

WE STAND FOR AMBITION.

University of
Kent

Plan My Path

2024-2025



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Executive Summary

Overview

Plan My Path (PMP) is a targeted outreach programme developed by the University of Kent to support care-experienced students in exploring higher education (HE). Delivered over four sessions through a blend of campus visits and in-school sessions, the programme is co-created and facilitated by care-experienced student ambassadors. Its key aims are to:

- Increase students' knowledge of HE
- Diversify perceptions of who HE is for
- Enhance sense of belonging in a university environment
- Strengthen students' sense of agency and control over their educational pathways

Key Findings

Increased knowledge of HE: Students reported greater understanding of university life, terminology, and support systems. This was reflected in both survey responses and qualitative feedback.

Mixed changes in perception: Student responses to attitudinal questions varied between cohorts, with some reporting increased interest in HE while others showed limited or decreased perceived relevance particularly around university as a route to career options.

Limited short-term impact on belonging and locus of control: Quantitative data showed minimal or negative shifts in students' sense of belonging. Qualitative responses, however, indicated emerging comfort and confidence, suggesting these concepts may evolve over time and are difficult to measure within a short intervention window.

High impact of ambassadors: The involvement of care-experienced ambassadors was a standout strength. Students valued their personal stories and relatability. Similarly school staff noted the positive influence on trust, openness, and aspiration.

Positive school-based effects: The programme fostered an increased sense of community between students participating, increased student-staff engagement, and in some cases, the benefits of the programme were formally integrated into Personal Education Plans (PEPs).

Evaluation Limitations

- The small cohort size limited the statistical power of the survey data.
- Some survey questions may not have been age-appropriate or easily understood by all participants.
- Focus groups led by ambassadors, while student-centred, would benefit from redesign and specialist facilitation to generate deeper insights.

Recommendations

1. Retain belonging and locus of control as pedagogical concepts but treat them as long-term outcomes rather than immediate measures.
2. Intentionally embed ambassador journeys and personal stories throughout all sessions.
3. Develop more structured opportunities for student reflection in every session.
4. Consider group demographics whilst ensuring transparent and sensitive communication of the programme's focus.
5. Review and refine survey design and focus group methodology.
6. Introduce longitudinal tracking to assess sustained impact beyond the programme period.

Conclusion

PMP demonstrates strong potential in increasing care-experienced students' understanding of HE and in fostering aspirational thinking. Its distinctive ambassador-led model offers authenticity, representation, and relational support that students value. While some outcomes such as belonging and agency may take longer to materialise, this programme lays critical groundwork for future progression. Strategic refinements and longer-term evaluation will help ensure its continued relevance and impact.

Introduction

The Plan My Path (PMP) programme is a targeted widening participation intervention designed by the University of Kent to support care-experienced students' exploration of Higher Education (HE). Care-experienced young people are among the most underrepresented groups in UK HE, facing multiple structural and psychosocial barriers to access, progression, and success (Office for Students, 2022). National data shows that children with experience of social care have an average progression rate of 14% by the age of 22. This compares with 39% for those eligible for free school meals (FSM) and 48% for the remaining general population. (TASO, 2025).

The programme seeks to challenge this disparity by providing care-experienced students with meaningful and personalised engagement with university life. Delivered over four sessions through a blend of campus-based and in-school sessions, the programme is underpinned by pedagogical principles of agency, belonging, and relational support. A unique feature of PMP is the central role played by care-experienced university ambassadors, who co-develop and co-deliver the programme alongside outreach staff.

This evaluation report assesses the effectiveness of achieving the four key aims of PMP:

- Increasing knowledge of higher education
- Diversifying perceptions of HE
- Enhancing sense of belonging
- Strengthening students' locus of control

Using a mixed-methods approach, the evaluation draws on attitudinal surveys, student work, focus groups with students and interviews with school staff and ambassadors. While the small sample size limits generalisability, the findings provide valuable insights into what worked well, what could be improved, and how the programme might evolve to deepen its impact.



Programme Rationale & Design

Care-experienced students are underrepresented in HE and have significantly poorer educational outcomes (Office for Students, 2022). Research findings indicate that care-experienced students are less likely to progress to HE. Moreover, the length of time children are in care seems to play a part in their progression to HE. According to a recent TASO report, children who were in care for longer than six months after age 11, were 9 percentage points less likely to progress than those who were in care for less than six months (18% vs 29%) (TASO, 2025). Care experienced students are also more likely to drop-out of their degree if they do progress and less likely to achieve a 1st or a 2.1 qualification (Office for Students, 2022).

Research by the Department of Education (2020) shows that care-experienced pupils do not lack awareness of the benefits of getting a university degree for future earning potential. However, their expectations of attending HE are lower than their peers, even after controlling for special educational needs, school exclusions and family benefit levels. This suggests that, despite knowing some of the benefits of university for prospective employment, care-experienced children do not see university as part of their future.

The University of Kent is committed to supporting care experienced students within its Access and Participation Plan (APP). Our aim is to increase the number of applications to universities and to the University of Kent in particular, for students who have ever been under the care of their local authority by 38% by 2027/2028 academic year.

PMP is a targeted intervention designed specifically to support students in local authority care with an opportunity to increase their understanding of HE and university in particular. It is a progressive programme, giving students the opportunity to explore university life, take part in interactive and creative sessions in-school and on the University of Kent's campus, to think about their future and consider the options for how to get to where they want to go. As part of the programme, information about the targeted support available for care-experienced students is also provided.

The programme is designed to be responsive to the students' interests, aspirations and things they want to learn more about. It supports them in developing their skills and exploring tools needed to help plan their path.

The programme is a 4-week intervention, which is structured to allow students to develop their knowledge of HE whilst simultaneously reflecting on what their ambitions for the future are and how university may support that. An overview of the programme can be found in table 1:

Session	Activity	Details
Supporter Information Meeting (OPTIONAL)	An online meeting for participants' supporters (eg. Carers, social workers) to attend. They will receive an overview of the project and hear more about the research project	Online
1. Exploring University Life	Students will take part in a variety of activities designed to explore what university is. They will work with student ambassadors to learn more about what a university is, what happens there, and what students do.	In school (2 ½ hours), Term 2.
2. University Student for a Day	Students will come to the University of Kent's campus to spend time with Targeted Outreach Ambassadors to see what it would be like to be a university student. They will: • Take part in an interactive and creative workshop • Take part in a subject taster session • Have lunch in a student café • Have an Ambassador-led tour of the campus • Have time for questions with the Ambassadors and staff	University of Kent campus (Canterbury or Medway) (10-14:30), Term 3.
3. University Choices	In school, we explore post-16 choices with students. In this session, we look at: • Career and study choices post-18 • University choices – what, where and how to study • Choices at university – accommodation, budgeting, and finance insights	In school (2 hours), Term 4.
4. Future Me Day	Having explored who goes to university, why, and how they get there, this day goes back to the students themselves. What do they want to do in the future? How might they get there? With time for reflection and exploration, this session will give students the opportunity to start to plan their path.	University of Kent campus (Canterbury or Medway) (10-14:30), Term 5.

Table 1: Programme overview

In 2024/25 academic year, the programme was completed with two schools and delivered to 33 students. Of these, 65% were students who are currently residing in local authority care. Due to extenuating circumstances for the third participating school, only 22 students were able to finish the programme, 18 of whom agreed to participate in the evaluation for this report.

Targeted Student Ambassadors

An integral element of the programme design is co-creation with care-experienced ambassadors. The ambassadors are consulted, invited to share ideas, review the sessions, and support the delivery on sessions. As such, the whole programme is co-developed and supported by care-experienced student ambassadors. Their knowledge and experiences are integral to ensuring our work with students in local authority care is authentic and addresses the barriers and challenges which are specific to this audience.

Programme Aims

The programme aims are as follows:

1. Increase students' sense of belonging in a HE environment
2. Increase students' knowledge of HE
3. Increase students' locus of control and exposure to choices in their education
4. Diversify students' perceptions of HE

Evaluation Methodology

To evaluate this programme, a mixed-methods approach has been adopted. Data was collected through a combination of methods, including student attitudinal surveys, analysis of student work, student focus groups, interviews with school staff and qualitative feedback from targeted ambassadors and delivery staff. This approach enables both quantitative and qualitative insights to assess the programme's effectiveness in achieving the aims.

Student data collection

Attitudinal surveys

To assess changes in student attitudes, all participants completed a short attitudinal survey at the start and end of the programme. This survey was designed to measure knowledge and perceptions of HE. Survey questions were each linked to one of the aims. Where possible, survey questions were drawn from validated tools developed by organisations endorsed by the Office for Students, including TASO and NERUPI.

Activity reflections

Following each session, students completed an end-of-activity evaluation, reflecting on their learning and remaining questions. These short reflections will be used to identify key takeaways and highlight areas of confusion or curiosity, providing feedback on the programme's delivery and relevance.

Analysis of student work

In addition, selected pieces of student work were collected to support a visual comparison of attitudes and perceptions over time. For example, at the start of the programme students described university using keywords and at the end of the programme created posters to promote HE to peers. This analysis will look to identify whether there was any increase in knowledge of HE in accordance with aim 3.

Student focus groups

At the end of the programme, qualitative data was gathered through semi-structured focus groups led by student ambassadors. These discussions explored students' overall impressions of the programme, and their future aspirations related to HE. By centering student-led conversations, these focus groups prioritise the voices and lived experiences of participants.

Designated school staff data

Midway through the programme, delivery staff conducted semi-structured interviews with designated members of staff from participating schools. These interviews explored perceptions of student engagement and the programme's progress so far.

At the end of the programme, focus group was held with all designated school staff to evaluate the

programme's overall effectiveness. Staff reflected on student engagement, observed changes outside of the sessions, and whether conversations about HE continued beyond scheduled activities.

Ambassador and University staff feedback

Targeted student ambassadors who were involved in development and supported the facilitation of sessions were invited to complete an anonymous survey or attend an online interview to provide insight into their experiences of the programme. Interviews are conducted by an independent member of the evaluation team to encourage honest feedback.

Methods of analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted on all focus groups and interviews. Statistical analysis was employed to analyse survey responses.

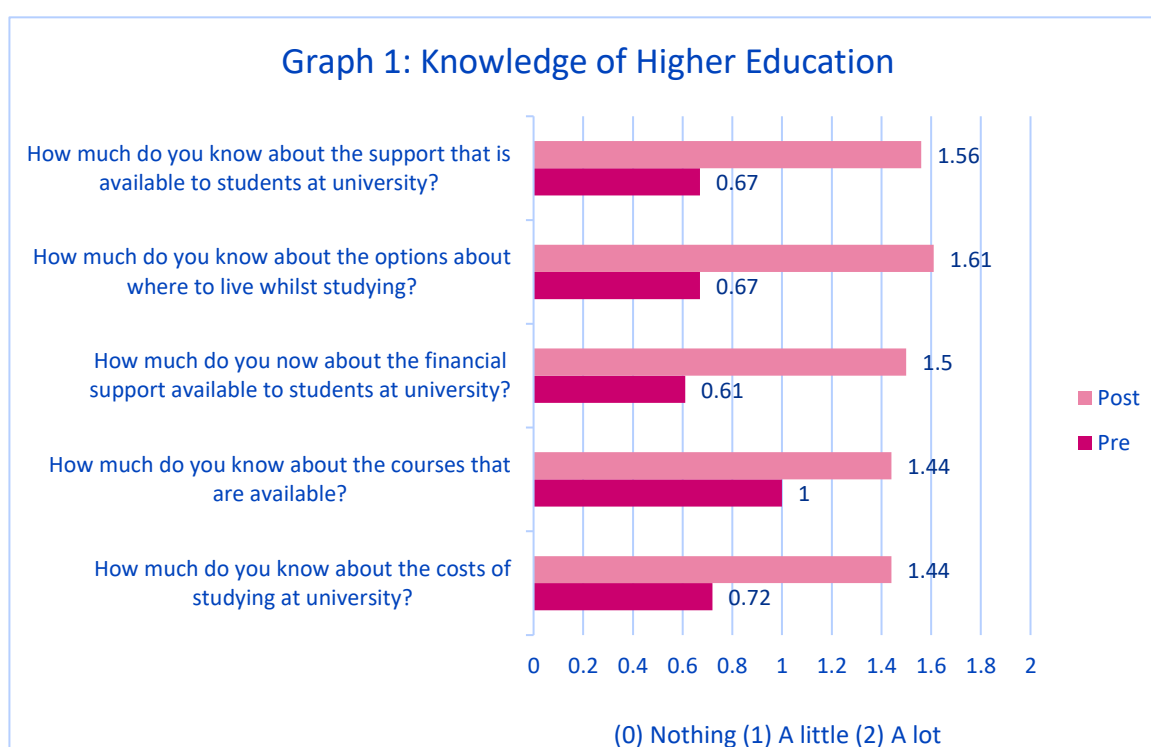
Findings

This section will discuss each of the programme aims and evidence which was analysed to assess each aim. This year, the number of students who completed the programme and the evaluation surveys (n=18) is too low to ascertain statistical significance of the surveys. Caution has been applied in interpreting the results, given the small sample size and limited reliability. However, general trends observed in the survey questions will be discussed alongside analysis of qualitative data taken from focus groups and interviews.

Increase students' knowledge of HE

For the participants who completed the programme, there were noteworthy increases in their self-reported knowledge of HE. Students were asked to define how much they thought they knew about HE at the start and end of the programme. These questions directly related to content covered throughout Plan My Path.

As shown in graph 1, there was substantial increased in knowledge across all questions. Whilst caution must be applied due to small numbers (n=18), this suggests that student's confidence in their knowledge of HE increased as a result of participating in the programme. The programme aims to provide a small amount of exposure to different areas of HE, the incremental increases in knowledge shown in the survey suggest a positive correlation between participation in the programme and general knowledge of HE.



Graph 1: Knowledge of HE- Responses in the graph below have been coded to indicate 0 = Nothing, 1 = A little and 2 = A lot.

These results were also corroborated by students in their focus groups. Many students discussed increased knowledge of university as a key element of the programme. As described by the student below:

“We covered a lot of subjects and learnt new things about the university, that we didn’t know before.”- Student

Another student expressed how they were less worried about finance and budgeting because they had more knowledge of the support available. When discussing finance and budgeting they said:

“Less of a worry, because I know I’ll be able to get help, if I need it.”

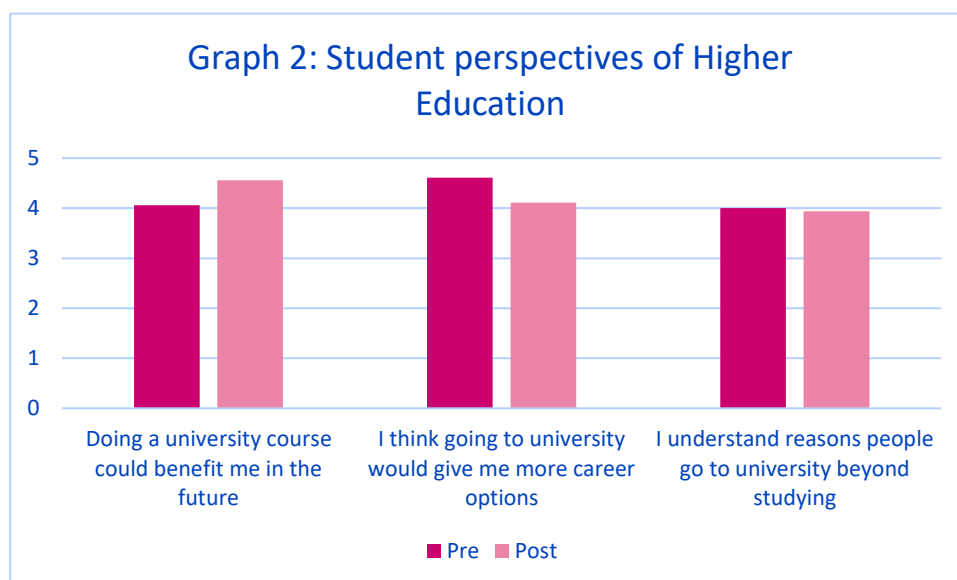
School staff also felt that the programme was meeting this aim in a substantive way. They state:

“So I think what was really important when we came to you was us giving them the idea of this is a lecture. This is a seminar because I think that terminology makes the real difference for them.”- School staff

The qualitative and quantitative analysis presented suggests that PMP is meeting its intended aim of increasing knowledge of HE and university.

Diversify students’ perceptions of HE

As shown in graph 2, overall shifts in student perceptions of HE were limited. However, there were discrepancies between the different cohorts for survey questions related to perceptions of HE. School 1 saw a noteworthy decrease, whereas school two saw a sizable increase. Given small numbers, numbers are presented for full cohorts only. Further exploration of the qualitative data collected from focus groups did not account for this discrepancy, which suggests caution should be applied when interpreting their results given uncertainty about their reliability.



Graph 2: Student perspectives of HE - Responses in the graph below have been coded to indicate the scale (1-5) 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree.

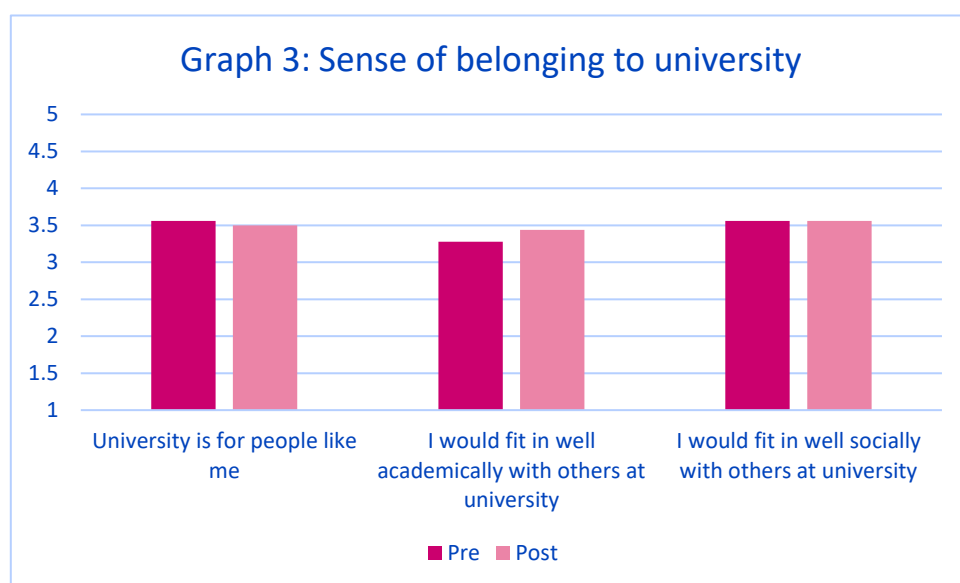
Overall, the number of students who agreed to, “I understand the reasons people go to university beyond studying” decreased from 14 positive responses to 13 positive responses. Despite this, the cohort experienced positive increases regarding the benefits of HE for them. For example, at the start of the programme when asked “Doing a university course could benefit me in the future” 14 students gave a positive response compared to 16 students at the end of the programme. Likewise, 9 students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I am planning to study at university when I’m older”. This increased to 11 students at the end of the programme. There were also two additional students who moved from strongly disagree or disagree to agree by the end of the programme. In total, over half of the cohort experienced a positive shift in their reported likelihood to apply to university at the end of the programme.

Across both schools the number of students who agreed/strongly agreed with the statement “I think going to university would give me more career options” decreased from 17 to 12. Qualitative data did not provide insight into why there was a decrease in perceptions around this. Future focus groups may benefit from asking specific questions related to perceptions of HE to better understand their answers. This may suggest that content did not expose students to the benefits of HE on future career pathways or that students would benefit from more discussion on career pathways throughout the programme. However, it may also suggest that students have explored specific career pathways that interest them and have decided other pathways may be more beneficial in achieving that.

Increase students' sense of belonging in a HE environment

PMP aimed to foster a sense of belonging within the university environment. Belonging is a complex, multifaceted construct, encompassing social, academic, and cultural integration. The survey data and qualitative feedback provide a mixed picture of progress in this area.

Quantitative responses to sense of belonging statements remained relatively stable with minimal change between pre and post programme surveys. These changes are displayed in graph 3:



Graph 3: Sense of belonging - Responses in the graph below have been coded to indicate the scale (1-5) 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree.

These relatively stable or declining metrics imply that the programme did not consistently improve students' sense of belonging, particularly regarding social integration which is a key component of successful transitions into HE.

While the quantitative data suggest limited shifts, qualitative feedback from students and staff provides nuance, revealing some positive early impressions. One student described the university environment positively:

"I think this university is really nice and cool, because people are really respectful and they have a lot of manners. And they're really nice to you, so that's really good."-student

Whilst another student reflected on a changed perception of difficulty which enabled them to view themselves as future University of Kent students:

"I thought it would be really difficult, but after the little sessions, I knew that it's really easy and it's really good to be a student in the University of Kent."- Student

Additionally, experiencing practical aspects of student life, such as viewing the accommodation, also

seemed to help students imagine themselves in those spaces. For example, one student stated:

“Like, if you had your own room, like, you can have it how you want and then you can feel like, more comfortable when you’re doing your work.”- Student

These comments suggest that for some students, university visits and interactive sessions helped build familiarity, laying the groundwork for a future sense of belonging. However, given that belonging is a construct which develops overtime, it is unlikely that students would experience large shifts in perception throughout the duration of the programme. This was highlighted by school staff who stated:

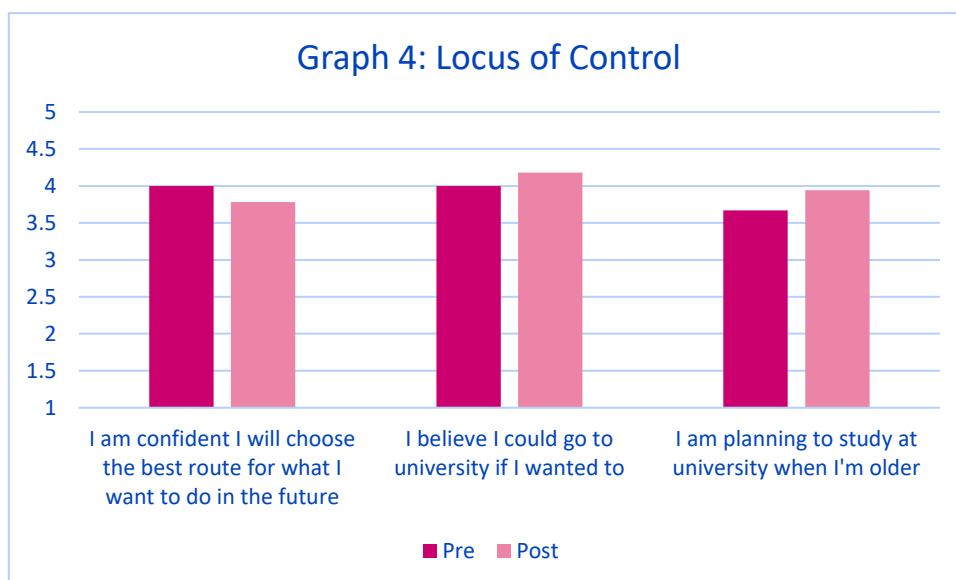
“increasing a student's sense of belonging in a HE sort of environment, I think it's a really difficult thing to be able to show them... I think it is hard to meet because you don't feel, I mean typically students don't feel a sense of belonging until they're a few months in anyway, do they?”- School staff

This observation is supported by literature on HE transitions, which suggests that belonging tends to emerge gradually, often after sustained exposure, peer interaction, and lived experience within the institution (Thomas, 2012; Mountford-Zimdars et al, 2015.). Given this, whilst sense of belonging should remain as a key theoretical concept which underpins the pedagogical framing of the programme, developers should consider whether this aim would be best placed as a longitudinal outcome.

Increase students’ locus of control and exposure to choices in their education

A key objective of the programme was to enhance students’ sense of agency, specifically, their locus of control in relation to their educational pathways. The concept of locus of control refers to the extent to which individuals believe they have control over events that affect their lives (Rotter, 1966). Developing an internal locus of control is associated with higher academic motivation, goal-setting behaviour and resilience in the face of challenge (Findley & Cooper, 1983).

Quantitative data collected through pre- and post-programme surveys asked students to rate their agreement (on a 1–5 Likert scale) with statements related to self-agency and decision-making in education. The results are displayed in graph 4.



Graph 4: Locus of Control- Responses in the graph below have been coded to indicate the scale (1-5) 1 = strongly disagree, to 5 = strongly agree.

The results did not indicate a significant overall shift in students' locus of control over the four-week period. This outcome is perhaps unsurprising given the limited duration of the programme. Indeed, it may be unrealistic to expect substantial changes in such a deeply embedded psychological trait over a short-term intervention. Furthermore, even where short-term change is observed, questions remain about the durability of such shifts without longer-term support or reinforcement (Zimmerman, 2000).

Nevertheless, qualitative data collected through student interviews and open-ended responses suggest emerging shifts in students' awareness of educational choices and a growing sense of autonomy in decision-making. Several students described feeling more empowered to view university as a viable option. One student reflected:

"I feel like it is an option in the future if I wanted to go to university."- Student

Another articulated a growing sense of independence and a personalised approach to learning:

"It makes you, like, more independent and gives you, like, more of that free will to do what you want. And, like, learn the things that you want to learn."- student

Importantly, some responses indicated not only increased openness to HE but also a more critical and informed stance towards it. These may serve as early indicators of a shift toward internal locus of control, where students begin making self-directed decisions based on their own values, goals, and circumstances:

"Going to university is quite a big commitment, in terms of time and money. So, for a lot of people you really want to take the opportunity to really learn about it and make sure it's the right decision for you as well."

Equally another student, whilst focusing on a different choice was able to openly discuss potential future options that they were considering. They stated:

“I think, in a way, you can try and see it- Because, doing this, I can really see myself kind of taking on maybe architecture or something. But at the same time, it’s just, like, the next level, you’re independent”- Student

Whilst locus of control remains a key theoretical concept which underpins the pedagogical framing of the programme, developers should consider whether this aim would be best placed as a longitudinal outcome.

Discussion

The following section presents the key themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of qualitative data collected from students, ambassadors, school staff, and university practitioners. These themes capture the multifaceted impact of PMP on participants' experiences, attitudes, and interpersonal relationships.

Ambassador Impact

The impact of students working consistently with the same ambassadors as well as having ambassadors from care-experienced backgrounds share their personal stories was clearly articulated by participants and school staff. One student stated:

"I really enjoyed working with the student ambassadors and learning about their struggles and their achievements and how they overcame any obstacles. I also enjoyed sharing ideas and laughing with the student ambassadors."- Student

Further students stated:

"Very nice opportunity to meet them and learn about their personal stories, views, and subjects"- student

"I liked how you guys got round your struggles at the start and how you made friends, I think that was really important."- student

"I think talking about your own stories helps others understand that they're not alone with their struggles"- student

In the above responses, the students talk about the importance of hearing about the ambassador's personal journeys. What makes PMP unique is that the student ambassadors are able to share their experiences of progression as someone who has living experience of local authority care. This provides a space for open and honest dialogue between students and ambassadors which allows students to envision what is possible for them despite the challenges they are facing.

School staff feedback mentions how this being organically embedded into the programme through conversation, as opposed to explicitly stated in the content, is key. They mention how this fosters different perceptions of what their future could look like. They note:

"I think that one gets hit from the fact that the ambassadors are care experience themselves. And I really like how we don't shove it down their throats. But there have been some really nice natural conversations around it. And you can see like the sort of like, light bulb moment when the like, when my like the school students have realised that your ambassadors have also been in here and they're like, oh, so they did it. So I can do it."- School staff

This is an intentional approach from ambassadors who want to create an environment where being care

experienced was a part of their story.

“I think it's the probably the most important thing out of the sessions now. We don't always say it straight away. A lot of the time we don't mention it because we want them to feel comfortable with us. We usually just say it within our stories or you know, like if we're just talking about something, we'll talk about how we have a foster carer or something. And I think having it quite naturally in a conversation helps it to click to them that ‘Oh, these are successful young adults that are in university. They're studying, but they were also a care leaver’.”- Targeted Ambassador

University staff similarly reflected on the ambassador experiences and the value they add to the programme:

“I'm also really pleased with the ambassadors and seeing their confidence grow over the year and seeing how much they've brought to it, to the point where they put a session in themselves on the last day about their journey to university, and they were really proud to share it and it made a huge impact on the students. They were saying how many conversations that opened up about going from care to university. That has led us to now want to put something like that in every session where ambassadors talk about their personal experiences, and the ambassadors are up for it.”

Given the high value placed on ambassador experiences by both students and school staff. This reflection from the university practitioner is important. A future recommendation for the programme should consider at what point and the frequency in which ambassadors share their journeys to enable conversations to be opened up earlier within the programme.

The qualities of the ambassadors were also highly praised by school staff and the students. This demonstrates that how the ambassadors interacted with the students also plays a big role in the programmes success.

“I think one of the things that I've noticed about the ambassadors in the two sessions is that they're very understanding of lots of different sort of personalities and some of the ways that sometimes students can act and sometimes you know we're talking about students who, you know, lots of them are very complex. Lots of them have experienced trauma. So I think having them be care leavers, it provides you with a person who isn't going to be too judgmental or, you know, even though they don't know their background, and even though the students don't know particularly that their care leavers, you know, immediately, it's a certain type of personality, I suppose, and it's that sort of understanding and reasonability.” – School staff

This member of staff emphasised the importance of consistency of ambassadors when working with students in care. The element of trust building is integral to the rapport that can be built.

“the more you come back for them, the more they'll trust you the better your relationship will be.”- school staff

What this illustrates is the way in which the ambassadors are embedded into the programme builds consistency, rapport and trust. This was also discussed by students who most frequently described ambassadors as ‘friendly’, ‘kind’, and ‘caring’. One student also discussed feeling understood by the ambassadors:

“[The ambassadors] were great, very talkative and quite sociable, helping me feel understood.”- Student

As mentioned above ambassadors support all aspects of the programme and this creates a sense of investment from the ambassadors which is reflected in the interactions they have with the students and the impact this has on the students. One ambassador noted:

“I think as an ambassador, it's been quite empowering in a way. I've already mentioned this to a lot of the people within outreach, especially [the programme lead], that doing this work has made me feel a lot more positive.”- Targeted Outreach Ambassador

Increasing community within the schools

Teachers reported that participation in the programme had a positive impact on students' sense of community and interpersonal dynamics within the school environment. Staff noted that students developed a stronger awareness of one another throughout the school. One member of staff observed that students had become more inclined to acknowledge one another within the school setting, reflecting a growing sense of unity:

“I think the progress that I've seen in some of our students is just being able to sort of acknowledge each other within the school, so they're now almost aware we're all on this project together and it's just nice them sort of having an awareness of each other.” – School staff

It was also commented on the enthusiasm the programme had generated among participants, stating that:

“this cohort is very excited about it that whenever they go past me in the corridor, they are always asking 'when's the next session'. – School staff

These reflections suggest that the programme has not only supported peer relationships but has also contributed to more informal and positive student-staff engagement across the school.

Lasting Impact

Evidence from staff and practitioners indicates that the programme has had a lasting impact on participating students, both in terms of their ongoing engagement and the value they continue to place on their involvement. In several cases, schools have formally recognised the importance of the programme by integrating it into students' Personal Education Plans (PEPs), highlighting its perceived relevance to their broader development. One teacher noted:

“For some of the students, we've put it down as one of their targets. Within their PEP to engage with the programme.”- School staff

This suggests a commitment to sustaining the benefits of participation beyond the immediate delivery period.

Staff also reported that students continued to reference the programme in wider school contexts, including during meetings and reflective discussions. One teacher shared:

"I've had some feedback from various meetings that they've been in where they've been speaking about this."- School Staff

Perhaps most notably, the willingness of students to return for a graduation event, many months after their direct involvement had ended, was seen as a powerful testament to the programme's impact. A practitioner reflected:

"Another piece of evidence for that is the graduation, a year later, a whole year in a Year 9's life is such a massive amount of time, and that they wanted to come back, they didn't have to, the Year 11s had already finished their GCSEs, they came back. So that was really humbling, actually"- practitioner

The graduation event was a new addition to the programme this year and was not included in the original scope of the evaluation. However, it offered a valuable opportunity to reconnect with students after a significant period had elapsed, providing early indications of the programme's longer-term influence. To build on this, it is recommended that the evaluation team undertake a follow-up study with these students, employing qualitative methodologies to explore the enduring impact of their participation in the programme.

Reflective questions

Reflective questions were introduced in the programme this year for evaluation purposes. These questions utilised a 'traffic light' system to identify aspects that were effective and where additional knowledge gaps remained. While this method offered a basic framework for feedback, the depth and specificity of the reflections submitted by students were limited, with little variation or personalisation observed across individual responses.

Despite this, reflection remains pedagogically valuable and important tool for student learning. It fosters metacognitive awareness, supports critical thinking, and encourages learners to engage more deeply with content and their own progress (Moon, 2006; Phan, 2009). Future iterations of the programme should therefore explore how structured and meaningful opportunities for written reflection can be embedded more deliberately and effectively into its design.

This aligns with qualitative feedback from school staff, one of whom noted:

"I know the personal statement is changing, but on any university application, they're still going to have to write about them and that's the bit that they find really hard. And I think like the verbal conversations and things and as we say, like when it is a bit more general, it's a lot easier for them to get involved with. But when they actually have to stop, think and write about themselves. That's when they do find it a bit trickier so that that's the only thing I just. I think it could possibly be a benefit of trying to just a 5 minutes asking each session, but getting them to just sit and reflect on themselves about something that we've done that session."- School Staff

This insight identifies the need for scaffolded reflections including supporting students with developing skills to articulate their learning.

Group demographic

An important consideration is the demographic composition of the cohorts. PMP is designed with care-experienced students in mind. In School 1, 38% of participants had been of local authority care, while in School 2, this figure was 100%. These demographic differences may partly explain the variation in engagement with and perceptions of HE although there is limited data to assess this with any certainty.

Qualitative interviews with teachers suggest that students' understanding of HE was influenced by their exposure to diverse students during campus visits. One teacher stated:

"Then diversify students perceptions of higher education. Absolutely. I think them being able to understand that lots of different students come. So for example, we had a conversation on the day that we've visited the University of Kent where we were speaking about mature students and the fact that it's not just going to be, you know, 18 year olds attending. So they're starting to understand that actually there are lots of different students from different walks of life."

This expanding view of who goes to university may have been particularly meaningful for care-experienced students, who often face social and cultural barriers to accessing university. However, there was some uncertainty around whether students recognised the programme's intention to support care-experienced learners. One teacher commented:

"I wonder and it's a really tricky one and I don't know the answer to this, but maybe something to consider is maybe being more explicit about the programme being aimed at children in care, do they think that they've been selected just because [my teacher] has selected me? Or do they think that they've been selected to try and open their eyes to the fact that university is for everybody and it's not something that is out of reach for you?" – School Teacher

This comment suggests that there is a perception that students may benefit from more explicit discussions around care experience and progression to HE. This aligns with earlier discussion around ambassadors sharing their stories, allowing school students to recognise them as care experienced. However, the risk of stigmatising participants must be considered. As an ambassador stated:

"I think that's the great reason why we don't mention that at the start because we don't want to frighten them and be like, oh, you know, we're in care and it's not a big thing, it doesn't need to be a big thing unless you want it to be." – Targeted Ambassador

School staff also expressed the importance of discretion:

"There were a couple of carers who were quite concerned that they would be sort of like, they were being selected because they were in care and they didn't want them to be sort of... They didn't want it to be highlighted and I made it clear that within the programme it isn't highlighted that this is specifically for children in care." – School staff

This suggests further consideration is needed as to the composition of the group whilst continuing to maintain the sensitive approach to how the programme's purpose is communicated to participants. Programme leaders may also want to work closely with the school to ensure it aligns with the specific needs of the individual cohorts.

Evaluation Limitations

Surveys

The pre- and post-programme surveys used in this study were developed with an emphasis on incorporating validated instruments where feasible. Where possible, questions were drawn from the Access and Success Questionnaire (ASQ) (TASO) or other validated survey questions. However, further discussion is required on the limitations of using surveys for these age groups.

Although validated questionnaires provide a level of standardisation and rigor, their effectiveness is contingent on the comprehension levels of the target students. Research indicates that children, particularly in primary and early secondary school, may struggle with interpreting abstract or attitudinal survey items, especially those concerning internal constructs such as locus of control or sense of belonging (Fitzpatrick et al., 2014; Borgers, Hox, & Sikkels, 2003).

Furthermore, the timeframe for measuring change through attitudinal surveys deserves scrutiny. PMP is a four-week programme and therefore it may be unrealistic to expect meaningful shifts in attitudes in this timeframe. This may be particularly relevant for concepts such as sense of belonging or locus of control which are generally considered to be relatively stable traits that evolve over longer periods of time (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Skinner, 1996). While short-term interventions such as PMP, may be tangibly supporting incremental shifts in attitudes related to these concepts, it is unlikely to be able to capture these shifts within that time span. As described above, it may therefore be that these aims are expected to become longer term impacts of participation as opposed to something which is measurable within the programme itself.

To further interrogate this, it is recommended that further testing of the statements take place. This would enable researchers to explore how students interpret each question and how these interpretations align with the intended aims. This will help determine whether the statements and survey design require improvement or whether the programme's aims require adjustment. Statements that link to sense of belonging such as 'university is for people like me' have experienced small declines when used across a multitude of programmes which leads the university to complete further testing with its own target audiences. The university is currently partnering with the Kent & Medway Progression Federation to create an attitudinal baseline survey and validate its questions, which will include testing of some of the statements included in the PMP survey.

In summary, while surveys provide a scalable and structured means of data collection, their application with younger age groups especially for complex concepts, requires critical reflection.

Focus groups

Due to time and logistical constraints, mini ambassador led focus groups were piloted. Whilst some good data was collected in this process. The format of the focus groups needs to be reconsidered. Firstly, smaller focus groups should be held, by staff with experience and training in leading focus groups. Whilst the ambassadors worked hard to generate conversation, they were more inclined to fill the silence. Additionally, the focus group questions should be reviewed to be more specific to the programme, as mentioned above regarding perceptions of HE and career opportunities.



Recommendations

1. Reframe belonging and locus of control as long-term outcomes

Sense of belonging and locus of control are recognised as core theoretical and pedagogical concepts which underpin the programme design. However, given the nature of these concepts, it is unlikely that shifts in these concepts will be observed over the duration of the programme. Therefore, these aims should become long-term outcomes of the programme which are potentially explored through follow-up studies or longitudinal tracking.

2. Embed ambassador journeys throughout the programme

The benefits of having care experienced ambassadors working on all aspects of the programme are well documented. A particular highlight of their participation is being able to listen to their personal experiences and journeys. Therefore, programme developers should consider integrating ambassador storytelling more intentionally across all sessions of the programme. This will allow for earlier and deeper connections between students and ambassadors.

3. Strengthen reflective practice

Opportunities for reflection are key to developing metacognitive skills and confidence. It also provides opportunities for students to develop a deeper understanding of how university may benefit them. Therefore, programme developers should consider building more structured and scaffolded opportunities for student reflection within each session. Specifically considering opportunities for written reflection which would be valuable in supporting students to reflect on the application of the topics to themselves.

4. Review programme demographics and group composition

Consider the demographic make-up of participating groups and how this might affect engagement, perceptions of the programme and group dynamics, whilst simultaneously continuing to balance discretion with transparency regarding the programme's focus on care-experienced students.

5. Amend evaluation tools

Review the design and implementation of student surveys and focus groups to improve clarity and alignment to intended aims. This includes reviewing the language and questions used in surveys. This may involve testing or collecting qualitative data on survey questions. Additionally, re-design the focus groups ensuring they are small, staff led and more targeted in their questioning to enable more detailed and varied responses.

6. Implement longitudinal follow-up as part of evaluation of future cohorts

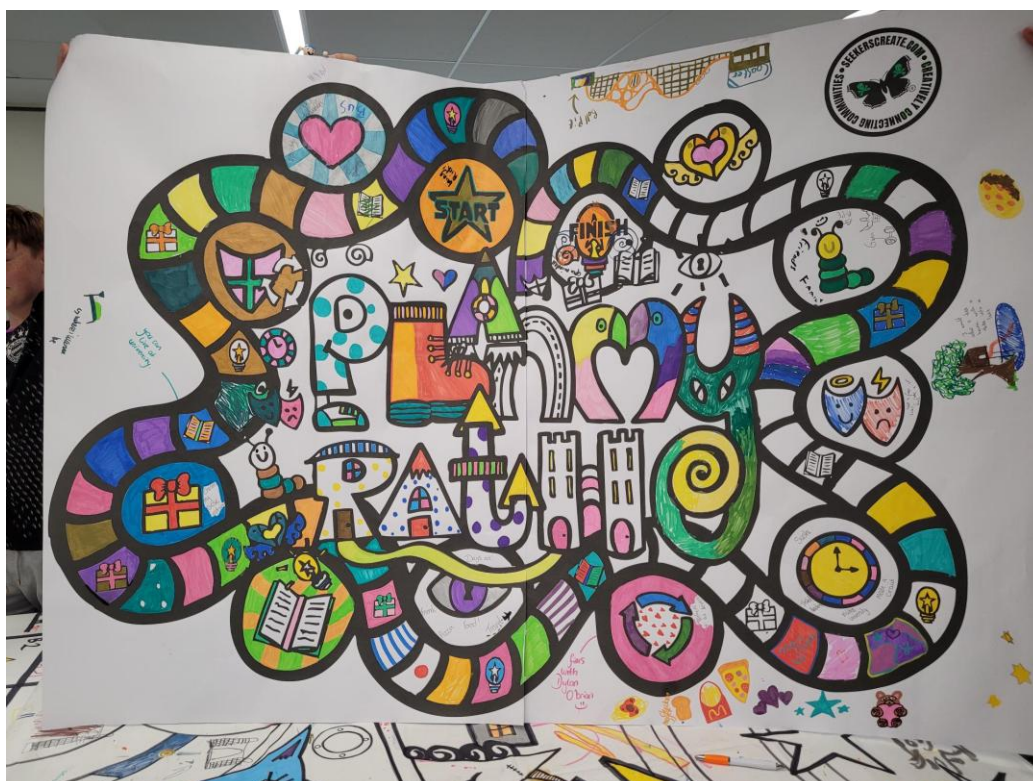
Introduce a mechanism for tracking former participants over time, such as follow-up interviews at graduation events or utilising baseline surveys at multiple time points throughout educational journeys.

Conclusion

PMP offers an ambitious, responsive, and relationship-led model of outreach for care-experienced students. The evaluation findings show that the programme has had a demonstrable impact on students' knowledge and understanding of higher education. There is emerging qualitative evidence that the programme also supported agency and aspiration and laid the foundations for a future sense of belonging in university spaces. However, quantitative data suggests that short-term attitudinal shifts, particularly in relation to deeper constructs like belonging and locus of control, are limited. This aligns with wider research indicating that these concepts develop gradually and may be better captured through longitudinal evaluation.

Central to the programme's success was the authentic and consistent involvement of care-experienced ambassadors, whose presence and personal stories provided powerful forms of representation and encouragement. The programme also positively impacted on student-school relationships, peer dynamics, and student enthusiasm. Benefits that go beyond the immediate aims measured as part of this evaluation.

As the programme continues to develop, future iterations should maintain its core strengths which include student voice, co-creation, and ambassador involvement, while also adapting its structure and evaluation methods to better support and evidence long-term impact.



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Written by Francesca Plom, Widening Participation
Research & Evaluation Manager, September 2025.

Outreach & Widening Participation, The Registry,
University of Kent, Canterbury, Kent CT2 7NZ

kent.ac.uk

University of
Kent