

First Star Academy St Mary's University Summer 2017 report

Overview

The First Star Academy at St Mary's University is set up to address the terribly low percentage of young people in foster care going on to Higher Education. As few as 6% of care leavers attend university (with only 4% actually obtaining a degree), this is compared to up to 45% of their age group peers.

An overview of the Academy at St Mary's University can be found at www.stmarys.ac.uk/firststar

This report focuses on the summer residential element of the academy which ran from 24th July to 19th August with students in residence for that whole period in St Mary's University halls of residence on the main Strawberry Hill campus (unless time out was previously arranged, for example to accommodate a pre-arranged family holiday). As this is a 4 year programme, the main objective for the first year was to get participants engaged and wanting to return, with the secondary aim of making year 10 easier to cope with, much of the core material being familiar when it comes up in the school year. The main objective was certainly hit and although the secondary objective will be best judged later in the school year, I feel optimistic about it, not least in the light of overwhelmingly positive feedback from foster carers, social workers and virtual school staff.

17 young people in foster care have joined the academy so far, all were in attendance for the summer residential.

Programme outline in brief

Students attended a number of sessions over the 4 weeks comprising of core academics, life skills, 'soft' skills and leisure time, with an overarching frame of starting to develop a sense of belonging in a Higher Education environment

Core academics

The core academics covered Maths, English, Science and IT.

- **Maths** looked at useful themes such as measurement and percentages, Pythagoras theorem and problem solving. A lot of work was done around resilience in maths and getting back into problems when stuck to help set up for the curriculum changes. There was also an entrepreneurial challenge to further 'real life' applications of maths
- **English** was based around Macbeth to help familiarity with Shakespeare in general, especially becoming more comfortable with the language and identifying themes and included an educational visit to the Globe and a performance of Macbeth in Covent Garden. The text was also used as a way in to useful skills such as academic writing, creative writing, presentation etc.

- **Science** was based around skills development and had a series of chemistry, biology and physics experiments looking at measurement (very large and very small), titration, propulsion, energy use etc
- **IT** this year was focussed around using the laptops that participants were gifted by the academy

Life Skills and 'soft' skills

Life-skills and 'soft' skills included:

- **Meta-Learning:** how we learn, how to identify key information, study strategies, highlighting and organising work, identifying best environments to study in, how 'failure' can lead to growth and viewing mistakes as opportunities etc)
- **Resilience:** practical techniques to bounce-back, role-models who have overcome adversity, optimism and growth mind-set
- **Mindfulness** and recognising emotions / emotional reframing
- **Financial Literacy** – delivered by a financial journalist from Money Saving Expert (Martin Lewis's EA) looked at budgeting, good debt and bad debt, how banks work, student loans, credit, income tax etc
- **Self-advocacy** – involved a session on children's rights – educational, individual, as a result of being in care and the UN convention on the rights of the child. We also ran 'student-voice' sessions where the young people expressed and debated their views on aspects of the academy, for example the relative levels of freedom / responsibility they had/wanted. We also used drama to develop confidence, play with alternative ways of expressing things and use of body language
- **Laundry** – they learned how to do their own washing
- **Cooking and nutrition** – they learned how to cook simple meals, how to research recipes and how to adapt recipes. They also learned some basic nutrition principles
- **Teambuilding** – they learned to work as a team, build trust and healthy attachments through numerous teambuilding activities including sports sessions, music sessions, rock climbing and various other activities

Final Show

The students and staff performed in a final show on the last evening of the residential. Students performed an abridged version of Macbeth that they had written using a mixture of Shakespearian and modern language. Students who didn't want to perform acted as sound, lighting, director and stage hands. After the Macbeth there was a talent show with students performing acts of their own choice, ranging from musical performances to magic tricks to spoken word. The increase in confidence that the young people developed over the 4 weeks which allowed them to put themselves on the spot in the show was incredible, far exceeding any predictions. The show itself was a huge success and a perfect celebration to a stretching, rewarding and frankly life-changing 4 weeks.

Successes and feedback

One of the young people on the academy (name removed for child safeguarding) was due to leave for 1 week to attend a scout camp, he decided to stay in the academy instead

Two of the young people had said they would only commit for 2 weeks as 4 weeks is a long time out of the summer holidays and had at the end of the first two weeks. Both returned and saw the academy through to the end.

There was considerable positive feedback from the academy teachers also, one in particular stands out in my mind and refers to a participant who has been completely written off as being incapable at maths by her school despite, in my opinion, being very bright. Her First Star teacher reported praise for her for

“.... knowing more than she realises! So many times she stopped herself from saying something and when I encouraged her she was totally right”

-Jo Lunt, Maths teacher First Star Academy

I received a lot of unsolicited feedback from foster carers and other professionals, for example:

“The SW for [name removed for child protection] says that, it has changed his life!”

-Sue Tarry, Ealing Virtual School

“Just wanted to say a huge thank you to you and your team for the excellent summer that [name removed] has had. He had a great (but tiring) time - and from the sounds of it has done some amazing things. What a fab opportunity he's been given. He is talking already about next summer's stay!”

-Foster Carer for one of the participants

“It should have been longer”

-Academy participant (initially one of our least engaged most introverted participants who had an amazing journey over the 4 week)

Next Steps

The academy continues with Saturday sessions (on the first Saturday of every month) and there are 3 more summer residencies for this cohort, supporting participants up to the age of 18, that is throughout GCSE and A Levels, and university applications.

Saturday sessions (term-time programme) in brief

The focus of the Saturday sessions is dictated in part by the academic cycle; in the lead up to exam periods for example we will emphasise the Meta-Learning element of the programme, specifically study skills, revision strategies and exam technique, with some subject-specific remedial work as timetables allow.

Outside of exam periods and the lead up to them we will run up to 3 caregiver sessions, so that professionals with the closest educational relationship to the young people (i.e. foster carers, virtual school staff, designated teachers and social workers) can understand our approach, what we teach and how we can best work together to sustain progress towards the end goal. It is also an

opportunity for us to understand how we can best support the caregivers, to workshop solutions to common issues and network. Subjects are likely to include attachment theory and attachment aware education, financial literacy, study skills and programme input sessions.

As feedback from the USA places the attachments developed in the student cohort as such a key factor in student and academy success, some of the Saturday sessions will be designed to enhance that sense of cohesion and community within the group.

I also intend to run a rights/advocacy clinic in order to further the self-advocacy sessions in the summer and facilitate the young people getting their rights met (there is not a single participant who had not experienced some violation of their legal rights, either individual, educational or as a result of being in care)

Ongoing case management

I will be conducting ongoing case-management and am currently in discussions with Virtual Schools and social workers to assess the best way to measure academic (and other) impact of the academy. Virtual schools that I have been able to meet with so far this term have agreed to make introductions to the Designated Teachers in the schools that our participants attend.

Ongoing recruitment

I will be recruiting year 10s to join the current cohort and will be working throughout the year to identify suitable candidates until we hit a maximum of 30 academy students.