

Championing Boys: Relational Widening Participation in Practice

2025



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Executive Summary

Overview

Championing Boys: Exploring Who You Could Be is a sustained widening participation programme developed by the University of Kent Outreach and Widening Participation department. Initially piloted in 2023 with Year 7 boys from low socio-economic backgrounds, the programme has since expanded into a progressive multi-year intervention incorporating Year 7, Year 8, and Year 9 modules, with a Year 10 module planned for 2025–2026.

The programme is designed to support the same cohort of students throughout their pre-16 educational journey, with each module building upon the previous one through a different thematic focus. Year 7 (Future Me) encourages boys to explore future aspirations and challenge stereotypes through exposure to unfamiliar subjects and careers; Year 8 (Express Myself) focuses on identity, lived experience, and creative expression; and Year 9 (Find My Voice) develops confidence, oracy, and critical thinking through debate and discussion of social issues. Each module includes in-school workshops, a university campus visit, a celebration event and evaluation activities, creating sustained engagement.

Programme Aims

The programme is underpinned by a series of overarching aims focused on supporting boys from low socio-economic backgrounds to explore potential identities, develop confidence and agency, critically reflect on masculinity, increase familiarity with higher education and ensuring that they feel that their voices are valued within educational spaces. These aims are aligned with the Taking Boys Seriously Principles (Hamilton et al., 2024).

Methodology

This evaluation adopted a mixed methods research design to assess both the implementation of the Championing Boys programme and its initial impact on participants.

A range of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods were used, including pre- and post-programme focus groups, attitudinal surveys, school performance data, and interviews with designated school staff members. This approach enabled triangulation across multiple data sources, providing both statistical insight and contextual understanding of participant experiences. Surveys explored attitudes towards school, higher education, masculinity, and the future, while focus groups provided more detailed reflections on programme experiences and perceived impact. School effort grade data in English and Maths was also analysed to explore possible changes in school engagement.

A total of 76 students across Year 7, Year 8, and Year 9 participated in the programme. Participants were selected collaboratively with the school using widening participation criteria, including socio-economic indicators, eligibility for free school meals, and representation within groups underrepresented in higher education.

The evaluation also identified several methodological limitations. The attitudinal survey was found to be overly long and broad, reducing data quality and raising questions about the suitability of some survey methods for younger learners. Pre-programme focus groups were valuable for relationship building but generated limited evaluative data. Additionally, the absence of a comparator group restricted the ability to establish causal impact. Recommendations for future evaluation include redesigning survey tools, introducing comparator groups and implementing longer-term follow-up data collection to better assess sustained impact over time.

Findings

This evaluation explored the implementation and impact of the Championing Boys programme across Year 7, Year 8 and Year 9 cohorts. The findings suggest that the programme is successfully meeting many of its overarching aims, particularly in relation to increasing confidence, supporting educational engagement, exploring masculinity, amplifying student voice and improving familiarity with higher education.

Overall, participants responded very positively to the programme. Students consistently reported enjoying the sessions, valuing the opportunity to participate and expressing a strong desire to continue in future years. Importantly, no single workshop emerged as universally preferred or disliked, suggesting that the programme offers a balanced range of activities that appeal to different learners and learning styles.

Evidence from focus groups, surveys and staff feedback suggests that the programme had a positive impact on students' confidence. Students reported feeling more confident contributing in class, sharing ideas and persevering with challenging schoolwork. These findings were supported by statistically significant improvements in survey responses related to confidence, resilience and classroom participation. School staff also observed noticeable improvements in students' oracy skills, behaviour and classroom engagement.

The programme was particularly successful in increasing familiarity with higher education. Students demonstrated greater understanding of university life and increased belief that higher education could be an achievable pathway for them.

The evaluation also highlighted the importance of relational approaches within the programme. Students consistently valued the supportive relationships developed with ambassadors and facilitators, describing them as approachable, understanding and relatable. Male ambassadors were seen as particularly influential role models who helped challenge stereotypes surrounding masculinity while creating safe spaces for discussion and self-expression.

Although survey findings showed limited short-term shifts in attitudes relating to masculinity, focus groups demonstrated that students valued opportunities to discuss identity, masculinity and emotional expression in ways not typically available within school settings. Students described feeling listened to, respected and able to express themselves openly. The programme therefore appears to provide an important reflective space for boys to explore identity and voice.

The findings also suggest that the programme contributes to increased educational engagement. Students reported trying harder in lessons, participating more in class, and, in some cases, demonstrating improved behaviour. School effort grade data indicated that almost half of participants improved their effort grades in English and Maths during the programme. However, staff also identified challenges in sustaining momentum between programme delivery periods, suggesting that additional in-school continuation activities may strengthen long-term impact.

Several areas for future development were identified. Staff and students recommended embedding discussions of masculinity more explicitly throughout all modules and increasing opportunities for students to shape discussion topics. Further consideration is also needed regarding how concepts such as agency and possible selves are measured within the evaluation framework. Additionally, students raised questions about gender inclusion and the wider perception of the programme within the school community, prompting reflection on how the programme's aims are communicated and how opportunities for constructive gender dialogue might be developed in future iterations.

Overall, the evaluation demonstrates that Championing Boys is having a positive impact on participants' confidence, educational engagement and perceptions of higher education. The programme's relational ethos, emphasis on student voice and focus on creating reflective spaces for boys emerged as central strengths. The findings also reinforce the importance of strong partnership working between the university and schools in supporting sustained and meaningful impact.

Recommendations

As a result of the evaluative findings, the following recommendations were developed:

1. Review and redevelop pre-programme focus group into an introductory workshop
2. Think about how discussions on masculinity can be threaded throughout the whole programme
3. Consider more explicit information about higher education in later modules
4. Work with the school to build upon the momentum of the programme in everyday school life.
5. Redesign baseline survey making it more accessible to young learners
6. Incorporate comparator groups when analysing school data

1. Introduction

Boys from low socio-economic backgrounds remain significantly underrepresented within higher education and are more likely to experience educational disadvantage throughout compulsory schooling. Despite growing national attention on boys' educational engagement, much of the existing discourse continues to frame boys through deficit narratives which focus on disengagement, underachievement and behavioural concerns rather than recognising their strengths, aspirations and potential. At the same time, research increasingly highlights the complex relationship between masculinity, identity and education, demonstrating the importance of creating spaces where boys can critically explore these experiences in supportive and relational environments.

Championing Boys was developed by the University of Kent as a sustained widening participation programme designed to support boys from underrepresented backgrounds throughout their pre-16 educational journey. Grounded in relational education, youth work methodologies and strengths-based practice, the programme aims to support boys in exploring identity and masculinity, increasing engagement with education, developing confidence and broadening perceptions of future opportunities, including higher education.

This report presents the 2024/25 evaluation findings for Championing Boys. It outlines the theoretical and pedagogical principles underpinning the programme, alongside implementation and impact findings gathered through a mixed-methods evaluation framework. Drawing on student voice, staff reflections, surveys and school-level data, the report explores both the successes and limitations of the programme while identifying key considerations for future development. In doing so, it contributes to wider discussions surrounding gender, educational engagement and effective widening participation practice for boys from low socio-economic backgrounds.



2. Programme Overview

The University of Kent Outreach and Widening Participation department piloted 'Championing Boys: Exploring Who You Could Be' in the Spring of 2023. This intervention worked with Year 7 boys from low-socio economic background status groups. Following the success of the pilot, it has since expanded to incorporate two additional modules for Year 8 and Year 9, with a Year 10 module being piloted in 2025-2026.

The programme is designed to be sustained and progressive, with the same group of students moving up through each module each year. Each module takes a different theme, which slowly builds upon the previous. An overview of each module is provided in *Table 1*.

Table 1. Championing Boys Programme module overview

Year 7: Future Me	This module empowers boys to envision their future selves by exploring subjects beyond the standard curriculum, linking academic experiences to potential careers. Throughout the module students participate in a range of different workshops based on different university degrees that are not subjects taught in schools. The subjects also seek to challenge traditional gender stereotypes. The module finishes with a visit to the university, where students will have workshops in our specialist facilities.
Year 8: Express Myself	This module asks boys to reflect on their identity and lived experience. By doing so explores what it means to be male in today's world. Through critical discussion and creative expression, students challenge common perceptions and misconceptions about masculinity, envisioning the type of men they aspire to be. The module encourages students to see power of their lived experiences and celebrate creativity. At the start of the module, students complete our Da Vinci Challenges at the University and explore how creativity and Science combine in society.
Year 9: Find My Voice	This module empowers boys to develop their voice, confidence, and critical thinking through debates on real-world social issues. By combining debate with self-exploration, this module equips students with essential skills for communication and critical thought while encouraging them to challenge societal norms and envision positive futures. Throughout the module, students explore a range of social issues that interest them and will challenge them to come up with creative solutions. The module finishes with a visit to our university campus, where they will explore university special collections on protests and participate in a debate in our Mooting Court.

The structure of each module is similar. All groups received the following activities:

- 1x launch event with parents & guardians
- 5x in school workshops
- 1x campus visit to the University of Kent Canterbury campus
- 1x celebration event with parents & guardians
- 1x evaluation focus group

The year 9 programme, incorporated a sixth in school workshop. The total contact hours for each module is displayed in table 2.

Table 2: Contact hours

Year 7	Year 8	Year 9
19 hours	19 hours	21 hours

Programme Aims

In table 3, the overarching programme aims alongside the individual module objectives have been mapped to Theory of Change outcomes and the Taking Boys Seriously Principles (TSBP). This mapping exercise ensured that the design of the programme included the intentional embedding of the TBSP.

The overarching aims are what the university hopes to embed in every module of the programme. These aims align to TBSP and are our means of achieving them. Whereby individual objectives for each module are specific to the purpose of the module.

Table 3: Programme aims

Modules / Strands	Objectives	Taking Boys Seriously Principles
Overarching Aims	Explore a range of potential identities by engaging with subjects beyond the traditional curriculum, deepening their understanding of their own interests and aspirations, and linking these experiences to possible future careers	TBSP 9: Enable creative learning environments
	Support students to articulate and reflect on their abilities, strengths and potential	TBSP 3: Utilise a strengths-based approach to learning
	Create opportunities for students to critically reflect on their own concepts of masculinity, exploring a diverse range of male identities and role models while simultaneously challenging narrow and potentially harmful gender stereotypes	TSBP 4: Challenge and affirm masculine identities
	To increase students with familiarity with higher education and support students in imagining themselves there in the future.	TBSP 3: Utilise a strengths-based approach to learning
		TBSP 8: Engage meaningfully with boys
	Establish meaningful relationships with male ambassadors and staff who serve as positive role models	TSBP 4: Challenge and affirm masculine identities TBSP 8: Engage meaningfully with boys

	Foster a sense of agency for the boys to shape their own future	TBSP 10: Value the voice of boys
	Foster an environment where boys' voices are heard, their ideas and concerns are valued, and they are encouraged to take ownership of their learning and development.	TBSP 10: Value the voice of boys
Future Me (Year 7)	To help students gain a deeper understanding of their own identities, interests, and aspirations by reflecting on their experiences with different subjects.	TBSP 3: Utilise a strengths-based approach to learning
		TBSP 10: Value the voice of boys
	To expose students to a variety of subjects and potential career pathways beyond the traditional curriculum.	TBSP 9: Enable creative learning environments
	To empower students to critically challenge traditional gender stereotypes within subjects and career pathways	TSBP 4: Challenge and affirm masculine identities
	To inspire students by identifying positive male role models in related subject fields or careers	TSBP 4: Challenge and affirm masculine identities
		TBSP 8: Engage meaningfully with boys
Express Myself (Year 8)	To help students to engage in critical reflection on societal perceptions of masculinity, common misconceptions, and personal beliefs, empowering them to explore and articulate their own identities.	TBSP 4: Challenge and affirm masculine identities
	To provide opportunities for students to explore and express complex ideas about their identity and lived experiences through creative expression	TSBP 8: Engage meaningfully with boys
		TBSP 9: Enable creative learning environments
	To develop confidence in expressing and presenting their ideas, fostering pride in their work.	TBSP 3: Utilise a strengths-based approach to learning
		TBSP 10: Value the voice of boys
Find My Voice (Year 9)	To equip students with the ability to form, articulate, and defend their opinions on real-world social issues through debate, enhancing student's oracy and critical thinking skills.	TBSP 10: Value the voice of boys
		TSBP 8: Engage meaningfully with boys
	To build students' confidence in expressing themselves and develop students' academic self-efficacy.	TBSP 3: Utilise a strengths-based approach to learning
	To continue students' exploration of masculinity by linking debates to concepts of identity, gender roles, and societal expectations, encouraging them to think critically about the role of men in society and their potential future selves.	TBSP 4: Challenge and affirm masculine identities
	To demonstrate how the skills developed in debating link to broader academic success and real-world applications, particularly within GCSE English Language.	TSBP 3: Enable creative learning environments

Aligning to the Taking Boys Seriously Principles

Taking Boys Seriously (TBS) is a longitudinal research project undertaken by the University of Ulster. The research was established in 2006 and has secured funding to continue until 2028. This project worked with a range of different educational and community partners to explore why boys from low socio-economic backgrounds were less likely to reach expected attainment outcomes and have low progression into higher education.

As a result of their research, TSB created a set of principles, which they felt should be embedded into all educational settings which work with boys and young men to support them in thriving in that environment. The Championing Boys programme has embedded these principles as part of its core design. The following section will discuss how the programme actively embeds the TBSP into the programme, as well as practitioner reflections and evidence as to how well this is working.

#3: adopt an approach that acknowledges the strengths that exist within each boy as opposed to focusing on deficits

Traditional narratives surrounding boys, particularly those from low socio-economic backgrounds are often framed through deficit lens, emphasising what they lack rather than recognising the assets, aspirations and capabilities they already possess (Keddie, 2007). Such deficit-based framings risk reinforcing stereotypes, lowering expectations and obscuring the complex social and structural inequalities that shape boys' educational experiences (Lingard, Martino & Mills, 2009).

Research suggests that when practitioners adopt a strengths-based approaches, boys experience higher levels of motivation, belonging and self-efficacy (Saleebey, 2013). This is particularly important in widening participation contexts, where boys may have internalised negative messages about their academic ability or place within education (Reay, 2017). By shifting attention from perceived shortcomings to observable strengths, programmes create opportunities for boys to develop a positive learner identity and recognise their own growth. This programme achieves this by:

Language matters: At the University of Kent, we know that language matters. Whilst we are honest and open about the rationale behind the programme, we make it clear that the barriers experienced are due to structural inequalities rather than their individual abilities. In all communication, our staff and ambassadors celebrate the positive behaviours, attributes and skills the participants have displayed in the lessons.

Reflective journals: In all sessions students are asked to complete a reflective activity. These activities are consciously embedded to support students in developing metacognitive skills. However, alongside this they enable students to reflect on what they have achieved and what they have done well throughout the session. Aligning to the idea that language matters, it is a conscious act of sitting with the students and recognising their strengths.

Opportunities in every workshop for boys to succeed: In all sessions, students achieve something. They may write something or complete a task on a computer etc. They are set up to succeed at something. These are not simple tasks, they challenge them, but a space is created for the boys to be able to meet that challenge.

Celebration of achievements: The programme outwardly celebrates the achievements of the students. Students attend an annual celebration event where their work is displayed, and they receive certificates and pin badges. The pin badges are approved to wear on their blazers in school. This supports the idea that they belong and that they have achieved something by being on the programme.

#4: Challenge narrow and potentially harmful gender stereotypes and intentionally communicate and affirm positive masculinities.

There is growing recognition that narrow and stereotypical constructions of masculinity can limit boys' educational engagement, emotional expression and aspirations (Connell, 2005; Gater, 2025; Blower, 2025). Dominant norms of masculinity, often referred to as "hegemonic masculinity" and for working class young men "protest masculinity"

can position academic effort, creativity or help-seeking as incompatible with what can be viewed as a “real man”, leading some boys to distance themselves from learning environments in order to maintain peer status (Connell, 2005; Jackson, 2006). These norms can be particularly restrictive for boys from low socio-economic backgrounds, who may face additional pressures to conform to localised, often hyper-masculine expectations (Archer, Hollingworth & Mendick, 2010, Gater, 2025). Challenging these assumptions requires educators to disrupt gendered expectations rather than reinforce them, ensuring that boys are not limited by externally imposed ideas of what they should like, value or become.

When programmes create opportunities for boys to question stereotypes, explore diverse identities and recognise multiple ways of “being a boy”, they help expand the emotional and academic spaces boys feel permitted to occupy (Way et al., 2014). This includes broadening understandings of what subjects, careers or behaviours are appropriate for boys, challenging assumptions that can otherwise restrict their aspirations and social capital (Pinkett & Roberts, 2019). This programme actively challenges limiting stereotypes while offering boys affirming models of masculinity through diverse role models, creative curriculum design and intentional exploration of gendered experiences:

Challenge stereotypes in careers and subjects: Particularly within the Year 7 module, but in all engagements with the university, traditional gender stereotypes are challenged. Workshops in creative subjects such as physical theatre are included in modules. In ‘Boys Don’t Try’, Pinkett and Roberts (2019) establish 3 myths that are frequently shared regarding working with boys from low socio-economic backgrounds. One myth is described as ‘make learning relevant to boys’ interests. By doing this, practitioners would be making assumptions that reinforce stereotypes surrounding boys and could potentially lead to low expectations. This can prevent them from building other forms of social capital (Harrison 2018). Therefore, the programme was designed to intentionally push them outside their comfort zone and provide assurances that they will not necessarily enjoy every workshop, but they should try it and explore whether that is something they may want to pursue.

Opportunities to explore identity and masculinity as a concept: Research suggests that boys often do not get opportunities to explore what it means to be a boy within educational settings (Kehler, 2007). Despite this, there is a complex interplay between masculine norms and education which highlights the importance of opportunities to do so (Connell, 2005; Jackson, 2006). Throughout the programme and particularly in Year 8 modules, students explore the concepts of identity, lived experience and how perceptions of being a boy and masculinity interplay with this. Within these discussions, boys have opportunities to explore the complexities which exist within masculinity and have opportunities to discuss positive qualities of masculinity in a safe space.

Male role models: Research suggests that students are more likely to experience a shift in both their knowledge and perception of HE if they have access to a role model who has experience of going to university (Baars, et al, 2016). The university has recruited and trained male student ambassadors to support the programme and act as role models. These ambassadors are consistent across the programme, allowing students to build trust and rapport with them.

#8: Boys need to be seen as individuals and thrive when their individuality and difference is recognised and responded to.

Research has consistently shown that boys, particularly those from working-class or otherwise marginalised backgrounds, benefit from educational environments that recognise them as individuals rather than as members of a homogenous group (Francis & Skelton, 2005; Hamilton et al, 2024). Evidence suggests that sustained work can be integral to this. When practitioners have the time and continuity to get to know boys on a personal level, they can tailor support better and respond to the specific needs of each student (Gilligan, 2009). Sustained engagement and consistent staffing are central mechanisms through which boys’ individuality can be recognised, supported and celebrated.

Sustained and progressive programme: We know that traditional approaches to outreach have not had the desired impact for this audience. Therefore, it was felt a sustained commitment to the programme was required to support the students over time. The programme design aims to support the boys throughout their whole pre-16

journey. With modules built upon the last. By taking this approach, staff have an opportunity to meaningfully engage with students, as well as getting to know them on an individual level.

Consistent ambassadors and staff each week to build trust and rapport: Relational approaches are key to success (Hamilton et al, 2024). As discussed with the next principle. Therefore, the same ambassadors commit to the programme. This element builds trust and rapport with the students, getting to know them on an individual basis, recognising their individual strengths and understanding what their own interests are as well as being able to refer to this in sessions.

#9: Informal education methodologies have been highly successful at re-engaging boys who have completely disengaged from school-based education.

Informal education has long been recognised as a powerful tool for reconnecting young people who feel alienated from formal schooling (Smith, 2013). Research suggests that informal pedagogies, when delivered through sustained and authentic relationships, can foster motivation, confidence, and a sense of belonging for boys who have previously disengaged (Ord, 2016). Programmes grounded in youth work principles often demonstrate success because they attend to the holistic needs of young people, valuing their lived experiences and co-constructing learning in ways that feel meaningful and relevant (Batsleer, 2018). For boys who may resist traditional academic structures, the flexibility, creativity, and relational emphasis of informal education can create vital “re-entry points” into learning (Milne, 2019). The programme achieves this by:

Relational education principles prioritised by staff and ambassadors: By centering relationships and collaboration, practitioners create spaces where boys feel safe to participate, make mistakes, and develop a renewed sense of agency. Staff and student ambassadors all undertake training to support embedding relational principles in how they interact with the students throughout the programme.

Varied methods of engaging students: As outreach practitioners, we have the capacity to not be confined to traditional approaches to teaching and learning. The programme incorporates a range of interactive and creative approaches such as group work, debates, team-building activities, and hands-on, practical tasks. These diverse modes of engagement recognise that boys learn in different ways and allow them to encounter success through multiple forms of participation.

Collaborative approach to delivery ‘with them’ not ‘to them’: Our staff and ambassadors complete the programme alongside the students. They participate in every activity as a student would. Student feedback is woven through the development cycle of each module, ensuring that programmes evolve in direct response to the boys’ experiences and insights.

#10: When boys are encouraged and facilitated to actively contribute, they feel more affiliation to the environment and a greater sense of ownership and belonging.

The taking boys seriously research found that boys needed to feel “seen, known and heard” within educational settings and this is achieved through relational education exemplifying the need for careful consideration as to what constitutes embedding the student voice in a meaningful way (Hamilton et al, 2024). Student voice refers to the active participation of students in shaping their educational experiences (Cook-Sather, 2006). Effectively embedding the student voice, can shift educational narratives away from working on behalf of students to working with and alongside them (Bragg, 2007). In widening participation, student involvement has been linked to increased engagement and a sense of ownership over learning pathways (Fielding, 2010). However, traditional widening participation programmes often adopt a top-down approach, which may not fully address the specific needs and aspirations of boys (Archer et al., 2014).

Embedding the voice of the boys into every aspect of the programme is something that the university is actively working towards. By consciously thinking about how to not just listen to the boys but turn that voice into tangible action. The programme achieves this by:

Voice and discussion form key elements of the workshop designs: In all modules discussion and debate are embedded into the design. Students are encouraged to share their opinions and perspectives, consider other

voices and challenge traditional and outdated narratives. This format, alongside relational approaches, have helped the boys feel heard and valued throughout the duration of the programme.

Evaluation which has student voice at the forefront: The evaluation framework embeds student voice at the forefront, with a heavy emphasis on the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Focus groups are held with every participant at the end of every module. As will be shown throughout this report, these focus groups form the main basis of analysis. In future iterations of the programme, we hope to include the boys in the evaluation design itself.

Developing effective feedback loops: The boys should be able to see what impact their voice is having on the programme and creating effective feedback loops is essential to this as it allows the boys to see what changes have been implemented because of their involvement. The University does this by writing a condensed summary in the style of a Newsletter which is sent to students and their parents/guardians once the analysis has taken place. The long-term aim is to turn this newsletter into an accessible print media such as a cartoon that is more appealing for students to engage with. Additionally, we hope to work with the school to utilise the students as part of the school's student voice mechanisms.

3. Methodology

Research Questions

The aim of the research methodology was twofold: 1) implementation and process evaluation and 2) conduct initial impact evaluation. To achieve these objectives, the following research questions were devised:

Impact research questions:

1. How effectively is the programme meeting its overarching objectives?
2. Does the programme result in increased engagement in school?

Implementation and process research questions:

1. Was the content relevant for the needs of the participants?
2. Was the programme relevant to the programme aims?
3. Did the participants perceive the intervention to be effective? What did they like? What do they want to change?

Research Design

A mixed methods approach was developing incorporating a range of different data sources including focus groups with students, student attitudinal surveys, school performance data and an interview with the designated member of school staff. This approach enabled both quantitative and qualitative insights to assess both the impact of the programme and the implementation of the programme. It enables evaluators to triangulate data across different methods.

Data Collection Methods

Pre programme focus groups

To discover more about student perceptions of education and masculinity, evaluators piloted a pre-programme focus group using creative methods. This included a range of activities including discussions, creative activities, group tasks and word clouds. It was initially thought that by conducting a creative pre-programme focus group, comparisons in perceptions could be made pre and post programme.

Pre & post attitudinal surveys

Pre and post programme attitudinal surveys were implemented with students at the start of the first workshop and at the start of the focus group. These surveys included 4 sections focusing on: attitude to school, perception of higher education, perceptions of masculinity and attitudes about the future. In the post-programme survey, they were also asked questions about Championing Boys on an agreement scale.

Survey questions were mostly validated statements taken from the TASO ASQ or other available methods. A discussion on survey limitations will be explored later in this section.

A Wilcoxon signed rank test was conducted to examine changes in participants' agreement and test for significance. The thresholds were used to analyse the effect size were as follows; 0.10 = small, 0.30= medium and

0.5=large.

School performance data

School performance data was used to assess if there were any changes in how students interacted with school. Schools often have differing performance metrics which can be challenging to consistently assess across different schools. However, as the programme is currently localised in one school, their school effort grades were used as the measure of assessment.

As this programme is not specifically designed to increase attainment, it was felt that effort grades are more representative of the increased engagement we may expect to see as a result of the programme. At the school, students are assessed on a 4-point scale (1 = Inadequate, 2 = Requires Improvement, 3 = Good, 4 = Outstanding) at the end of every term.

As core subjects, student effort grades in English & Maths were assessed at the start and end of the programme (as the programme is 6 weeks, it often spanned one term duration). Due to not having comparator groups this academic year, casual impact cannot be assessed but assessment of correlation can be used.

Interview with designated member of school staff

As part of the programme, the school agree to have a designated member of staff who supervises each module. At the end of the programme, an interview was held with the designated member of staff. This interview provides essential in school context, both on the ongoing impact of the programme but also supports programme developers in improving the implementation of the programme.

Parent surveys

Online parental surveys were distributed as part of the celebration event. It was hoped that by doing this, we would get understanding on what if anything is discussed in home environments about the programme. Despite increased parental engagement at the launch event and celebration event, only one survey was completed and the level of detail within this survey was minimal. Therefore, this data has been excluded from the overall evaluation.

A summary of which data collection tools were used to analyse each research question is provided in table 4.

Table 4: Data collection tools used for each research question

Research Question	Data Collection Tools	Source of Data
Impact: How effectively is the programme meeting its overarching objectives?	Pre-programme focus group, post-programme focus group, survey, staff interview, parent survey	Students; school staff; parents
Impact: Does the programme result in increased engagement in school?	Post-programme focus group, survey, staff interview, school data	Students; school staff; parents
Implementation: Was the programme relevant to the programme aims?	Post-programme focus group, staff interview	Students; school staff
Implementation: Did the participants perceive the intervention to be effective? What did they like? What do they want to change?	Post-programme focus group; post-programme survey	Students

Participant information

A total of 76 participants took part in Championing Boys this academic year. As the programme moved to a new school location, students were invited to participate. Two groups for each year group were initially offered, however, there was only one Year 9 cohort this year. The breakdown of participant numbers is shown in table 5:

Table 5: Participant numbers

Year 7	Year 8	Year 9
35 participants	26 participants	15 participants

The university worked closely with the school to offer the programme to students who would most benefit from it. Students were targeted based on a range of widening participation criteria. This included:

- Area based indicators of socio-economic background including TUNDRA, IMD, IDACI and Uni Connect target wards
- Eligibility for free school meal (FSM)
- Identifying as a part of groups underrepresented in Higher Education such as students currently residing in local authority care.

Given the collaborative nature of targeting the students, all students met at least one of the above listed criteria. This meant there was a high proportion of students for each of the target criteria as represented in table 6:

Table 6: Participant demographics

Characteristic		Participants n (%)
Widening participation criteria	Eligible for FSM	53 (69.7%)
	IMD Q1	31 (40.7%)
	TUNDRA Q1/2	46 (60.5%)
	IDACI Q1	30 (39.4%)

Evaluation limitations

Survey design

Despite drawing on validated survey questions and scales widely used within the research literature; the survey design implemented this academic year was not effective. The survey was too long and too broad, which reduced data quality.

As highlighted in previous reports, there is continued uncertainty around the suitability of survey methods for pre-16 learners, particularly those relying on attitudinal statements rather than direct question formats. It remains unclear whether young participants interpret such statements as intended, raising concerns about reliability and construct validity.

Nevertheless, surveys continue to offer clear advantages within outreach evaluation, providing an efficient and accessible means of gathering quantitative data that can demonstrate causal impact when used appropriately. Given these strengths, it is recommended that surveys remain part of the evaluation framework; however, substantial redesign is necessary. The instrument should be significantly shortened, with all items tightly aligned to programme objectives in a clear and meaningful way. It would also be valuable to explore whether reframing attitudinal statements into question formats enhances accessibility and comprehension for this age group.

This year, a 10-point scale was piloted. There was some debate as to whether meaningful change could be assessed via smaller point scales and whether having a larger scale might display more nuanced changes. However, the 10-point scale was less accessible for students and produced a greater degree of variability. An alternative scale should be devised for future iterations. Perhaps with clearer parameters to increase student understanding.

In refining future surveys, it may also be beneficial to draw on the Boy Quadrant from the Taking Boys Seriously research team. Whilst these baseline surveys have been designed with schools in mind, there may be questions which align to programme objectives. Additionally, using such a tool could provide an opportunity for national comparative data given that these baselines are widely available across the UK.

Pre-programme focus groups

It was expected that the data collected from the pre-programme focus groups would be descriptive and context rich, however, the value of the data collected was limited. The focus group served as a good opportunity for students to be integrated into the programme, understand its aims and build rapport with ambassadors and each other. Yet, the value as a data collection activity was limited. It was discussed whether this needed to be redeveloped, however, there is a delicate balance needed to justify taking students off timetable and therefore it was decided to pause this data collection method.

Comparator groups

While the school data gathered this year provided valuable insight into participant experiences, the absence of a comparator group limits the ability to determine the programme's causal impact. To enable more robust evaluation and clearer attribution of outcomes to the programme itself, it is strongly recommended that a comparator group be introduced into next year's data collection strategy. This will allow for meaningful comparison between participating pupils and similar pupils who did not take part, strengthening any claims about programme effectiveness.

In addition, data was collected only immediately after programme delivery, restricting understanding of whether any positive changes are sustained over time. To capture both immediate and longer-term effects, it is recommended that school-level data be collected at three points: pre-programme, post-programme, and six months post-programme. This longitudinal approach will provide a richer evidence base, highlight the durability of impact, and support more informed decision-making for programme development.

4. Implementation & Process Findings

Was the programme content relevant in meeting the programme aims?

The following section discusses specific insights generated from the data which relates to each individual module. These insights play a crucial role in process and implementation evaluation of each module. Supporting future programme development and serving to understand the most successful elements as well as areas which can be improved for future cohorts.

Year 7

In the Year 7 focus groups, the participants were asked to rank the workshops they explored favourite to least favourite and provide an explanation for why they ranked it in this way. Overall, there was no consensus on which were most and least liked, which has not been the case with previous years. All workshops featuring as favourites for some students, insinuates that the differentiation of workshops is well balanced. It would be encouraged to keep a similar structure of workshops for future years.

There was feedback from teaching staff that whilst they could see how each module clearly developed from the other. However, there was the suggestion that this module needed to more consciously cover masculinity and challenging stereotypes. This feedback has been previously raised, and programme developers should consider how to specifically embed this element throughout the module.

Year 8

As discussed in an earlier report, previous cohorts reported difficulty with poetry. This academic year, substantial changes to lesson plans has led to improvement in students' confidence writing poetry and general enjoyment of poetry. Many students reported enjoying looking at different forms of poetry and how this changed their perception of what poetry was.

"My view on poems, like, I thought they were just, like, boring. But now that I think about it, there are, like, loads of different poems as well. There's not only just normal poems about just stuff, it's like, haiku poems and stuff like that. Like, structures."

The opportunity to explore different, less rigid forms of poetry resulted in increased confidence in their ability to write poetry.

"Yeah, how good I was at poetry. I was really bad in primary school, and stuff, and then- yeah. And I feel like I've been to this, and I'm actually not that bad at it. Because I always felt like poems need to rhyme, and that's where mistakes crept in, but then after this, I felt like it doesn't need to be."

Some students also reported that this had resulted in them continuing to write poetry in their spare time. Within

their workbooks, space was created for this to happen, with several notes pages added to encourage creativity outside of class.

Reading work aloud also boosted students' confidence. This was an intentional change in the programme this year which has proven effective as it provided opportunity for students to receive positive feedback from session leaders and peers. One student noted:

“When you got the round of applause at the end, it shows that people actually enjoyed it, and they felt it was actually good and you're proud of yourself.”

Year 9

This was the first year this module was offered, however, the module itself has been adapted from existing oracy module. Students expressed increased confidence in their ability to present and formulate arguments. However, students reported wanted to debate topics that related more to masculinity or had relevancy to a teenage boy. Programme developers should work alongside students to pick topics which allow boys to have open discussions on different aspects of masculinity. The teacher further corroborated:

“Because the last thing on this, that some of the boys have to me, was they really enjoyed it, but they thought it would be more about masculinity specifically, and talking about that. And they enjoyed the activities, they enjoyed doing the public speaking, for Year 9. They enjoyed, with Year 8, doing the poetry. But they didn't always get how it linked to masculinity.” - Teacher

Did the participants perceive the intervention to be effective?

Overall, the programme was praised highly by most participants. In all focus groups the students expressed that they valued the opportunity to participate in the programme and would like to continue to participate in the programme in the following academic year.

The survey results also upheld this. Students were asked to score the below statements out of 10, 1 strongly disagree and 10 strongly agree. The average scores across all year groups is presented in table 7.

Table 7: Impression of the programme

	Average score (out of 10)
Participating in Championing Boys has allowed me to explore new interests that I want to carry forwards	8.37
I enjoyed participating in Championing Boys this year	9.01
I want to continue being a part of Championing Boys next year	9.21

5. Impact Findings

The following section will address the impact research questions, using analysis conducted on surveys, student focus groups and staff feedback.

Due to the absence of a comparator group, shifts in survey results do not prove causation, as we are unable to control extraneous variables. However, some aims do show a positive correlation within the pre and post survey. Caution must also be exercised due to the limitations of survey designs described above. Given this, focus groups and staff interviews provide additional context which often support findings and detailed accounts which help to analyse the impact of the programme and assess to what extent it meets its aims.

How effectively is the programme meeting its overarching objectives?

Build confidence in skills and abilities

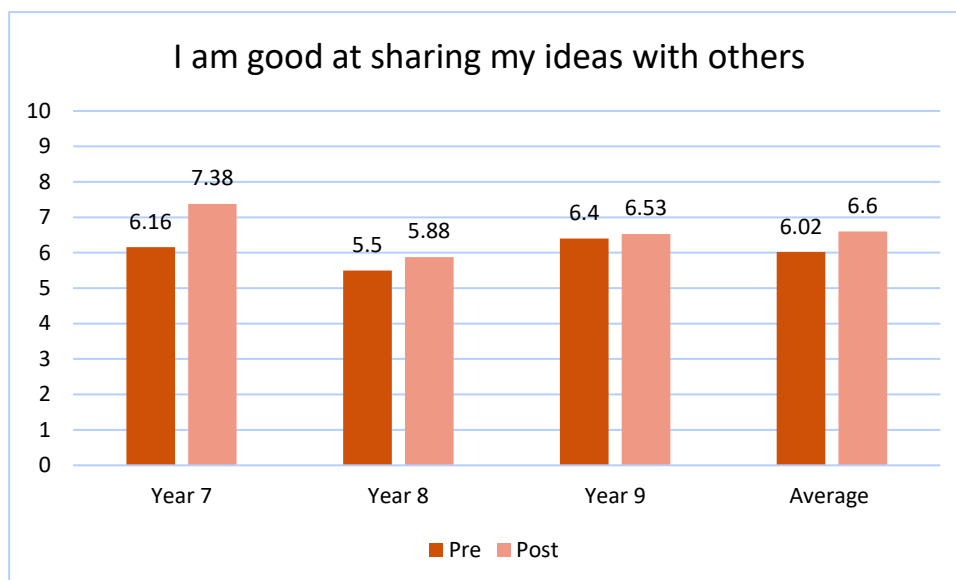
There is evidence to suggest that the programme resulted in short term increases in confidence in skills related to the programme or education more broadly. Four statements analysed resulted in small-medium significance as shown in table 8. This would indicate that students have moderate short-term increased confidence as a result of participation in the programme.

Table 8: Significant analysis on confidence statements

Survey item	N (paired)	p-value	Significance Interpretation
<i>I am good at sharing my ideas with others</i>	67	0.023	Small–medium improvement
<i>When I find schoolwork hard, I do not give up easily</i>	66	0.041	Small improvement
<i>I am confident to contribute in class</i>	65	0.012	Medium improvement
<i>I know what I'm good at</i>	66	0.018	Small–medium improvement

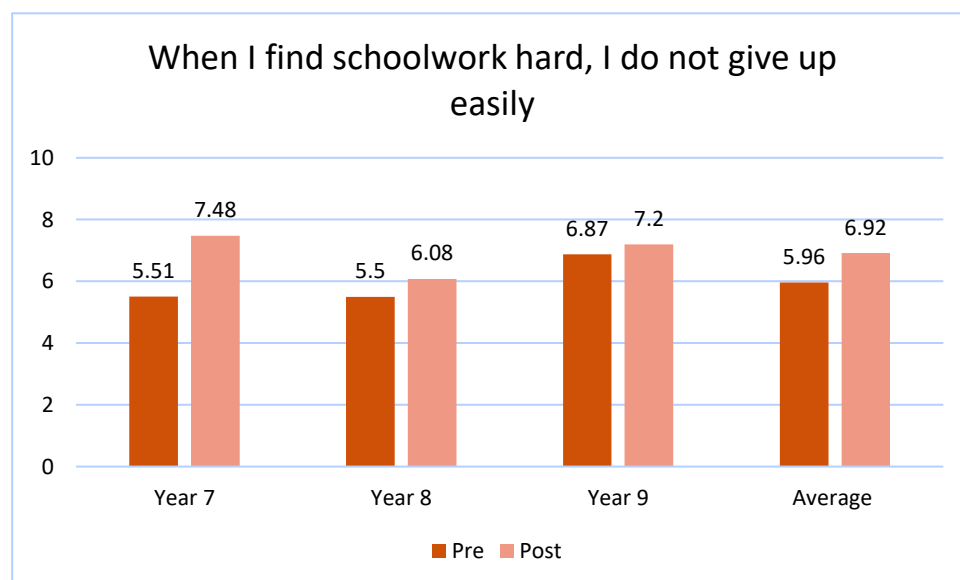
For the statement, 'I am good at sharing my ideas with others' all year groups saw increases, as represented in figure 1. The effect size was small-to-moderate ($r = .28$), suggesting a modest improvement. This suggests the programme had a meaningful but modest impact on participants' confidence in having a voice within the education system.

Figure 1: Average pre & post survey scores for the statement "I am good at sharing my ideas with others"



For the statement 'When I find schoolwork hard, I do not give up easily', there were increases observed across all year groups with the most substantial increase being from the Year 7 cohort, depicted in figure 2. The effect size was small-to-moderate ($r = .25$), suggesting a modest improvement in increased resilience and the confidence to keep attempting schoolwork.

Figure 2: Average pre & post survey scores for the statement "When I find schoolwork hard, I do not give up easily"



The largest effect size was seen in the statement 'I am confident to contribute in class'. The effect size was medium ($r = .31$). This would indicate a moderate increase in confident in class participation. The greatest increase was observed in Year 7 cohort. However, increased confidence in class was mentioned across all year groups within focus groups. For example, one student specified:

“Yeah, I’ve been more confident at school. Like, in English, I’ve answered a lot more questions, and I’ve been giving a lot more detailed answers.” - Year 9 student

Explore masculinity and its potential

Evidence suggests that boys are less likely to show emotions than females due to masculine stereotypes around strength and patriarchal assumptions of what it means to be a man (Connell, 2005). Therefore, statements which assessed student views on masculinity were asked at the start and end of the programme. This was to assess whether or not their views on masculinity changed throughout the duration of the programme. The survey results show that masculinity norms around emotional expression remained relatively stable. No statistically significant changes were observed for the masculinity-related items such as “not afraid to cry in front of others” and “will hug another man” as depicted in table 9. Gender norms tend to be relatively stable, meaning that a short intervention like Championing Boys is unlikely to produce rapid or substantial shifts in attitudes. However, sustained engagement across multiple modules may begin to foster gradual change over time. As suggested in the research, it also creates a needed space for participants to explore identity in a way which is not often offered at schools.

Table 9: Significance analysis for masculinity survey questions

Survey item	N (paired)	p-value	Significance Interpretation
<i>Is not afraid to cry in front of others</i>	63	0.211	Not significant
<i>Will hug another man</i>	64	0.147	Not significant

In the focus groups however, students reported positively the opportunity to discuss masculinity and how it was important to them that those involved understood the topics and listened:

“I feel like it helped, because, like, the people that we were talking to, they understood what we were talking about. And they were willing to, like, listen to what we were saying, so that helped a lot.”

Some students also reported that it was something they felt was missing from the current curriculum:

“In this school, you don’t really do, like, that stuff, like, the opportunities that we have now, like, about masculinity and stuff. So, we got opportunities to do different things outside of lesson and different periods of lessons” – Year 8 student

There is also evidence to suggest that the presence of the male ambassadors challenged student’s perceptions of masculinity. In one exchange a student said they were surprised by the ambassadors, when prompted to expand on what he meant he said:

"Something about them surprised us, because, like, one of them who’s strong and is like, kind of muscular and he picked up some stuff that I don’t think he would pick as to how he looked. Because he was strong, I thought he’d pick, like, sports and stuff, so it surprised me what he picked."

Increase familiarity with HE

There is evidence to suggest that participating in championing boys increased the participants familiarity with higher education. Survey scores suggest that the largest effect was observed for students' understanding of what studying at university would be like ($r = .52$, $p < .001$), indicating a large programme effect as indicated in table 10.

Table 10: Significance analysis for familiarity with HE statements

Survey item	N (paired)	p-value	Significance Interpretation
<i>I know what studying at university would be like</i>	64	<0.001	Large improvement
<i>I believe I could go to university if I wanted to</i>	66	0.004	Medium improvement

Interestingly, this effect was most prominent effect was observed in Year 7 and Year 9 groups, with a less pronounced movement. This generally aligns with the module outcomes as the Year 8 module contains the least amount of university specific content. However, the students do still get to experience a different style campus visit and meet regularly with ambassadors which may influence their perceptions of Higher Education.

There is evidence from the focus groups which also suggest that the programme meets this aim. For example, one student stated:

“It’s made me change my thoughts about a lot of different things. Like, education, university and what university really is. Like, I didn’t know what a university is. I thought it was just like a school like this, just bigger.” – Year 8

Value the voice of boys

Evidence from the focus groups suggests that the programme successfully incorporated opportunities for boys to express themselves and created spaces where they felt listened to. For example, one student stated:

“I felt like it was sort of like a safe area to talk, as well, because there was no one that would really judge you.” – Year 8 student

Others highlighted that speaking with each other and listening to others around them played a key part in the programme’s success. For example:

“Because we got to communicate with each other and see each other’s thoughts.” – Year 8 student

Students have also expressed the importance of being a part of the programme evaluation. This is an integral place where student voices are listened to. In previous years, the university has written to students to inform them of where their voice was actioned in the future programme. This is important step in closing the feedback loop. The university is now considering how to further the inclusion of student voice throughout the development and evaluation of the programme. This is being completed using Lundy (2007) model of child voice. Lundy (2007) advocates for a model that considers space, voice, audience and influence as essential elements in meaningful inclusion of student voice. This has been further reflected on by the school, who stated:

“And I think the final one, about their voice, that’s something more in school we can develop. About, where they’re done this now, like I said earlier on, it’s what they can use it for. Is it about them suggesting thing that could be adapted in the school, to promote masculinity and to promote boys and to promote those ideas? I think you’re doing your part with that, that’s more about us, as a school, and how we can utilise the ideas they’re giving in these sessions, to change things.” – Teacher

This highlights something integral to the ethos of the programme, that it’s not standalone but embedded into the ethos of the school. This is something that the school have indicated will become important for them in future years.

“Because I think, at the moment, obviously you’re doing a lot of the work, you’re coming in, you’re working with them. But then they leave the room, and it may not be mentioned again to them until the week after. So, it would be quite nice if, even if there’s a working group of them, a couple of them in Year 7, 8, 9, 10, that are working together beyond that. To then think, ‘We’re learning all this, we’re doing all this, how are we actually going to use it across the school?’” – Teacher

Fostering agency

The data shows anecdotal evidence that students are feeling more confident in taking ownership of their own decisions. The focus groups included increased conversations regarding possible future career pathways, as well as increased conversation regarding progression to higher education. For example, one Year 7 student stated:

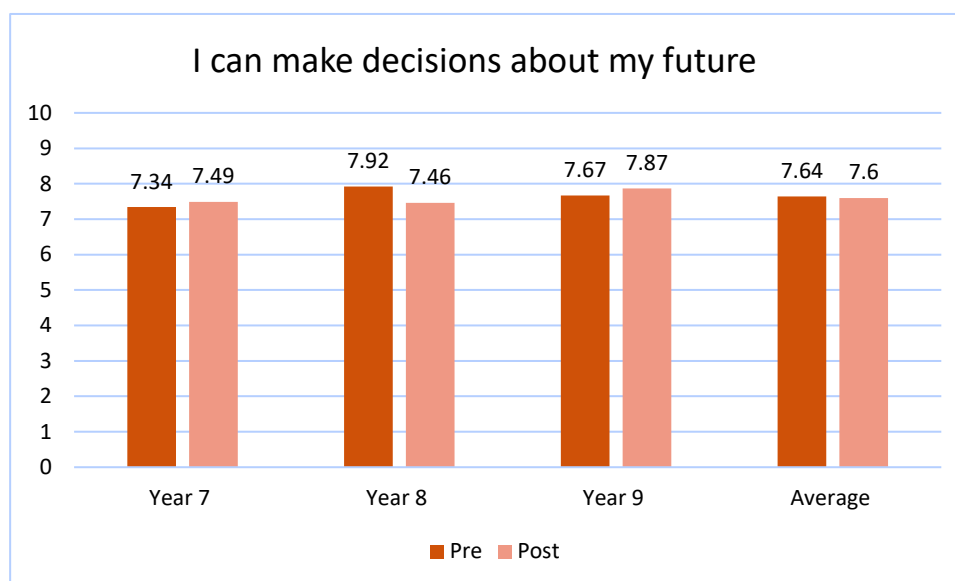
“I could do designing if I wanted to. It seems quite fun. It explores so many things that I know I’ve never really thought of doing before.” – Year 7 student

This indicates that the programme offered this student opportunities to reflect on future opportunities they had not previously shown interest in. Another student discussed how visiting the university campus allowed him to recognise the university as a possibility:

"On the tour when we were walking around, I was actually in my head thinking, I could actually go here. “- student

These conversations, indicate some initial increased agency as they are recognising opportunities available to them and considering what is appropriate for them. However, quantitative shifts in survey data were not observed and, in some cases, went down marginally as depicted in figure 3.

Figure 3: Average pre & post survey scores for the statement "I can make decisions about my future"



As shown in the above table, slight increases were observed in Year 7 and Year 9 groups, whereas Year 8 observed a decrease overall. This may be because of the content in Year 7 is specifically focused on future selves and Year 9 campus visit explores specialist facilities whereas the Year 8 content is more specifically focused on creative writing and discussions surrounding masculinity. It may also be that programme appears to have reshaped how participants think about their future decision-making, rather than simply increasing confidence.

Research shows that agency is complex in nature and difficult to define, with multiple differentiations used in academic literature (Coffey & Farrugia, 2014). For programme developers, consideration should be had as to the conceptual framework which defines agency in this context and whether that is a measurable objective in the short-term. Equally if used as a long-term objective, further theoretical thinking is required as to how this is objectively measured over the duration of the 4-year programme.

Explore potential identities

Possible selves' theory was used to support the development of the programme. Markus and Nurius (1986) theory of possible selves refers to the possible identities' individuals perceive available in the future. Harrison (2018) describes how this theory can be used in widening participation contexts. Harrison argues that perceptions of future possibilities are partially shaped by our social and cultural backgrounds and therefore those from under-represented backgrounds may have a narrower view of what is possible or available (Harrison, 2018). This also supports the rationale to challenge narrow and potentially harmful gender stereotypes.

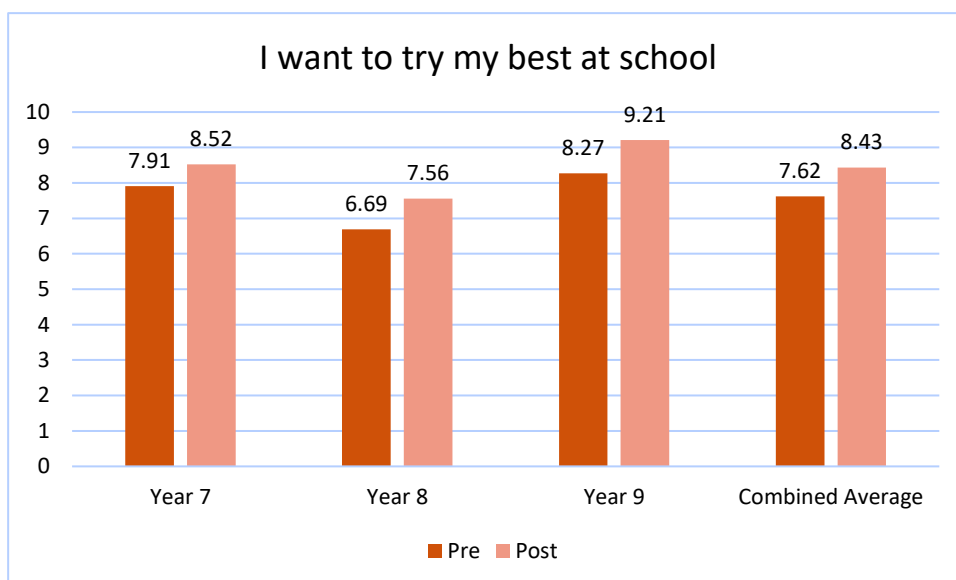
Whilst possible selves is a key theoretical concept which underpins the programme design and is embedded in every module, it was not explicitly linked in the evaluation design. Some of the conversations held in the focus group suggest that it works as a framework to support the intended programme aims. For example, students have frequently reference across all modules future careers or interests they had not previously considered. This would suggest that students are imagining alternative identities.

It is recommended that data collection tools and research questions be reassessed in future iterations of the programme to measure this aim or alternatively, if it is deemed that this concept is difficult to measure it should be considered whether this is needed as an aim or can be considered theoretical framework of the content.

Does the programme result in increased engagement in school?

Survey data suggests that attitudes towards education increased at the end of the programme. The section about perceptions of school within the survey saw the most substantial increases. As can be shown in figure 4, all year groups responses to the statement 'I want to try my best in school' increased.

Figure 4: Average pre & post survey scores for the statement "I want to try my best in school"



This has been corroborated by students in focus groups. Across all year groups, students have reported that the programme had positively influenced how they interacted with school. This has included trying harder in lessons, being more confident to contribute in class and seeing a reduction in behavioural issues. These reflections came largely unprompted from the students throughout the focus groups as described below:

“It’s just made me work harder. I don’t know how. I don’t know why. As I’ve mentioned maths and English already, in English I’ve been more focused, and I’ve written a lot more. I used to write about half a page in an English lesson. Now I write a page and a half, maybe two pages. And then in maths I used to just mess about. And now I actually do my work.”
– Year 7 student

Whereas others suggested that their behaviour had improved:

“I used to be getting four signings a week, like four or three signings a week. I now am on zero.”- Year 7

Similarly, a student in a different year also commented:

“Yeah, definitely. I only got- I only had one sign-in last week and the week before that I got, like, nine.” – Year 8

The increased confidence to participate in class and reduction in behaviour was also corroborated by the school staff who noted:

“We have seen drastic improvements in their confidence and oracy skills, based on the sessions they have completed. This has been commented on by a number of teachers who have seen this grow in the classroom.”

However, the school has also reported a loss of momentum as the effects of the programme wear off throughout the school year. They reported that students tend to revert to old habits or behavioural issues after an extended period.

“I think the things that I’ve been thinking about, in terms of the programme, one of them is, where they get seen intensely, for six weeks or whatever, it’s then quite a long gap until they’re seen again. I kind of think, with some of the Year 9 boys, the positive impact starts to wear off a little bit, the longer it is since they’ve had the session. So, I don’t know. But I also get why it’s intense, because you will have a good amount of time with them to really make the progress, but it’s what could happen afterwards, to kind of keep it rolling.”

The teacher further expanded:

“So, for example, one of the Year 7s in particular had an awful start to the year. When he was doing the programme, his behaviour really calmed down. And now he has stopped doing it, he has got worse again. So, I think you kind of see that, when he saw that he had a space to go to each week, he could share his views, he could do something different, I think that seemed to really help calm him down and give him a sense of purpose. And that’s why I’m saying that, if we could extrapolate it some way, get that kind of impact for longer, that would be really useful.”

The university and the school have been in further discussions about how momentum from the programme can be harnessed within the school. These discussions are ongoing, and suggestions include creating masculinity ambassadors to support changes within the school setting, drop-in support continuing following the programme, a school or specific project which is completed as part of the Year 10 module. This insight and discussions highlight that a strong partnership working between the university and the school remains an integral part of the programme’s success.

Additionally, we have worked alongside the school to review school data. School effort grades in English and Maths were collated before and after the programme to measure whether their involvement in the programme had any correlation to involvement in school lessons. English and Maths were chosen as core subjects, but also as subjects most frequently cited by students as areas where they felt they tried harder or had improved confidence. The school effort grades are measured on a 4-point scale (1 = Inadequate, 2 = Requires Improvement, 3 = Good, 4 = Outstanding). Data suggests that on average 48% of students’ effort grades had improved at the end of the programme, as displayed in table 11.

Table 11: School performance data - This table shows the percentage of students whose effort grade increased by at least 1 grade by the end of the programme

English Effort Grade Improvement		Maths Effort Grade Improvement	
<i>Year 7</i>	56%	Year 7	55%
<i>Year 8</i>	46%	Year 8	48%
<i>Year 9</i>	41%	Year 9	41%
Average	48%	Average	48%

The school has anecdotally reported that this is higher than expected progress. However, to fully assess this, a comparator group should be implemented to assess causal impact in following academic years.

6. Further Discussion

The focus groups with participants provided some additional important insights which are valuable to this report. The following section will discuss the importance of relational approaches in education and consideration for the perception of targeted programmes within the wider community. These insights also highlight how important including the student voice is in widening participation contexts to truly understand impact.

Relational approaches to education

As previously described, research suggests relational approaches have success in reengaging boys in education (Hamilton et al, 2024). This finding has been upheld in our own evaluation. Relational approaches remain integral to the design and delivery of the programme, with staff and ambassadors receiving training in how to effectively implement these approaches, inspired by youth work methodologies. One student described:

“They could, like, say you were talking about something in one lesson, they can remember that we said that lesson and it could link to the other lesson.” – Year 8

Students described how they were interacted with as being important to them:

“I feel like they knew when you were just struggling with something, and then they would come to help you.”- Year 8 student

As part of the programme ambassadors are recruited to act in role model capacities and work alongside students within the programme. Our evaluation suggests that they remain integral to the success of the programme. In all focus groups, across all modules, participants spoke highly of the ambassadors and how they interacted with participants. The participants’ enthusiasm for working with ambassadors was also at times mentioned unprompted by participants within focus groups. For example, one student said:

“Can I say something about the ambassadors? They were doing very good. Like, helping other people and expressing and opening them up and helping them, like, understand and develop their feelings.” – Year 7

In this quote, the student described ambassadors supporting students to express themselves. Help, support, understanding were all frequently used to describe the ambassadors and why they were valued as part of the programme.

Students also frequently described the ambassadors as being ‘like them’ and that they liked having people around them who they could relate to. When asked if it was important to them that the students were male, participants often described that they felt more comfortable. For example, one participant said:

“Because they sort of feel the same way as us.”- Year 8

Like much of the university’s widening participation work, ambassadors are a crucial ingredient to the success of championing boys. The ambassadors work hard to develop rapport and in the context of championing boys provide

consistency which allows the students to open up to complex tasks and discussions and provide a safe space for students to participate and engage in challenging topics.

Championing Girls

In both Year 7 and Year 9 focus groups, concerns were raised as to why a Championing Girls programme was also not offered. They raised concerns about equality. Some Year 9 students had also raised that there was a lack of understanding about the purpose of the programme within the wider school community which had at times led to negative comments from peers.

These points are valid and have prompted reflection on the programme's structure, particularly on how its purpose is communicated and how the wider school community might be engaged in constructive discussions about masculinity and gender allyship. This mirrors national conversations in which these issues are gaining increasing attention.

The university recognises the value of providing opportunities for boys and girls to work together at some stage in the programme. Although the boys consistently reported feeling more comfortable in an all-male group, the reasons they gave highlight both the benefits and the limitations of single-gender spaces. For example, one exchange from a focus group illustrates this:

Male: Some boys find it uncomfortable to talk around girls, so they feel more comfortable talking around, like, their own gender, kind of.

Male: It's like we're worried what the girls are going to think, and what they're going to say

Maintaining dedicated all-male spaces remains an important element of the programme design, supporting boys to explore sensitive topics safely and openly. However, further consideration is needed as to whether introducing structured opportunities for boys to develop confidence in having positive, respectful conversations with girls about these themes could strengthen the programme's overall impact.

7. Recommendations

1. Review and redevelop pre-programme focus group into an introductory workshop

Whilst a creative methodology focus group was relatively innovative, the quality of the data collected was less valuable. Additionally, the focus group did not adequately support the students in critically thinking about concepts related to the programme such as masculinity and engagement in education. The focus group should be redesigned to a) better support the students in critical reflection and b) providing more specific evaluation data that can be used as a baseline guide for comparisons to the end of the programme. This must be balanced with ensure data collection is proportionate.

2. Think about how discussions on masculinity can be threaded throughout the whole programme

Feedback from teachers and students alike highlight that discussions and reflections on masculinity are an essential element of the programme which requires deeper engagement. Further development should therefore consider how critical reflection on masculinity can be intentionally embedded throughout all stages of the programme.

3. Consider more explicit information about higher education in later modules

Students greatly appreciate the opportunity to regularly visit the university campus and have expressed increased interest in university as a future option. However, students also expressed a desire to understand more specifically about teaching practices and what is involved in learning at university. Therefore, opportunities for students to develop a greater understanding of this would be valuable.

4. Work with the school to build upon the momentum of the programme in everyday school life

There are early indicators of greater school engagement from participants, however, feedback from the school suggests that this impact decreases when interactions with the university stop throughout the school year. The positive partnership with the school has led to further discussions on how the momentum of the programme could be harnessed to continue this positive engagement as the school year continues. Some suggestions.

5. Redesign baseline survey

As discussed in the evaluation limitations, the survey implemented this academic year was too long and too broad. There are also questions as to whether attitudinal statements are easy for this age group to interpret. Despite this, surveys remain an accessible way of collating quantitative data which can determine casual impact. Given the advantages of continuing to implement surveys. It is recommended that the survey design be reviewed. It should be shortened, ensuring that the statements used are specifically linked to programme objectives in a meaningful way. It would also be worth exploring whether asking questions in question format is more accessible for this audience.

6. Incorporate comparator groups when analysing school data

As discussed in evaluation limitations section, to strengthen evaluation, it is recommended that next year's data collection includes a comparator group to better assess the programme's causal impact. Additionally, school data should be collected before, immediately after, and six months after the programme to capture both immediate outcomes and longer-term sustained effects.

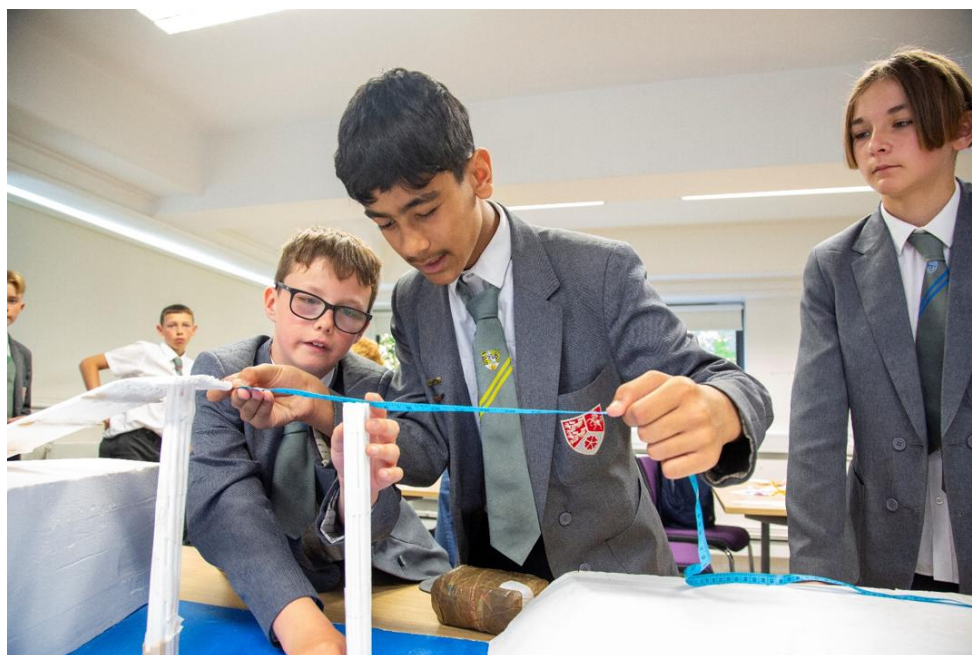
8. Conclusion

The findings from the 2024/25 evaluation suggest that Championing Boys is having a positive impact on participants' confidence, engagement with education and perceptions of higher education. Across focus groups, surveys and school feedback, students consistently described increased confidence in contributing within lessons, greater willingness to engage with schoolwork and stronger awareness of future educational opportunities. The programme also appears to provide an important space for boys to discuss masculinity, identity and lived experience in ways they often do not encounter within mainstream educational settings.

Central to the programme's success are its relational and sustained approaches. Consistent ambassadors, collaborative delivery methods and opportunities for meaningful student voice enabled participants to feel "seen, known and heard" (Hamilton et al, 2024).

At the same time, the evaluation identifies important areas for development. Further consideration is needed regarding how discussions surrounding masculinity are embedded throughout all programme stages, how momentum can be sustained between interventions and how evaluation methods can be strengthened through redesigned surveys and comparator groups. Some intended outcomes, such as shifts in gender norms or agency, may also require longer-term evaluation approaches.

Overall, Championing Boys demonstrates the value of sustained, evidence-informed and relational widening participation practice. The programme highlights the importance of creating spaces where boys can critically explore identity, recognise their strengths and imagine broader possible futures within education and beyond.



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