



UNIVERSITY OF
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Camden



Research Evaluation of ICET Head Start into Higher Education Programme

Year 1 Summary

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1. Executive Summary

Care experienced young people (CEYP) have low progression rates into higher education (HE), with latest data from the Department for Education suggesting that only around 15% of care leavers in England are entering HE by the age of 19, compared to 47% of the general population. Those who are successful often overcome major challenges and barriers to go to university and many enter higher education as mature students.

The present provision for supporting CEYP to transition from secondary to higher education is piecemeal and subject to regional variation, with no consistent model utilised to support this specific group of young people.

1.1 Head Start into Higher Education

The Inner Circle Educational Trust (ICET) is funding a seven year programme, Head Start into Higher Education, in partnership with the London Borough of Camden Virtual School (CVS). Through the Head Start initiative, 30 CEYP who show the academic potential for attainment at Level 2 and 3 are receiving targeted funding and personalised support from an Educational Navigator (EN). The EN role draws on the concept of the relational navigator, which promotes a pedagogical relationship to enable the navigator to '...pilot through complex systems and transitional processes in collaboration with, and through walking alongside, the CEYP with respect to their lived contexts and experiences'. [1]

CVS took account of the following criteria when selecting CEYP who might benefit from the programme:

- **Year 9/10 students in full-time education**, selected based on their summer term 2023 PEP progress and attainment being recorded as On Track at age-related expectations or working above in Maths, English, Science and a range of other subjects, or working within a range of Grade 5-9 at Level 2 subjects at the beginning of the Key Stage 4 academic year 2023/4 and 2024/5; and
- **Year 12 and above in full-time education**, working towards a range of grade 5-9 at level 2 or studying a level 2 or 3 course at the start of the academic year 2023/4 and 2024/5.

The programme did not seek to gather a cohort that would be representative of the wider population of CEYP in Camden or beyond, or that would enter the programme at the same level of education.

Once a CEYP is found to have met the academic criteria for the programme, the EN conducts an in-depth analysis of previous Personal Education Plan (PEP) meetings for the CEYP. The EN subsequently approaches the Social Worker or Personal Advisor and then the carer and child / young person via email or phone call to talk about the programme. If the invitation to join the programme is accepted, the EN then meets the young person, their Social Worker or Personal Advisor, and their carer(s) to provide further information about the range of support and activities available.



[1] Burke, P. J., Cameron, C., Fuller, E. and Hollingworth, K. (2021). The relational navigator: a pedagogical reframing of widening educational participation for care-experienced young people. International Journal of Social Pedagogy, 10(1): p.1 see <https://journals.uclpress.co.uk/ijsp/article/pubid/IJSP-10-15/>

1.2 The evaluation approach

ICET has commissioned an independent evaluation of Head Start in Higher Education by the University of Birmingham in partnership with the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) to demonstrate whether this type of programme and financial investment will make a material difference to the life chances and educational outcomes of the CEYP involved. This report outlines the findings of Work Package 1 (WP1), an investigative phase during the first year of the programme, to establish the approach to evaluation during the subsequent six years of the project.

The evaluation is adopting a mixed methods approach, with both formative and summative elements, and is rooted in the expectation that the framework will be co-created with ICET, the CVS and CEYP themselves. The direct engagement of CEYP is intended to encourage a sense of ownership, which will be important for participation in surveys and interviews to gather insights, both during the project and beyond it, thereby opening the possibility for further longitudinal research. Qualitative insights form an important strand of the evaluation, with opportunities for CEYP to engage in a variety of ways.

As well as producing reports for ICET, the evaluation will also explore how the evaluation findings could be deployed to influence improvement and best practice through changes to policy and practice nationwide. This will involve ongoing public communications crafted with ICET and the CVS, together with a policy briefing and seminar at the end of the project to discuss recommendations with policymakers and practitioners. It will also include consideration of further research that could be conducted with the cohort.

The project is planned to run for seven school/academic years from 2023/24 through to 2029/30. WP1 took place during the 2023/24 year, with the other work packages (2-5) scheduled to be carried out at key points across all subsequent years.

1.3 Evaluation activities in Year One

Activities undertaken in WP1 have involved:

- a desk-based review of recent policy and research findings in the field;
- semi-structured interviews with key people at ICET, the CVS and the EN to explore the programme in more detail. Further interviews with external experts who provided insights into other initiatives and effective practice. These people were also asked about their views on how the evaluation should be conducted in the subsequent years;
- review of the baseline data for care experienced young people (CEYP) in Camden and nationally on their educational attainment and progress into and through higher education; and
- two face-to-face focus groups with CEYP currently involved in the Head Start Programme, exploring their experience of the support they have received so far, and their views on how the evaluation should be conducted in the subsequent years.



1.4 Findings

1.4.1 Literature and policy review

The review of literature and policy initiatives highlighted several themes of relevance to the Head Start programme and will help to inform the ongoing evaluation of this initiative. These include:

- The importance of continuity of support, which is holistic, relational, and knowledgeable of individual needs;
- The need for accurate and consistent information, advice and guidance for young people and their advisers;
- The challenges of evaluating initiatives with small sample sizes, inconsistency around definitions of care experience and a lack of data linkages between local authorities, schools, colleges and higher education; but, despite this
- the benefits of early interventions that leverage partnership working across schools, colleges, universities and local authorities.

1.4.2 Conclusions from the interviews

The interview data from ICET trustees, members of CVS and external experts reinforced many of the same themes and issues. Key points included:

- the importance of the EN also working with the young people's carers and other support networks, as well as the CEYP themselves, to provide a consistent message around aspirations;
- the need to explore a broad range of options for each young person, and not only a pathway to HE;
- providing support based upon individual need which adapts to the changing needs of the CEYP, as they transition through education stages;
- continuity of support by the EN which means that the CEYP do not have to keep telling different people about their lives;
- awareness by the EN of the stigma and barriers that the CEYP may have faced, or may still be facing, and how this individually makes an impact on their motivations and aspirations; and
- the challenges of measuring educational success for CEYP, which calls for a wider consideration of what success may look like for the Head Start Programme, which could include pathways that do not necessarily lead to higher education.

1.4.3 Focus group findings

The two focus groups with CEYP provided some early qualitative insights on the programme and how best to engage CEYP as participants in the evaluation. Findings included:

- positive feedback from participants on the relationship developed with and support provided by the EN, and the way in which this was responsive to their needs;
- perceptions that progression to higher education would provide security and improve the participants' future lives;
- a lack of recognition by the young people at this early stage that they were part of a broader programme and cohort of participants; and
- support for online surveys as the most effective way to secure ongoing engagement, with the option to participate in other activities, if the young people so wished.

1.4.3 Focus group findings

In WP1, the evaluation team utilised Department of Education Data (Children Looked After, 2023) to problematise and challenge the use of data within existing programme evaluations for CEYP that report success against all students nationally, using averages for all children in care. We also used this data to present a demographic profile of Camden's CEYP. This work suggests that a nuanced approach will be needed for programme evaluation, which utilises disaggregated data, as care experienced young people are not a homogenous group.

Through an odds ratios [OR] approach, we established that Camden's CEYP are more likely than the national average to be:

- Black, African, Caribbean, or Black British [OR 8.1];
- Asian or Asian British [OR 2.6];
- male [OR 1.2],
- over the age of 16 [OR 1.6],
- unaccompanied asylum-seeking children [OR 3.2];
- in secure units, children's homes and semi-independent living accommodation [OR 2.6]; and
- placed due to 'absent parenting' [OR 3.2], a 'parental illness of disability' [OR 2.6], and under a 'voluntary agreement under S20 CA 1989' [OR 2.5].

These findings show that extant programme evaluations that do not consider the demography of CEYP in a holistic way have the potential to under- or over-state their claims, as there is clear evidence that the race/gender/ethnicity/language/eligibility for FSM for CEYP in Camden already make an impact upon their experiences, outcomes and transitions, within education.



In addition to these findings, our data preparations in WP1 have developed the context for educational reference points (and subsequent transitional benchmarks) to be utilised in WP2. This is crucially concerned with requesting access to individual CVS student administrative data.

1.5 Formative advice on the programme

The activities in WP1 have raised several areas that the ICET Trustees and CVS may wish to consider as the programme develops:

- firstly, to consider supporting the work of the EN with a website or intranet system including details of the initiative, signposting the support available and links to other organisations and websites. This will not only cater to different CEYP support needs, aid continuity and help the role of the EN, but may help to engender a collective sense across the two cohorts, and a recognition that they are part of a wider programme. If this is not considered appropriate, other ways of bringing the cohort together should be explored;
- secondly, for the EN and each CEYP to produce an individual support plan that is agreed at the point of transition from CVS to HE, apprenticeships or other destinations. This should include what support has already been provided, future modes and timings of contact, who will initiate the contact, future objectives, and areas to be addressed in the next year. This will help to manage expectations of both parties and help with the workload of the EN as they will be able to plan their time better; and
- thirdly, to consider the issue of continuity of support and succession planning if the current EN were to move on, and to explore whether the progress being made is purely relational, and attributable to the personality, skills and knowledge of the current postholder.

1.6 Next Steps: implications of WP1 findings for the conduct of WP2–5

The findings of WP1 indicate that the cohorts of CEYP have begun their engagement with the Head Start programme in different school years, and therefore at different points in their transitions from compulsory education to post-compulsory education, training or employment. Equally, as CVS staff have made clear, while the aim of the project is to support transitions into HE, participants can be expected to transition to different destinations, or to take different routes in their transition into HE than a UCAS application at the end of year 13.

WP1 has also found that the enactment of the relational navigator role in Head Start has led to participants having a largely individualised relationship to the programme, and a more limited personal sense of themselves as part of a cohort of participants in the project.

This diversity of starting points, anticipated pathways and individualised relations to the provision will all necessarily shape the evaluation's approach to WP2–5. Equally, the relatively small number of participants and lack of control groups necessarily informs our evaluative aims and approach.

We propose using WP2–5 to focus on two questions:

- How the educational navigator works with Head Start participants to shape their transition to post-compulsory education destination; and
- How Head Start participants' post-compulsory educational outcomes compare to broader populations of CEYP.

Question one (WP2 and 3) will focus on producing a rich understanding of what Head Start has provided and participants' subjective perceptions of that provision, including whether and how it has helped them, and their sentiments regarding the provision. We will take a case study approach which will be designed to provide an account of the young person's transition to their post-compulsory destination over the five years of provision. Each participant will be a case, and cases will provide a cumulative account of the work of the EN and young people's engagement with Head Start. This design will enable the evaluation to accommodate the individual differences of participants, their different starting points, destinations and the flexibility of educational navigator provision.

Question two (WP 4) will be answered through accessing CVS student participant data via the Department for Education's Unique Learner Number (ULN)/Learner Personal Record (UPR) to enable the tracking of transition, participation and attainment of students from compulsory education (Department of Education) into higher education (Higher Education Statistics Agency – 'HESA'), and, given the small sample size, using odds ratios to compare the individual attainment and progression data of each participating CVS student to broader populations of care-experienced young people within and beyond Camden/London/England. This work may also inform broader research on CEYP in local areas across England.