

The University of Strathclyde Summer Experience: The Impact of a Widening Access Residential Summer Programme for Children in Care

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Abstract

The Innovative Routes to Learning (IRL) unit at the University of Strathclyde ran a three-day on-campus residential programme for children from a looked after (care) background from three Glasgow City Council schools during summer 2013, designed to build pupils' academic confidence and raise their awareness of and aspiration to progress on to university. Evaluation of the programme shows very positive results in a number of areas, including pupils' aspirations and confidence to undertake university-level study, pupils' knowledge of higher education, and attitude towards school-work. Participants also benefitted greatly from working with student mentors and other young people from different areas. In order to maximise the benefits of such programmes it is important to bear in mind issues around correct targeting of participants, effective communication between stakeholders and ensuring the programme is set within an extended, co-ordinated programme of support.

Key Words: looked after children; widening access; outreach; partnership working

Introduction

Innovative Routes to Learning (IRL), within the School of Education at the University of Strathclyde, ran a three-day on-campus programme for children from a looked after (care) background from three Glasgow City Council schools during summer 2013. The programme was designed to build pupils' academic confidence and raise their awareness of and aspiration to progress on to university. This was done through providing participants with a series of engaging and challenging activities which allowed them to gain knowledge of specific university courses as well as more general information about higher education. Pupils also learnt about student life through working with undergraduate and postgraduate student mentors, taking part in an evening social programme and staying in university accommodation.

Background

IRL has previously run a variety of educational initiatives which have allowed children in care to take part in wider summer programmes that are not specifically dedicated to looked after children. It was considered, however, that a smaller, dedicated summer programme for children in care would allow a greater focus on individual needs and provide more individual support than would be perhaps offered on IRL's wider programmes. Running this summer school for a younger age group would allow participants to go on to access IRL's more 'mainstream' support as they progressed through the education system.

IRL, along with colleagues in the University of Strathclyde, has developed a strong working relationship with Glasgow City Council (GCC)ⁱ and the MCR Foundationⁱⁱ and plans for the summer school were incorporated into a larger programme of support for a target group of children in care, at the end of S2 or S3ⁱⁱⁱ, from three schools in the east end of Glasgow.

The residential programme would act as an introductory activity for this extended programme of support.

Programme content

The summer programme ran during July 2013 and was called the *Strathclyde Summer Experience*. In total, ten of the targeted pupils participated in the programme, with eight taking part in the residential aspect, staying for four nights in the University's halls of residence.

The programme's main focus was on raising pupils' awareness of and aspiration to attend university. Working in small groups and guided by student mentors, pupils undertook a series of engaging challenges that allowed them to find out general information about university, address any fears and concerns they might have about higher education and take part in taster sessions for specific university subjects. Activities included:

- Team-building activities
- An *Introduction to University* presentation
- A campus tour quiz
- A 'Subject Auction' in which Strathclyde students from different disciplines tried to 'sell' their subject.

In addition, pupils took part in four interactive subject-specific challenge sessions including:

- Measuring their brain waves in the Psychology Lab
- Enacting a trial with Law students
- Making stalactites and 'slime' in the Pure and Applied Chemistry Lab
- Re-branding toilet paper for specific target markets with Business students

Groups spent the last part of their week working on a 'Mega Challenge' which involved exploring the campus independently to find out information about various aspects of university life and study. They then presented their findings to assembled guests at a graduation ceremony on the final afternoon of the programme.

Pupils also took part in an extensive evening social programme which included dinner in a restaurant, a trip to the cinema, a martial arts session, bowling, an art session involving making clocks, and a 'Crystal Maze' challenge activity.

Parents and carers of participants attended a parallel evening event which allowed them to take part in some of the same activities that their young people had completed throughout the week, enabling them to find out about university opportunities open to their young people and how to support them in achieving the best possible outcomes from their education.

The main aims of the programme were:

- To raise pupils' educational aspirations, in particular with regard to university study
- To increase pupils' awareness and knowledge of higher education
- To raise pupils' academic confidence and appreciation of the importance of academic achievement at school

- To provide pupils with access to the University's departments and equipment, giving them experience of what it would be like to study certain subjects
- To allow pupils to experience first hand what life and study on a university campus is like.

Evaluation findings

Participants completed pre- and post-programme questionnaires, designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative information about their educational aspirations, attitude towards school and university and feelings about their experience on the programme. Some of the findings are listed below.

- Pupils found the overall experience very enjoyable. In particular, pupils enjoyed meeting new people and spending time with student mentors:
'I loved every single second.'
- Pupils appear to have found great value in developing relationships with student mentors. The programme's informal environment and the fact that all mentors employed in the programme were experienced in working with young people were factors that were conducive to the establishment of these relationships:
'I just want to thank all the mentors for all the work they've put into this. They've been amazing.'
- When asked if the programme had changed their perception of university, several pupils mentioned how they were now less intimidated by the idea of going to university, with many feeling more confident about their ability to complete a degree and many also now feeling more relaxed about being able to make new friends:
'I feel more confident and the thought of going to university doesn't scare me as much.'
- Several pupils mentioned that the experience had made them decide that they definitely wanted to go on to university:
'Yes, before I wasn't sure about Uni but now, after this experience, I would love to go. I really hope I get the grades to get in.'
- The programme also had an impact on some pupils' attitude towards school work, with some expressing a stronger desire to work harder at school in order to get the grades needed to gain entry '*...you need to keep your head down and study hard to be the best you can.'*
- Pupils' knowledge of various aspects of university, including student finance, accommodation, faculties and courses improved over the course of the programme:
'That it's free if you lived in Scotland for more than 3 years.'
- Many pupils felt the programme had helped them develop team-working, communication and presentation skills, as well as making them feel more confident in general:
'I have boosted my confidence in meeting new people, working in a group and expressing my ideas to people.'
'Confidence, meeting new people and being able to put my point across.'

- The student mentors working on the programme felt that the programme was very beneficial in raising pupils' knowledge and awareness of university and their aspiration to progress on to university study. Many felt that the pupils had improved their confidence in both academic and social skills and that working with students had given them an insight into university life and a chance to be reassured about their concerns and to have some myths dispelled. The programme offered an environment where pupils felt confident in asking questions and raising their concerns. Many mentors felt that the opportunity to meet new people had been very beneficial and that staying in university accommodation had helped pupils develop feelings of independence.

Student Mentors

Given the more sensitive nature of the work on the residential summer programme compared with other IRL projects, a high level of importance was placed on choosing experienced mentors who had proven to be trustworthy, efficient and proactive, as well as able to form very good working relationships with young people from more difficult backgrounds. Most of the mentors who worked on the daytime programme had worked for IRL for several years and had shown themselves capable of undertaking a range of different roles and dealing with high levels of responsibility. It was also considered important that these mentors should be current or recently-graduated students so that their experience of university was as fresh and up-to-date as possible.

Slightly different criteria were used in selecting the mentors who would stay overnight with the pupils in university accommodation and run the evening social programme. Most of these mentors had worked for IRL for over five years, some for as many as eight years. It was thought that these mentors had the required level of maturity and experience to deal with any potentially more serious problematic issues that might arise during the residential aspect of the programme.

As with all IRL projects mentors were given training on course content before the programme. In addition, mentors also received training from CELCIS (Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland) and university social work academics on working with children in care and the particular educational obstacles that they face.

On other IRL programmes, mentors normally work with groups of pupils in a ratio of approximately one to eight. It was decided to have a much smaller ratio of pupils to mentors on the summer programme in order to give more personalised attention to individuals. This was something of a sensitive issue due to an awareness that many young people in care have contact with a lot of adults and that many of these do not stay in their lives for long. This concern was amplified by the fact that the pupils would also be working with different mentors during their evening social programme. However, as the feedback above shows, the opportunity to work closely with student mentors was one of the main benefits that pupils felt they had gained from the programme. Several mentors also mentioned the small ratio of pupils to mentors as a very positive aspect of the programme.

'The high ratio of mentor to participant was excellent in that it allowed spending more time with each pupil on a one-to-one basis and it was easier to interact less as an authority figure and more as a source of support for issues.'

Recommendations for Practitioners

- Correct targeting of pupils to take part in widening access initiatives can often be problematic and is dependent on clear guidelines, which in turn are dependent on clear programme aims. There are also issues around variance in levels of expectation, with assumptions that looked after children are unlikely to progress to higher education. Care must be taken to counteract a culture of low expectation while at the same time maintaining a level of realism. As with all widening access programmes, pupils should be selected on their academic potential rather than necessarily their current academic performance but there is a sense that when targeting pupils in care there is a need to adapt and go slightly 'below' the level of academic achievement normally expected in such initiatives. If this is done early enough, with a programme of continued provision in place, positive outcomes should be achieved.
- In IRL's experience, it would be unrealistic to run a programme for children in care and not expect some level of non-attendance. Some pupils were unable to attend due to family or holiday commitments. This could possibly have been avoided with slightly better levels of communication with all stakeholders including foster parents, parents and carers. While all parents and guardians were sent information about the programme and invited to information sessions, perhaps a greater level of 'touching base' with them would reduce the risk of diary clashes in the future. There were also some pupils who perhaps viewed the three-day programme as too daunting a prospect, even though the residential aspect was not obligatory. A longer induction programme would probably go some way to countering this, preferably including an on-campus event for mentors and pupils.
- In order for outreach programmes to run effectively, the need for regular and clear communication between stakeholders is essential. This can be a larger issue for children in care due to the higher number of agencies and adults who are involved in their education and in their lives in general. Good communication between the social work and education departments in a local authority are particularly important in the context of educational programmes for children in care. This was recognised by the City Council; social work staff participated in discussions with IRL staff before the programme and they attended the graduation ceremony. The parents and carers of participants on the *Strathclyde Summer Experience* were also invited to an evening event during the programme, and the parents/carers of five pupils attended. We plan to consider ways of ensuring that at least one stakeholder, not necessarily a parent or carer, for each pupil attends such events.
- A common issue for pupils in care attending programmes is that they are too often one-off events that do not fit with a wider programme of support connecting to other provision and offering the kind of individualised support that will help pupils achieve their educational goals. Participants on the *Strathclyde Summer Experience* will have an extended programme of support including mentoring and access to other on-campus programmes and widening access events. Again, there is a need to ensure that all the stakeholders involved in this work communicate well with each other. In order to facilitate lines of communication, we plan to have one central point of contact, probably in the local authority, who is aware of all elements of provision and who ensures that communication happens.

Conclusion

There are clear benefits to be gained from intensive educational experiences on campus, allowing pupils to work closely with university students. Evaluation findings suggest a very positive impact with regard to aspirations and confidence to undertake university study, knowledge of higher education and attitude towards school work. In order to ensure that these benefits are maximised, it is important to address issues about targeting of participants, establishing effective communication between stakeholders and ensuring the programme is set within an extended, co-ordinated programme of support. All of these issues are dependent on effective collaboration and the model of partnership-working developed by Glasgow City Council, the MCR Foundation and the University of Strathclyde is an exciting step in the right direction.

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ⁱ www.glasgow.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=8597

ⁱⁱ www.mcrholdings.com/foundation/

ⁱⁱⁱ The second and third year of high school in Scotland, i.e. age 13-14