



Supporting the Progression of Looked After Young People to University: Evaluation of the *Choices Together* Programme

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Introduction

Choices Together is a programme for Looked After Young People (LAYP) in years 10 and 11, designed to introduce the concept of higher education. *Choices Together* has run since 2006/7 and this is the third year it has been run under the banner of the Raising Aspirations Partnership, a joint programme of widening participation activity directly funded and delivered by Newcastle University, Northumbria University and the University of Sunderland. The Partnership has recently expanded to include both Durham University and Teesside University, becoming the North East Raising Aspiration Partnership as part of the National Networks for Collaborative Outreach funded by the HEFCE to work with students, teachers, parents and carers to support the progression of disadvantaged young people into higher education. The aim of the *Choices Together* programme of activities is not only to raise the aspirations/knowledge of LAYP and their carers about university, but also to raise the awareness amongst university admissions officers and staff more broadly about the needs and real-life circumstances of LAYP.

In 2014 the *Choices Together* programme ran for seven weeks with a welcome event at Newcastle University and a celebration event at the Stadium of Light in Sunderland. In the intervening weeks the students attended four sessions at the three partner universities. Parents/carers were sent an information sheet in advance of the programme and there was a group of 30 regular student attendees, with 10 who came intermittently and 15 who dropped out. In addition there were up to 50 carers, parents and local authority advisers in attendance at the welcome and celebration events. These figures are good relative to other years. Six student ambassadors were provided with training and supported all the events.

This is a report of the evaluation that was carried out as part of a Catherine Cookson Foundation funded research project looking at the progression of LAYP to higher education in the north-east of England.

Context

At present the progression rate for LAYP to university is just 4% in the north-east of England, and around 6% nationally, as compared with 39% for all maintained school pupils (Department for Education, 2011/2014) however data is not uniformly collected across local authorities. This group is usually deemed to be at risk of dropping out of education and in need of extra support, but there has been little progress in affecting change and research has found that widening participation activities have not substantially impacted on this (Jackson et al., 2003).

However there is increasing research on educationally successful care leavers (e.g. Martin and Jackson, 2002) and policy changes were made as a result of the five-year action research project, *By Degrees: from care to university* (Jackson et al., 2005). As a direct result of this research the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 made provision for care-leavers going to university to have:

- a £2000 bursary;
- Buttle UK launched a *Quality Mark* to recognise those institutions which adopted a statement of commitment to care leavers;
- UCAS added a tick-box to its application form for care-leavers to identify themselves should they wish.

These changes do not fully address the many recommendations made in the *By Degrees* final

report however, and as this evaluation demonstrates, knowledge of even these changes is far from widespread.

Evaluation Methodology

The aims of the evaluation were to explore the experiences of the participants (young people, parents/carers and local authority advisers) and to assess the impact of the *Choices Together* programme. Data was collected by means of:

- group evaluation sessions with both students and carers, integrated into the welcome and celebration events;
- interviews with student participants at the welcome and celebration events;
- interviews with two local authority advisers;
- interview with a student helper;
- attendance at the staff training session and observing two further sessions;
- speaking to parents and carers during sessions and follow-up phone interviews with two carers;
- analysis of documentary evidence.

Evaluation Findings

Welcome and celebration events

The welcome and celebration events were highly regarded and had considerable impact on the participants. The venue for the celebration event, Sunderland's Stadium of Light, was particularly successful and was in part responsible for drawing siblings and friends of the young participants. A welcome event at Newcastle University included parallel

information sessions for students and carers and a panel session where three care-experienced undergraduate students currently at Newcastle and Sunderland Universities, spoke about their experiences in the education system.

Impact Case Study – Leanne, Year 10, and her carer

At the welcome event one of the researchers was told by Leanne's carer that she extremely nervous about the programme, so even sitting with a researcher talking at lunchtime was a new experience and helpful in enabling Leanne to feel more at ease. The carer said that neither she nor Leanne had ever been to anything like Choices Together before and neither knew what to expect, having just had the one letter about it beforehand.

The same researcher spoke to Leanne and her carer again at the celebration event. Leanne was still nervous but she said that she had loved coming and had not missed a single session. The carer said that she had learned so much, having had no idea about the financial package available for care-experienced students at university, and she wished that she had had some of this information earlier to support other young people she had looked after. She reported finding the session excellent in every way and that it had far exceeded her expectations. Likewise Leanne said that it had been amazing and that she'd loved meeting some of the other young people and being at a university.

Feedback afterwards was that this had been an extremely motivating session both for the young people and carers alike and there is evidence that for some of the foster carers in particular, hearing from these young people directly had prompted them to re-evaluate their roles, thinking about their responsibility to support the educational progression of the young people in their care for the first time. The students spoke about how particular foster carers and teachers had made an enormous difference to them through emotional as well as practical support and how vital support packages from particular universities were in their decision to go to university. However one of the students also spoke about how the 'looked after' label made him feel backed into a corner, as he knew the statistics and the slim chance he had of getting to university.

Impact on young people

The young participants were most keen to know about the practical side of university: cost; accommodation; admissions and courses. At the start of the programme the young people had a wide range of aspirations from engineering to teaching, which had not changed by the end of the programme, but the young people were clearer about how university could help them achieve these.

At the celebration event, young people said they had learned what they wanted about university and left with far more knowledge and confidence, feeling that university could be a positive experience. However there were also concerns that they would miss family members and there was still a lack of confidence about going. Nonetheless, having attended *Choices Together* they also had plenty of positive messages about university they would pass on to others and they felt more able to ask people for help and support at school if they felt stuck.

Young participant quotes about university:

'It's not as bad as you may think – it's useful.'

'You can go to university whether you're rich or poor and there are loads of unusual social clubs.'

'I would tell people uni is a good idea to go to because not everyone gets the chance to go.'

'I think that university would be good and it is a fantastic opportunity and it is a once in a life time thing so just to do it.'

Impact on carers and parents

Parents and carers had significant concerns about the young people in their care going to university, including finances, high entry requirements, managing independent living, possible discrimination because of having a care background, being alone in the holidays, and lack of self-confidence. The key concerns that were raised in interview were:

- the policy that their young person had to leave at age 18, particularly if this disrupted the final year of Sixth Form;
- different local authorities offering different support and information;
- information about *Choices Together* not necessarily reaching carers from private agencies;
- lack of confidence and knowledge to support their young people in education;
- lack of information about universities in general and the support available for care-leavers in particular;
- lack of support at school for university progression.

There was evidence of low expectations of their young people amongst some of the carers. One foster carer reported having fostered 78 children, only now did he have 'a bright one.' Another children's home carer said that none of his young people were going to apply for or get to university as most 'just didn't have the ability'. Some carers also told the researchers that they had actively *prevented* young people in their care from aspiring to university as they had believed it was too difficult, but would change this advice now that they had better information. Others voiced concern over the fact that the carer system was not adequately preparing these young people for independent living.

Overall carers found the programme excellent, well-planned and inspirational, stating that in the future they would provide more educational support for their young people. The key information that many carers did not know about was:

- **LAYP might be able to get into university with lower grades;**
- **special financial support packages were available for LAYP at some universities.**

The majority of the carers and parents who attended strongly believed that *Choices Together* had been a very good experience for the young people, providing an opportunity for confidence building and mixing with other young people with aspirations. However there were concerns about what would follow and who could be contacted for ongoing support, as well as the possible stigma that could result from being given special support.

Carer quotes:

'The young person has become more focused on a possible career pathway.'

'Stacey has said that Choices Together is one of the most useful things she has ever attended.'

'It was more accessible than I initially thought.'

'Inspirational. I've had dozens of children in my care but never before thought that my job should also be to support their educations...I feel really ashamed.'

'This has made me totally re-think my role and what I'm meant to be doing for my young person. I feel like I've just not had enough information to help them with their education.'

'We have been given a good idea of what was on offer and the ability to access this as well as the amount of support.'

'I wish I'd known about this years ago as I've had other young people who – well I've advised them against going [to university] as I thought there was no support and it was too hard.'

Impact on local authority advisers

An interview with a local authority adviser who had attended confirmed how successful *Choices Together* has been. No care-leaver had previously progressed to university in his local authority until 2012 and he sees *Choices Together* as significant in this shift. Along with

some of the foster carers, there was concern about the loss of the Education Maintenance Allowance and 'stay put placements' throughout secondary school and the last year of Sixth Form.

The local authority adviser endorsed how vital it was to get carers on board in supporting LAYP to get to university, another aspect of *Choices Together* he rated highly, stating that it was *both* the young person and their carer who need support and information. The view of several local authority advisers was that *all* carers and most social workers need extra training in this area and he believed that all would benefit from the kinds of information disseminated during the *Choices Together* programme.

Overall impact of *Choices Together*

- *Exceeded expectations of participants.*
- *More accessible than expected.*
- *Effective in building confidence, at least for the duration of the programme.*
- *Delivered excellent levels of information on university.*
- *Created a peer group which was very beneficial.*
- *Hearing life stories of care-experienced undergraduates was very impactful.*
- *Some carers completely re-evaluated their role in relation to supporting education.*
- *Participants left with positive views about university, although there were still some insecurities.*

Discussion

Choices Together is an effective, much needed programme, providing a range of stakeholders involved with the care of LAYP with crucial information and support in relation to progressing to higher education. There is substantial evidence from this evaluation that the lack of this kind of information acts as a real barrier to progression. At present the availability of appropriate information and support for LAYP is far too reliant on chance contact with particular motivated, supportive individuals, as has been demonstrated elsewhere (The Who Cares? Trust, 2012).

This evaluation has highlighted how carers can act as 'gate-keepers', influencing the young people in their care about whether to aim for higher education or not. This is a situation which can be changed, since some of the carers did report re-evaluating their roles in respect of supporting their LAYP to progress to university. The views of the carers depended on both their knowledge of the higher education system and their belief in the young person's ability to cope at university, not only academically, but also socially and emotionally. *Choices Together* brought these issues to the fore and made great strides in addressing them.

This evaluation has demonstrated that the LAYP clearly have aspirations and it is the support to keep these aspirations on track which is often lacking, not the aspirations themselves (Cummings et al., 2012). However there was evidence of low expectations amongst carers and many instances of reported low expectations amongst other professionals in the lives of the young people.

Whilst *Choices Together* goes some way to providing guidance and support for LAYP about higher education, it is only for a small number of LAYP and their families/carers and only for a limited period of time, but participants felt it should be available to all. This evaluation highlights how pivotal knowledge of financial support arrangements and other provision for LAYP to progress to university is to changing the way in which both carers and LAYP think about higher education.

Future Recommendations

- *Funding to expand this kind of targeted widening progression event with LAYP should be a priority both for local authorities and higher education institutions.*
- *Following-up both the young people and their carers over time will maintain the link with university progression.*
- *Low expectations of carers in terms of educational progression of their LAYD needs challenging more actively.*
- *Information about the looked-after status of young people is important for educational institutions to hold, particularly when extra support is available, but great care should be exercised over confidentiality.*

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