

An evaluation of the Villiers Park Scholars Programme

A report on the first two years of a four-year programme

Executive Summary

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Introduction

Overview of the Programme

Villiers Park Educational Trust is a charity with 40 years of experience in working with very able students aged 14-19 and their teachers. The Villiers Park Scholars Programme aims to identify young people from less advantaged backgrounds with high academic potential in order to improve their chances of gaining entry to 'centres of excellence at leading universities'. These are defined by Villiers Park as being departments in the top 20% for that subject nationally¹. It is intended to be a four-year programme, lasting from Year 10 to Year 13 inclusive. The evaluation took place over the first two years of the programme, from 2009-11. Initially, the programme has been undertaken in two geographical areas of higher social disadvantage with a first cohort of 115 scholars. Scholars were drawn from the six 11-16 secondary schools, one 11-18 school and three colleges of further education identified as suitable sites for the initial piloting of the programme. Fifty-seven of the first cohort of scholars were in Year 10 when the programme commenced and 58 were in Year 12 (hereinafter referred to as Year 11 and Year 13 scholars respectively). The number of scholars more than doubled from 2009-10 to 2010-11 as two additional 11-18 schools and later cohorts were added.

The Scholars Programme addresses issues relating to attainment and progression. For the scholars, it currently includes the following elements: institution-based intensive mentoring delivered by a Villiers Park learning mentor; residentials at Villiers Park which include the opportunity to visit a Cambridge college and a self-selected, subject specific residential for Year 12s or Year 13s; termly one-day enrichment activities; access to a virtual resource bank of extension activities; university masterclasses and activities delivered by partner organisations, including support and information for scholars' parents. A key additional component is access to the Villiers Park Advisory Service with the aim of developing the wider institutional provision.

The Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation focused on tracking the impact of the programme on the first cohorts of scholars over two years. A multi-site case study approach was adopted with data collected in three phases in each of the participating institutions. A mixed-methods approach to data collection was used including:

- Focus group interviews with scholars (involving 184 scholars over all three phases, 106 in area one and 78 in area two);
- Questionnaires completed individually by scholars at the start of focus group interviews (60 in phase 1, 65 in phase 2 and 61 in phase 3);
- Interviews with adults working with the Villiers Park Scholars Programme in a wide range of roles (86 in total, 41 closely involved, 14 senior managers and 31 not closely involved).
- Focus group interviews with seven groups of non-scholars;
- Attendance at some Scholars Programme events such as induction days, residentials and parent events;
- Attendance at Villiers Park review meetings;

¹ Using listings from *The Guardian* newspaper

- Questionnaires and interviews with a sample of Villiers Park scholars' parents (13 in total);
- Progress reviews completed by staff and mentors to inform the development of a number of snapshots (see Appendix One);
- Institutional and scholar level progress and attainment data;
- Year 13 scholars' university destinations.

Evaluation Criteria

Specific success criteria were agreed with Villiers Park prior to beginning the evaluation of the Scholars Programme. For scholars these included evidence of:

- Increased knowledge of higher education;
- Increased motivation, aspiration, expectations and self-confidence;
- Improved progress and attainment.

Criteria relating to the impact on institutions included:

- Evidence of greater understanding of the needs of high attaining and 'gifted and talented' pupils from less advantaged backgrounds and how to support them;
- Increased academic expectations;
- Increased attention to longer term outcomes, impact of curriculum choices and access to Higher Education;
- Perceived impact of the Villiers Park Scholars Programme on wider institutional ethos and practices.

Data from all sources were analysed thematically at each phase in accordance with these criteria. As the evaluation explores the impact of the programme, greater weight has been given to data gathered at Phase Three. Greater weight has also been given to data collected in schools because the programme aims to work with young people from the age of 14 (Year 10) and not from age 16 (Year 12). High attaining young people at this point are significantly further forward in their educational journeys having already made firm choices about their post 16 education.

Limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the findings in this report include using a two year evaluation of a four year programme and scholars' involvement in many other educational and life experiences, making it difficult to attribute impact exclusively to the programme. In addition, where reference is made to the impact on scholars in cohorts that began after the evaluation started (and therefore not included in this analysis), comments are drawn from the perspectives of staff, school/college liaisons, mentors and project leaders but not from the scholars themselves.

Villiers Park provided the participating institutions with the following selection criteria:

- High academic potential as demonstrated through either CATS scores (Year 10s) or attainment at 16 (GCSE grades, Year 12s);
- First generation to access higher education;
- In receipt of either Free School Meals (FSM) or Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA)²;
- Parent(s) in non-professional occupations.

² As EMA has now been withdrawn this criterion has been replaced with a maximum level of household income of £25,000

Implementing these criteria has been a challenge but good progress has been made.

Summary of the Overall Findings

1. THE SCHOLARS

1.1 Knowledge of Higher Education

Staff and scholars considered that the programme had improved scholars' knowledge of higher education through:

- Trips to universities, including one to a highly selective university from which they had gained insights into possible future destinations;
- Opportunities for Year 12 and Year 13 scholars to experience subject teaching at degree level and to gain insights into future subject choices;
- Residential activities which gave them insights into what it would be like to be away from home;
- Mentoring, masterclasses and campus visits that gave them insights into the range of universities and university courses available;
- Increased understanding of the intellectual and inter-personal skills needed for entry into university;
- Increased understanding of the university applications and admissions processes, through mentoring and partnership activities;
- For younger scholars, insights into the implications of course choices being made prior to transition to Year 12, through mentoring sessions.

1.2 Increased motivation, aspiration, expectations and self-confidence

The impact on the motivation, aspiration and confidence of the scholars overall is positive with some individual examples where the Villiers Park programme has made the difference between getting A levels and entering university or dropping out (see for example snapshot of Esther). Given the numbers involved and the aim to include those in the least advantaged circumstances, some variation in benefits secured is inevitable. Staff, parents and scholars felt that changes in the scholars were seen in the areas of motivation, self-esteem and confidence in particular. Greater impact was seen in relation to Year 11 scholars and amongst those without a parent who had been to university. Scholars who identified themselves as not having a parent who had been to university were more likely to say that involvement with the programme had changed their future plans.

1.3 Evidence of improved progress and attainment

Analysis of the quantitative data provided by the schools and colleges shows positive impact with Year 11 scholars in three schools performing favourably at GCSE level in relation to the top 25% of their peer group. Respondents considered that it is difficult to link progress and attainment with the programme specifically given the range of other potential factors. Feedback from scholars indicated that mentoring had contributed to changes in academic and study skills that would contribute to improved attainment however.

Analysis of the destinations data for the Year 13 scholars showed that around half of those for whom data were available took up places in leading universities. Precise figures vary according to the system for grouping universities used. Despite having started the programme far later than will be the case in the future, almost a third of the Year 13 scholars with no parental history of education at degree level were successful in obtaining places at leading universities, including two in departments listed in the Guardian top 20, the preferred measure of Villiers Park. It seems likely that rather more will have progressed to leading universities but these background data are not available for most scholars at College H.

2. THE INSTITUTIONS

2.1 Greater understanding of the needs of high attaining pupils from less advantaged backgrounds

The main impact identified in relation to these criteria was at school level and related to improvements in the identification of high potential in young people from less advantaged backgrounds. Overall, there was increased confidence that students in this category were now being identified since the schools' involvement with the Scholars Programme had begun.

2.2 Increased academic expectations

National data provide evidence of differences in the levels of academic attainment in the schools and colleges at the start of the programme. Schools in both areas were already working in a context of increased academic expectations as part of the national agenda and the schools participating in the programme in one area were also part of a local federation that had high expectations. Strong synergies between the focus of the Scholars Programme and these other agendas proved highly beneficial. Involvement with the Villiers Park Scholars Programme had heightened awareness of the underachievement of less socially advantaged pupils in the participating schools and prompted the development of measures to address this.

2.3 Increased attention to longer term outcomes and access to Higher Education

There was evidence from scholars, learning mentors and the school liaisons of an increased understanding within schools of higher education opportunities and how to access them. In general, staff identified barriers to progression as cultural and local rather than systemic.

2.4 Impact of Villiers Park on wider ethos and practices

Institutions involved with the Scholars Programme anticipated at the outset that they would be able to develop aspects of their practice as a consequence of their association with it. Some schools and colleges reported that they had valued the whole school development supported by the Villiers Park Advisory Service and that this would be further disseminated. There is a strong commitment to transferring successful practices identified in the Scholars Programme to benefit the wider cohort. Some schools have already used these insights to develop their mentoring with Year 11s.

At a number of schools, Villiers Park scholars have been selected as student leaders and staff consider them to provide positive role models for other students. Schools also reported increased interest in higher education amongst younger students and parents seeking their child's inclusion in the programme. Involvement with the programme was seen to be prestigious and identified as a 'selling point' by some institutions.

3. New developments to the Scholars Programme

The evaluation was both formative and summative with regular feedback to the Villiers Park Educational Trust and an interim report and presentation to trustees at the end of the first year. Partly in response to the formative feedback and also in the light of emerging issues observed by the Trust, the programme was revised and extended during the evaluation period. In particular, the following developments occurred:

- Strengthened organisational structure with further clarification of staff roles and responsibilities and improved access to training;
- Strengthened arrangements for the delivery of mentoring, including the development of a four year programme of activities based around key themes;
- Increased emphasis on scholars' ongoing motivation for inclusion in the programme;
- Additional specialist input through partnership arrangements with *Oxfizz*, *The National Association for Gifted Children* and *Brightside*;
- Setting up of an Ambassador Programme for ex-scholars, with opportunities to support younger scholars;
- Presentations at staff meetings in the participating institutions to involve wider staff more closely in the programme.

4. Conclusions

4.1 **Residentials** were identified as one of the strongest elements of the programme, in particular, the subject specific ones for the Years 12 and 13. These were noted to have contributed to increased expectations in terms of scholars' future plans, motivation and aspiration. These seem therefore to be a good investment.

4.2 **Mentoring** was identified by scholars, parents and others as critical in many of the individuals' capacity to complete A-levels, apply to university and college and to sustain their studies over the period. In several cases, mentors played a central role in supporting scholars on personal matters that would otherwise have presented major barriers to learning.

However, for some scholars whose needs differed or whose relationship with the mentor was not as well established, the experience was more limited. The consistency in provision of effective mentoring had improved since the interim report.

4.3 **Opportunities and experiences** that would not otherwise have been experienced were made available through the Scholars Programme. These included

opportunities to participate in residential activities and to meet and learn alongside able young people from other institutions.

4.4 **Scholars without a parent who has been to university** derived particular benefit from the programme. There is evidence of this both from the GCSE results and from the scholar questionnaires which suggest significantly higher levels of motivation, aspiration and changes in expectation to go to university.

4.5 Unsurprisingly, the **Year 11s reaped greater benefit** than the Year 13s and the full benefit for these scholars is yet to be realised.

4.6 Nearly 77% of the 43 Year 13 scholars for whom data are available **progressed to a degree course** after leaving school. Of these, over a third went to 'leading departments' (Guardian listing) and nearly a half attended either Russell Group or 1994 Group universities.

4.7 There was evidence of **wider institutional impact** in schools in relation to improving systems for identifying young people with high academic potential and in some cases, challenges to the low expectations associated with social disadvantage.

5. Recommendations

5.1 **Ongoing monitoring and evaluation:** Given that this evaluation covers only two years of a four year programme and that substantial improvements have been made to the programme over this period, it is crucial that Villiers Park continue to monitor and evaluate the outcomes both of the scholars that were included in this evaluation (now starting year 12 in post 16 destinations) and the cohorts that have begun in the last two years. The experience of this evaluation was that these data are not always monitored and evaluated by the schools and colleges.

5.2 **Mentoring** should be continued and strengthened. Villiers Park has already reviewed issues relating to training and quality assurance. The content of mentoring sessions should be kept under review in order to ensure that the new four-year programme of activities meets the wide range of needs identified.

5.3 **Targeting first generation scholars:** Major progress has been made since the interim report on the clarity and use of the selection criteria. In view of the evidence in this final report, consideration should continue to be given to targeting scholars who have little or no history of higher education while recognising that this definition is not always clear cut. The most marginalised students are more likely to be overlooked so ensuring that processes of identification challenge preconceptions is important.

5.4 **Definition of high potential:** Continue to think about how high potential is defined, working with schools to develop other ways of identifying potential in order to avoid total reliance on CATS, while ensuring disadvantage criteria are met.

5.5 **Targeting of Year 12:** Consider ways of ensuring that the small number of places available to Year 12 scholars go to those whose social circumstances mean that they are most likely to benefit from the level and type of support that the programme provides.

5.6 **Challenge image of Villiers Park programme as narrowly academic:** There were several clear examples in the evaluation of students who achieved highly

and took up university places in subjects that are sometimes regarded as less academic – Fine Art, Media etc. The Scholars Programme is not understood by everyone to have this broad vision. Villiers Park had encouraged these scholars to pursue their outstanding skills in these areas and should continue to give a clear message about its inclusivity in this respect and to offer as wide a range of specialist subject residential as possible.

5.7 Strengthen partnerships: Promoting partnerships between schools and colleges more strongly in new areas that Villiers Park move into might enable better synergies with other initiatives and enhance outcomes. Partnerships with Villiers Park seemed to be more effective where goals were most clearly aligned; work to develop these mutual understandings needs to be ongoing in part because staffing can be fluid. Further work should also be undertaken to strengthen the partnership with parents.

5.8 Identify ‘good practice’ for transfer: Identifying good practice that might be transferred across the programme and beyond will begin to embed the Villiers Park work more widely. Further staff development in the schools and colleges involved might move the engagement further from the senior leader team across to other staff with an interest. Furthermore, the model of mentoring and residential could be disseminated more widely on a national basis.

Scholar snapshots

Cara (Year 11): Confidence, communication and leading university

Cara joined the Villiers Park Programme during the Summer Term of Year 10 and completed Year 11 in July 2011. She does not have a parent or carer who has been to university. She is not in receipt of Free School Meals.

Cara has always intended to undertake further study, preferably at university but has become more interested in doing so and she feels it is much more achievable than she previously had thought. She is unsure at this stage whether to pursue maths and science subjects or performing arts which she also enjoys though one possible longer term plan is to do medicine. In January 2011, she was working at A or A* GCSE standard in over half her subjects and had been at least an A in all of them. She achieved 5 A*, 6 A and 2 C grades at GCSE.

The residential trip to Villiers Park has been the most enjoyable part of being a scholar for Cara thus far. At the end of phase 2 in the Autumn Term of Year 11, she reported that the Villiers Park programme had increased her confidence and independence giving examples of being better at finding information and intending to apply to a top university which she would never have considered before becoming involved in the programme. Both her learning mentor and mother commented that her confidence and self esteem have increased significantly as a result of the Villiers Park experience and her mother noted that this has enabled Cara to feel that it is no longer 'geekish' to be clever, 'or if it is she no longer cares'. Her peers commented on her much improved communication skills. She described herself as having 'a better sense of self which is useful in many areas of life'. Her mother suggested that: 'If I had had her opportunities and encouragement I would be running the world by now!'

Sarah (Year 11): Motivation, mentoring and leadership

Sarah began the Villiers Park programme at the start of Year 10. She is not in receipt of Free School Meals. Neither parent went to university but other relatives such as her uncle and grandparents did so.

At the start of the programme Sarah suggested that at 25 she hoped to be working on a magazine and was confused about how to apply to college but planned to talk to a mentor about it. By the end of Year 10 she recorded that the Villiers Park programme had built up her confidence and helped her to make new friends. Sarah reported that she would be going on to college (to do A levels) and would like to study English, Media or History at a local university with a view to going into the Media and writing. She suggested that the Villiers Park programme had not influenced her plans as such but that it had given her much more confidence, 'made me realise that I could do it' and steps to achievement, including improving revision plans. The school has much higher expectation of the scholars and she doesn't want to disappoint anyone. At the start of Year 10 her target grades were a mixture of As

and Bs, by the start of Year 11 these had all been raised to As. In the final results she achieved 2A, 2B & 3C grades at GCSE.

Sarah was extremely positive about her relationship with her mentor, commenting that she doesn't know what she would have done without her help and support on personal problems. In particular, she appreciates the support that her mentor has given in her determination to do media studies A-level as she is really interested in it and thinks four academic subjects, which is what others are pressurising her to do, would cause too much stress. Her learning mentor corroborated the increase in confidence and noted that she had used the mentoring very effectively to try to address personal issues that were acting as barriers to her academic progress. She also found the Villiers Park residential and the trip to Cambridge University in particular, very helpful. In Year 11 she was elected to a student leadership position.

Shane (Year 11): Focus, value and impact on parent

Shane joined the Villiers Park programme on the recommendation of the Villiers Park school liaison at his school. He is not in receipt of free school meals and neither of his parents went to university.

At the end of Year 10, Shane reported that the Villiers Park programme was teaching him life skills such as motivation and organisation. In Year 11, he commented that the residential was inspiring, providing an opportunity to make friends with other Villiers Park scholars. Shane suggested that the Villiers Park programme had changed his future plans which were previously unfocused – he had far too many disparate ideas about what he wanted to do which, with the support of the mentor, had been refined. He is now focusing on Art and Design, which Villiers Park has supported though his teacher told him he should be doing all academic subjects. He will do Fine Art on the Villiers Park Year 12 residential. With his mentor, Shane has looked through more than 20 different college courses and the mentor suggested looking at the London School of Fashion as a leading HEI in this area. He admired people in positions that he thought he might pursue in the future and realised that he could better himself and so is looking carefully at what is going to get him where he wants to be. He attributes much of his enlightenment to the mentoring which he requested take place weekly instead of fortnightly and reported that the relationship was so good that he can talk comfortably about any aspect of his life. He commented: '...[mentoring] is like a little locker where I put everything that's weighing me down a little bit. I give it to her and she keeps it until the next session.' Shane's target GCSE grades in 2009 were As with Bs in sciences but by the end of 2010 these had all been increased to As. His GCSE results were A*, 3As, 4Bs and 1C.

Shane's mother is very supportive of his plans and involved in both his education and his sports activities. He claimed that his involvement in the Villiers Park programme has been good for her and has increased her pride in him – she often mentions 'my boy's a scholar'. More significantly, she has enrolled herself in further education for next year in order to train in a profession, which according to Shane, would not have happened without the Villiers Park programme making her realise that she can do it. He reports a major increase in appropriate communication which has made him less loud and outspoken than he used to be. He was selected to be a student leader in his school in Year 11.

Tom (Year 11): Confidence, friendship and gradual change

Tom started the Villiers Park programme in Year 10. He is not currently in receipt of free school meals but was in the past. Two siblings undertook degree level study and a parent did a part-time Open University.

From the outset, Tom stated that he intended to study English at Cambridge and go on to become a teacher and writer and he saw the Villiers Park programme as helping him to achieve this. His mother reported that he enjoyed the residential enormously but that he didn't initially appreciate the mentoring though she feels this has been useful and he recognised its value by Year 11. Tom confirmed the usefulness of the residential which he stated included activities that were more challenging and open-ended than the tasks undertaken at school. It had improved his English, analytical thinking and application but felt that it could have been longer and taken place earlier in the programme. He has always been motivated to work hard but not as part of a group and this has been improved through the Villiers Park experience. Both the learning mentor and Tom's mother reported that he had lacked confidence throughout his secondary schooling and that this has increased through the Villiers Park programme. His predicted GCSE grades were all As except for one B and one D. His results were 7As and 2Bs.

For Tom, involvement in the Villiers Park programme did not change his plans though he stated it had raised his expectations of which university he could aim for but it gave him increased confidence to realise them, in particular by making a place at a top university accessible and realistic.

Esther (Year 13): Mentoring

Esther began the Villiers Park programme in Year 12 whilst starting her A-level course at college. No one in Esther's family has attended a university. She is in receipt of the Education Maintenance Allowance.

At the start of Year 12, Esther expressed her intention to go to further education though she also made reference in her early questionnaire to university, and to work in either IT or Art. In Year 13 she stated that she intended to apply to university but could not have done so without the huge support of her mentor without whom she would have left, not completing her A-levels.

Esther has made significant progress in her motivation, aspiration and confidence. She was very shy when she started college and now enjoys it. She applied to two local universities to do a degree in either Media or computer systems. She had offers of A, B, C or 3 Bs – Her A-level results were A, B, D and she has begun her course at a local university.

Colleen (Year 13): Raising aspirations

Colleen began the Villiers Park programme in Year 12 whilst starting her A-level course at school. No one in Colleen's family had attended university. She is in receipt of the Education Maintenance Allowance.

During Year 12, Colleen had been to Villiers Park for a week to do a course in law and this had included an opportunity to visit the courts. This experience had raised her expectations from wishing to become a solicitor to a barrister which according to Colleen was as a result of her Villiers Park involvement. She claimed that her motivation, aspiration and self-esteem had all improved and that her academic work had benefited. The Villiers Park programme had also inspired her and given her other ways of interpreting things. Her predicted grade for all her A-levels were As. She had received five offers of places from universities, some regarded as leading in law and these were conditional on 3 A grades, or As and Bs. Her A level results were one A and two Bs and she was accepted at a 1994 group university.