **5 Findings**

### **5.1 Carers**

Having been involved in and researched widening participation outreach programs for over 15 years, the standout strand to *Next Steps* to be the level of involvement and resources targeted

at the carers themselves. Carer involvement was a core thread that ran through *Next Steps* and was in no way a tokenistic gesture as can often happen with outreach programs.

### 5.1.1 No HE experience

Next Steps proved a valuable resource for carers, with all but one reporting having no experience of HE and the one with some form of HE experience reporting that it was from another country, commenting that 'it is so much different here with all the subjects and requirements to deal with'. Every carer felt that the Next Steps programme was able to offer an insight and knowledge to their young person that they just did not have.

■ *is not that academic and she struggles, we have discussed what she wants to do after school, this is another avenue for her to have discussions about education, further, higher education .. stuff she/ we might not be covering or she's engaged with at school.. It is a good way for her to have access to people she wouldn't normally have access to, who she may listen to or take something from. Things she's not currently taking from me...(Kin carer)*

*Because of programs like this, it gives them insight into what university is about, when you just come from secondary school and its...oh you've got to go to university, you don't know anything and we don't know. In Ireland you leave school at 14..coming to a programme like this, you meet other students, they can gather a little bit more experience of what it is like to go to university. (kin carer)*

All of the carers and key workers who participated in the focus group felt that Next Steps was a great use of resources. They unanimously claimed that they would encourage other young people to get involved with it. A key worker who came to the project as it was nearing its conclusion wanted to add a caveat noting that, in the case of two of her young people, language and their immigration status was a barrier to them enjoying the full benefits of the programme. She notes:

*At the moment, it is still quite difficult for me because they haven't got their status, they don't know if they will be here, they are still doing esol, so they are not even at that level yet.....Obviously, they are career-minded, they do want to be somebody and this has helped.*

### **5.1.2 Informed and Empowered**

Carer workshops were well-attended and were always energised with a core group who were keen to take full advantage of available knowledge and any resources that enable them to support the progression of their young people. This group enthusiastically soaked up information, demonstrated keen interest and gained knowledge by asking lots of questions. They contributed to and illuminated discussion by offering real-life examples of challenges and successes relating to the social, emotional and learning journeys of their young people.

A real asset and positive outcome to emerge from the carer workshops was the sense of collective identity and shared experiences and how this created a space/forum to exchange experiences/strategies and insights. There was a real sense that the carers were attending events and looking forward to spending time with the others.

### **5.1.3 Contributing to Positive Relationships**

The carers' workshops and their involvement encouraged positive participation from their young people. There were multiple occasions on which young people and their carers attended elements of the *Next Steps* programme together. It was clear for all to see that the foster carers and key workers were fully invested in supporting the education and aspirations of their young people, as can be seen from this Kin Carers extract below:

*...the coach recommended a beauty thing at the Excel centre, she got tickets, obviously I had to go... We went last Sunday. I thought brilliant, it was really positive, something we wouldn't have known about...*

The report cannot comment on existing relationships between foster carer/ key workers and their young people but certainly - from observing their dual engagement and resulting discussions around progression - it can be said that *Next Steps* contributed to maintaining or reinforcing positive relationships.

### **5.1.4 Staff Inconsistency**

The full impact of reinforcing positive relationships between carer and young person was not as great for those with a key worker. Staff inconsistency and a change in housing had a negative impact on the two unaccompanied brothers. Consistent with some of the well-

documented issues leading to fragmentation in support during formative periods, the young participants' key worker was fully invested in the program but was abruptly replaced in the latter stages. Although a replacement joined the group and was excited by the project, the enthusiasm and support of the original staff member in encouraging his young people to be part of programme was a significant loss and probably contributed to these two young men missing a few sessions near the end.

#### **5.1.5 Awoken Aspiration**

Having participating in and observed carer workshops, the researcher noted that – through their engagement in *Next Steps* – carers were inspired to reflect upon their own educational journeys. In one particular case, this stirred personal aspiration:

*I just didn't, [go to university] ....courses that were available just weren't that good when I went. Now it's amazing, I would love to do it all again... I mean I like fashion and art... (a really big smile and looking upwards), London College of Fashion or St Martin's.. I dunno, I like that sort of thing, for me that is what I would enjoy.. But then after doing it [HEI day} I would just be disappointed I didn't do it [Fashion course] and have to drag myself to my desk job the next day..*

## **5.2 Coaches**

A significant asset of the *Next Steps* project was the body of coaches who applied and committed to the programme. After attending the coaching training days and matching events, and having surveyed hopeful coaches, the researcher found it striking to witness the enthusiasm, knowledge and experiences among the gathered graduate and undergraduate potential coaches.

The coaches were, in many ways, representative of the young foster children with whom they hoped to work. From those who completed the training and filtered into a coaching pool waiting to be matched to a suitable young person, almost all were first generation Higher Education students. A number had care experience, with one coming from a family which had a long history of fostering.

### 5.2.1 Biographies of Resilience

Alongside graduate/undergraduate subject specialisms ranging from Law, International Relations (IR), Nursing, History, African Studies, Arabic/Politics, many coaches had powerful biographies, having navigated their own adverse life experiences/barriers. Among the coaches, there were individuals who, as children, migrated to the UK unaccompanied; there were young women who resisted and broke away from limiting cultural and/or gender expectations (race/ religion/ethnicity) in order to pursue their education and career ambitions. Many of the coaches described themselves as not being 'naturally academic' and felt that they had to work harder than most of their peers in order to get the same results. Further valuable experiences shared by the trainee coaches included that, for many, their narratives of compulsory schooling were littered with exclusions, expulsions, 'always in trouble', 'resits' and 'last minute turnarounds'. As one coach explains below, she drew on her own challenging experiences of schooling in order to convince a young person who she was coaching to try and go back to school, after he left due to other stresses relating to status:

*This taught me to be a very good listener, to be open-minded. The whole experience was something different; I should say that the young person dropped out of school in the middle of it and then he went back. Me relating my life, cos he told me he's never going back to that school, and after our meeting, and I talked to him, he got back to me and said I will give it another go. To me that was the highlight of the whole programme...Him knowing what he wants and me being able to know that my mentor role made a difference in his life ...I learnt that, in life, having those opportunities where people are actually there to help, to mentor you, are very important...*

When asked about what they bring as a coach to young people, coaches were alert to the importance of what might be described as a shared struggle and insider knowledge, as captured in the two extracts below:

*They could have hired mentors who have got certificates to do this, but they got us, students, people like them, who have gone through it...coaches who have been through foster care, this shows the resilience of people who have been through foster care... (Next Steps Coach)*

*[I wanted to] share my experiences of what I've gone through in my own educational career...How I got there, how I overcame stuff ...Hoping to share with my young people, how to get yourself out of a ditch (Next Steps Coach)*

*I've worked in food banks, facilitated group sessions with BME community members, with refugees, Asylum Seekers etc .. I know that I was a difficult teenager so I was curious to see how it goes. My family have also fostered long-term previously and I didn't have a conventional progression into university life so I thought I could also impart some wisdom, potentially....it may be a bit easier to build a bond with someone when you're able to tell them that you yourself have also struggled to get into education (Next Steps Coach) .*

### **5.2.2 Reciprocal Outcomes**

It is important to acknowledge the reciprocal outcomes (between the coaches and foster children) that were observed throughout the *Next Steps* programme. There were a number of opportunities in the programme, such as the matching and celebration events, where coaches and young participants were grouped and worked together. Contrary to the often-negative representations of looked after children, the coaches' resilience and academic successes offered the young foster participants alternative and positive images/role models. Coaches referred to how much they took from the training and resources provided to them throughout the programme – but almost unanimously noted that they found the less tangible and more informal elements to be the most valuable. Coaches continuously commented on how they had 'gained so much', 'felt like they were doing something worthwhile', 'had more self-esteem' or were 'completely blown away' by their exchanges with the young people. It was widely noted, when talking to the coaches, how much inspiration and encouragement they took from being around the young people and their fellow coaching peers.

## **5.3 Young Participants**

### **5.3.1 Diversity of cohort: Local/Global youth**

Having observed the young people coming together for the start of the programme, it was clear to the researcher that the participants were largely (except siblings) unknown to each other. This relatively small *Next Steps* cohort exemplified the diversity of young people with care experience. A number had clearly experienced some of the well-documented challenges

and personified the not-so-well-documented resilience found among this group. There were those unaccompanied young people with unimaginable journeys/trauma, facing significant challenges in coming to terms with a second language, an alien culture and their profound precarity of status alongside the other young people who had their own, equally-adverse, biographies. Among this small cohort, there was a melting pot of ethnicities, races, cultures, languages, genders, sexualities, fashions, music tastes, local and international sporting allegiances that epitomised the wonderful diversity of urban youth.

### 5.3.2 Collective Aspiration

With transitions to HE being the anchor underpinning *Next Steps*, there were those set on school to university transitions. However, more than just targeting the converted, *Next Steps* participants also included a number of young people who were adamant that HE was not for them, as well as some who were undecided. A powerful outcome which emerged from within this group – with such varied global and youth identities, and varying post-school aspirations – was the positive collective identity that developed. Group participation in the programme, designed to harness and develop aspiration, encouraged participants to openly express and explore their ambitions and aspirations. This collective energy, coupled with their introduction to successful and high-achieving care experienced graduates/undergraduates, contributed to disrupting and countering the powerful denigratory or negative narratives often attributed to young people who have care experience. As most youth research shows, young people are aware of how they are represented and, certainly, this group were alert to the negative narratives which are often levied at them. A valuable and significant impact of the programme was the opportunity for them to encounter other ambitious care-experienced young people like themselves and to collectively challenge negative media and statistical representations that only emphasise their underrepresentation in HE and overrepresentations as NEETs, law breakers/ criminals and prisoners.

### 5.3.3 'Foster Kids'

Although there were many positives identified through this collective care-experienced identity, it must be noted that this foster care specific programme – and the targeting of the young people under this criterion – generated some tension and labelling anxiety among participants:

*I think they are quite stereotypical, that we are needy, that we are going to be reluctant to do things...Which is just not the way it is...we*

*are all pretty motivated to do what we want to do... If there is someone that is like that then that is fine, but not just target us all, 'cause we are pretty motivated...*

*I feel the same, because we have had a rough start to life, it is like they are trying to put loads and loads of things to foster children, but when you do that it just makes you feel more singled out...Like when it comes to foster kids things I usually don't like to go, just because it is all foster children...I would like it if it was this programme if it was everyone and not just foster children ..*

*Sometimes just being foster kids can be a bit much...Like people look at you differently, like we need extra, that we need a bit more...*

#### **5.3.4 Precarity of status**

It was notable, too, that the diversity of this small cohort of foster children revealed a number of significant challenges with which some members of the group had to contend – alongside pursuing their educational aspirations and career ambitions. The two unaccompanied young men in particular faced significant culminating hurdles that eventually saw their engagement in the programme wean towards the end. Enquiries revealed that both were preoccupied with anxieties of being removed from the country and that their precarity of status – not knowing if their future would be in this country, coupled with key worker and placement changes – understandably generated competing priorities that diminished their motivation to finish the programme. It is important to acknowledge that they attended most of the *Next Steps* programme and, although they were still developing in terms of language, they were able to learn a lot from the coaches and ambassadors who shared similar journeys. They also contributed significantly to the sessions with their aspiration, career ambitions, resolve and global knowledge, positively contributing to the group.

#### **5.4 HEI visits**

HEI visits were well set up in a way that allowed the young people to explore different types of university experiences and subject areas. This ranged from City/ Central London days that mostly covered the arts and humanities to other suburban institutions that mainly covered Law, Sciences and Engineering.

From the interviews and the researcher participant and observation platform, it is clear that the HEI visits had a profound and lasting impact on the young people. The Drama and Law HEI event saw a good turn out from the young people, all fully engaged in activities. A drama workshop – which included a warm-up that required participants to remove their shoes/trainers, inhibitions, stand parallel to each other and project their voices citing nonsensical phrases in amplified tones – generated much laughter while also teaching the group the basic skills of stage performance and clear oratory presentation. In the second part of this session, all of the young people were equally engaged with a specialist taster in sport law. The teaming up with student ambassadors for a law quiz was a fantastic activity for the researcher to witness – and, indeed, in which to be involved. The young people were all enthusiastically and competitively engaged, discussing, debating and exploring legal questions relating to morality and sport. The only difficulty encountered by the Law professors was their struggle in getting participants to move onto the next question/exercise as they were so engaged and engrossed in their current content. Another challenge for the facilitator was having to choose respondents from an overly excited crowd who would eagerly share their answers during the marking of the quiz. The ambassadors, staff and young participants all fired their arms into the air, hoping to be selected to share their team's quiz answers. It was a thoroughly engaging and stimulating event.

The second HEI STEM event observed at Kingston University was equally as positive. The young people were fully engaged, participating in stimulating science-based activities, led by current and past university students who had mostly undertaken science-based degrees. Wearing goggles and protective clothing, they mixed chemicals to create dry ice, learnt methods of fingerprint analysis and operated a machine/computer that revealed the compounds that make up everyday objects. There were many questions and high levels of intrigue, with a number of the young people applying their own previous learning to formulate relevant 'good questions'.

After a brief practice-based introduction to subjects like Physics, Chemistry and Forensic sciences, participants moved onto a group-based activity that explored the variety of courses available to study at university. It was revelatory to all of the participants – when they were asked to use letters of the alphabet to match to university courses – just how many different types of subject areas there are:

*That task we did at Kingston, when we had to name a course after every letter...That gave a good insight into what you can actually do.. I did not know half the stuff you could do...It shows you what you can*

*do...It not just you can do this and that, it is actually there in front of you...*

For many of the young people, it was the SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) visit that had a profound impact on opening up what HE can be about. In an interview quite some time after event, the enthusiasm and impact was still palpable:

*[SOAS] Everyone is different, everyone comes from a different path of life...That was really cool to see cos, when you think of uni, you think everyone is just the same, everyone is academic, everyone is this, but there it is different to what you think uni is.*

*University really surprised me. I wanted to do something in music and, when I thought about uni and music, I thought: so you have to be a grade 5 on a chosen instrument and you have to get all these grades. [that] at uni it is all classical instruments and it will be the most boring lectures because you have to learn all these different things, but SOAS it's really different because it is world music, and that really surprised me...*

The full impact of the SOAS visit on one particular young person is captured in the following extract by a foster carer who accompanied her on the day:

*The SOAS visit stands out for us, especially for the eldest, she almost wanted to cancel [Next Step] altogether, but she lit up on the SOAS thing, because of the music...one of her dreams is to be a musician or a Psychologist, anything to do with mental health...It opened her eyes because of all the world music and different instruments and learning about culture at the same time. She really lit up...it was the diversity of everything, we went into the library, the arts, the history...all the young people that were there, it was in their faces..*

## **5.5 Coaching**

From interviews with the young people and some of coaches, it was clear to the researcher that, for some, the coaching element was a welcome source of support. Just under half of the young people in particular, the coaching relationship proved to be an important mechanism

for discussing current social/educational challenges, exploring post-schooling aspirations and supporting their continued engagement.

### 5.5.1 Tacit Knowledge Coaching

One of the young unaccompanied men benefited from a coach who had knowledge and experience in overcoming difficulties associated with being in a foreign country. Much of this coaching relationship centred on this young person being supported to navigate hurdles in his schooling and offering reassurance/advocacy that he was undertaking the right subjects for his ability/level. It was suggested that, through this coaching, this young person was encouraged to return to school after leaving because of other external pressures. Unfortunately, he was not present at the group interviews to comment, but this extract from his coach offers an insight into some important work and the outcomes of their relationship:

*The whole experience to me was something different, I should say the young person dropped out of school in the middle of it and then he went back. Me relating my life, cos he told me he's never going back to that school, and after our meeting, and I talked to him, he got back to me and said I will give it another go. To me that was the highlight of the whole programme.... Him knowing what he wants and me being able to know the mentor role, it made a difference in his life.*

Another notable example of successful coaching was seen in the relationship built between a young male foster child – exploring aspects of his identity, wanting to pursue a career in the fashion/beauty industry and the tensions this brings – working with a female coach who had a great deal of similar life experiences:

*I quite like mine, my coach is nice... we are quite opposite people ... but in a good way...I got along really well with mine, quite helpful as well, she helped me create a CV, my old one was rubbish... she really knew where I was coming from and did not make me feel I was doing the wrong thing.*

### 5.5.2 Coaching: Assuming Deficit

For others, the coaching was not as successful. Some of the young people felt that the goal-setting approach added nothing more to what they were already doing. Two of the young people, rather perceptively, felt that the coach (or the rather the model) wrongly assumed that

they were somehow lacking in motivation or focus and that, just because they were care-leavers, they were somehow defective and therefore unable to set and to meet their own goals:

*....at the start, I was just really overwhelmed, she just gets straight down to it and I was overwhelmed, she was very blunt and I just did not like it ...either way I am the type of person that when it comes to school and education, I am very motivated, it is something I really focus on, like a good distraction...When everyone is talking about giving 100% it doesn't really apply to me.. It's not 'cause like I think I am the best, it is because, when it comes to education, I want to get the best... like I had trouble with this exam question...had the exam paper for about a week and I was thinking about what the question could be and when I asked her she said :'what do you think it is'.. I got really, really frustrated because I am the type of person when I look at a question I already think like a thousand different ways of answering it ..*

Another young person felt that the coach was just another individual to whom they were answerable:

*I liked having my coach but we only saw each other once a month or something...helpful but I felt like I just did not really need help.. The setting goals at the end, for me, it was just like, I don't really need that, it was hard to find goals because I didn't need it and I already have lots of things going on and she was setting goals ..I was oh my god...I don't know what I am going to do....I have like homework, revision, goals from social workers and goals from this...and I was thinking oh my god too many things going on... .. it was better when it was more of chat...*

Coaching is a useful approach and worked well when the coaches were able to creatively reach outside of the parameters of the model and were able to apply their own life experiences in their approach. Indeed, with the right training, life experiences can be useful in a coaching context. Although not overtly shared, they do play an important role in informing coaches with regard to how to frame/ask the right questions. The coaches who struggled were the ones who stuck rigidly to the model of setting a goal and Socratic questioning of how the young person intended to meet it..

### 5.5.3 Coaching Logistics

In many cases, both coach and coachees felt that the geographic logistics added a significant barrier to regular contact and to developing meaningful coaching relationships. With coaching sessions having to take place in the young person's home – both for safeguarding reasons and in order to bring this support to the young person's space – coaches talked of up to two-hour commutes for an hour session. This contributed to cancellations on both sides and inconsistent contact that impacted on the potential overall effectiveness of the coaching.

## 6 Reflection

### 6.1 Cultural and Social Capital

There is a substantial body of Sociology of Education scholarship that points to the importance of social and cultural capital in successful school to university transitions. It used to be the case that, among more affluent families, the notion of young people going to university was almost always a given; a great deal of family cultural activities would be influenced by the parents' own university learning whilst at the same time culturally preparing the next generation for HE.<sup>13</sup> With increasing numbers entering university since the mid 1990s, more and more households have parents, siblings, family members or friends with some personal experience or knowledge of the HE system. This is what Bourdieu – the sociologist who introduced ideas of social and cultural capital – describes as: [*they have*] *a feel for the game*.<sup>14</sup>

For obvious reasons (many noted in the opening sections of this report), those with care experience are generally not afforded the same cultural conditioning for HE progression, nor do they have the privilege or advantages that are associated with having alumni/alumnae parents/ carers/family or social networks. A major strength of the *Next Steps* programme was that it offered a real '*feel for the game*', opening up what university is and can be. Over the six-month delivery of *Next Steps* – with carer workshops, coaching and HEI visits – young people and their carers enjoyed a relatively prolonged immersive HE experience. Both were offered insights into what was possible from as graduates and undergraduates, many sharing inspiring stories of navigating significant barriers to HE. They were offered expert guidance

---

<sup>13</sup> (see) Reay, Diane (2017) *Miseducation. Inequality, education and the working classes*. Bristol: Policy Press.

<sup>14</sup>Bourdieu P (1984) *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

relating to finance, support and study skills. They were able to discover the diverse range of subjects and courses offered for study at HE level, to experience different types of university settings and to participate in ‘tasters’, thereby getting a sense of how these different institutions deliver their specialist subject areas. I am confident that the young participants have taken enough from *Next Steps* to nurture their aspirations for HE or, alternatively, to make an informed decision that university is not for them. *Next Steps* substituted enough social and cultural capital relating to HE for informed choices to be made and to enable carers to gain the knowledge (or access it) to support their young people, whatever their post-school transitions.

## **6.2 Ripple Impact**

An important outcome of the *Next Steps* programme was that the level of resources and engagement with carers opened up the potential for ripple impact. Having observed carers’ participation, and having interviewed them, it was evident to the researcher that the programme had a significant impact and even awoke certain aspirations in them personally. The knowledge and awareness generated by their participation in the project will inevitably be drawn upon in their future contact with other young people with whom they work.

## **6.3 Critical Moments**

Youth Scholars talk of ‘critical moments’ as events that a (young) individual ‘sees as having important consequences for their lives and identities’.<sup>15</sup> These can be events, encounters, activities (interactions with teachers/ professionals/ peers or a film/song or travel) or incidents (bereavement, the loss of a parent, or being the victim of violence) that lead to life-changing trajectories for better or worse. The same research shows that many young people from poorer backgrounds lack resources for legitimate leisure pursuits and activities, and are less likely to travel than their more affluent counterparts. They are what these researchers term ‘trapped in place’ or stuck in neighbourhoods where the chances of more adverse critical moments are greater. *Next Steps* – with the partnerships established between universities across London, the programme’s inherent determination to inspire HE students, and the opportunity to be part of a group with other aspiring care-experienced young people – opens up greater potential for more positive kinds of critical moments. An important aspect to

---

<sup>15</sup> Thomson R, Bell R, Holland J, et al. (2002) Critical moments: choice, chance and opportunity in young people’s narratives of transition. *Sociology* 36(2): 335–354.

consider with critical moments or encounters is that, for young people, the impact might be immediate or might, instead, be realised some years down the line.

## **7 Summary**

*Next Steps* was a well-designed programme and a significant resource for the young participants and their carers, but it also offered reciprocal outcomes for all of the undergraduate and graduate coaches taking part. The programme generated and harnessed existing aspiration among the young participants and, importantly, offered a space for the reinforcement and reproduction of positive care-experienced identities. Although for some the targeting of them under the 'foster children' category felt uncomfortable at times, future programmes could work to explore how to utilise this category of identity more positively by having those who have completed the *Next Steps* programme consult and feedback on its design, thereby creating a pipeline through their input into the content and delivery of future projects. HEI visits were extremely popular among the young people and served to profoundly broaden their horizons regarding what university is and what it can offer, and emphasising that it can be a place for them, too.

*Next Steps* proved to be a vital source of knowledge and information for carers, bridging the deficit in HE social and cultural capital that is, by contrast, commonplace in families with generations of HE experiences. The programme also provided a positive forum for carers and key workers to share their educational challenges and successes relating to the young people under their care; crucially, the programme contributed to the maintenance of positive relations between carers and their young people

The extraordinary levels of experiences and knowledge running through the coaching cohort was not as well utilised as perhaps it could have been. Some young people benefited enormously, and there is evidently something in this approach. However, future programmes would benefit from a model that encourages coaches to draw more confidently on their own valuable lived and educational experiences, intuitions and resilience.