

Rise High: An investigation of a pilot careers and skills development programme for young people in rural and semi-rural areas in Derbyshire

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Abstract

The Rise High programme, a collaboration between the University of Derby and the Chatsworth House Trust, explores a progressive, sustained approach to careers outreach with under-represented young people in rural and semi-rural areas. This case study examines emerging evaluation findings, showing early evidence that the programme has strengthened participants' understanding of career pathways over time and supported the development of skills and confidence. Impacts on university aspirations or motivation in current studies are less conclusive, highlighting potential for future programme development. The case study concludes by situating the programme within the local and wider political context of rurality and hidden disadvantage.

Keywords: career progression, outreach, rural careers England, widening participation, evaluation, measuring impact

Introduction

This qualitative case study explores the emerging findings from the Rise High programme, a progressive, sustained outreach initiative delivered to 28 participants in rural and semi-rural areas of Derbyshire. The programme is a collaborative venture led by the University

of Derby's Widening Access (WA) team and the Chatsworth House Trust's Learning and Engagement (LE) team. This partnership has been established in recognition of shared objectives to create meaningful opportunities for local young people, with a particular focus on those from disadvantaged backgrounds. For the WA team, the emphasis lies in supporting progression to higher learning, whereas for the LE team, the priority is to facilitate access to the Chatsworth Estate and to enhance understanding of career pathways within the organisation. The collaboration brings together complementary expertise in widening participation, higher education progression, and evaluating outreach, and rural, heritage, and arts career pathways, enabling the development of innovative approaches to careers outreach for local young people.

The main aim of the Rise High programme is to deliver an engaging suite of activities focused on careers information, skills development, and confidence building to a group of young people from local rural and semi-rural areas. All participants meet one or more indicators of disadvantage, identified using the regulator of higher education provision for England, the Office for Students' (OfS), criteria for identifying under-represented groups in higher education (OfS, 2021).

This study is positioned within the political and social context associated with rurality and disadvantage, where 'hidden' deprivation is often overlooked (Local Government Association, 2017; Burke & Jones, 2019; Davies et al., 2021). Rural areas are often categorised as having low levels of deprivation due to the presence of a generally advantaged population spread over a wide geographic area, with statistically high numbers progressing to higher learning. This can mask small pockets of significant disadvantage, meaning that some young people in these areas may miss out on opportunities and support more readily available to their urban peers (IntoUniversity, 2015; Graham, 2024), particularly where specialist rural careers education is lacking (Commission for Rural Communities, 2012; ACRE, 2014; Alexander & Fuqua, 2024).

The motivation for developing the Rise High programme was to address entrenched social mobility, as perceived by the WA and LE teams in their local contexts, which is both prevalent and under-researched in rural contexts (Milbourne & Kitchen, 2014; Corbett & Forsey, 2017). The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities, widening the attainment and progression gap between the most and least advantaged young people (Lally & Bermingham, 2020; Tuckett et al., 2022). Against this backdrop, the programme teams sought to provide a sustained, high-quality intervention tailored to local needs.

Literature Review

The main driver for the creation of the Rise High programme was the recognition from the WA and LE teams that they could apply their respective expert knowledge and resources to support the successful career progression of disadvantaged young people in local rural and semi-rural areas.

This, in part, was in recognition that rural disadvantage can often be hidden. This view is grounded in research which cites a number of reasons why this is the case, such as, a reluctance to reveal a need for support for cultural reasons (Local Government Association, 2017; Golestani et al., 2025), overall favourable averages in the health of the general local population masking a minority in poor health (National Centre for Rural Health and Care,

2022; Burke & Jones, 2019) and deprivation being viewed by those within the population only as a historical problem, as Woodward (1996) notes 'Historically, the vast majority of rural residents have lived in conditions of extreme hardship' (Woodward, 1996, p. 63) and therefore by comparison, due in part to general rises in living standards, modern rural deprivation is more concealed (Woodward, 1996). Milbourne backs this view highlighting a disconnect for those living in areas of rural disadvantage between the material and sociocultural aspects of their lived experience (Milbourne, 2014).

This 'hidden' disadvantage has a practical impact for organisations engaged in outreach, particularly careers and progression outreach, as often funding sources focus on areas where high levels of deprivation and disadvantage can be readily identified. IntoUniversity (2015), for example, report that most funders are biased towards urban needs, albeit unintentionally. This is due to a higher concentration of disadvantaged target groups within smaller geographic areas, meaning they can be reached more easily and with fewer resources. Rural areas, on the other hand, tend to include a wider social mix across a greater geographic area which makes it much harder, and more costly, to reach those who need support (IntoUniversity, 2015). Further still, Graham (2024) asserts that the inequality in funding of the urban versus the rural can be explained by the pervasive discourse that 'rural pupils outperform their urban peers' when, in fact, his analysis of attainment through a socio-economic deprivation (SED) lens found that 'the prevailing narrative of English rural overperformance in average data has hidden the underperformance of SED rural pupils from the political landscape' (Graham, 2024, p. 11). This evidence justifies the necessity for organisations such as the University of Derby and the Chatsworth House Trust that have a presence in rural communities to use their collective will and expertise to redress this balance.

When using the term 'disadvantage' an important part of the programme development is to understand what criteria were to be used. The main dataset used to identify participants is the English Indices of Multiple Deprivation (EIMD), an official measure of relative deprivation within small areas in England, developed by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and updated every 3-5 years (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019). A secondary dataset, POLAR4, also mapped postcodes of potential beneficiaries for the programme. This dataset measures levels of youth participation in higher education produced by the OfS using the English census data (OfS, 2022). Both datasets assess by geographic area and, ultimately, have both strengths and weaknesses. Zelenina et al. (2022) reviewed the use of deprivation indices across the world and noted the advantages as the breadth of the socio-economic and demographic indicators used within the indices, the ability to apply the indices to neighbourhood level, and, that the data is drawn from comprehensive sources such as a census. However, the disadvantages are the infrequency with which data is gathered, with often large timespans between data collection (Zelenina et al., 2022). Other authors, such as Harrison & Hatt (2010), Fecht et al. (2018) and Burke and Jones (2019) also note that the allocation of scores for an area being applied to every individual is problematic, an issue further exacerbated in rural localities, as deprivation can be isolated within small pockets which are difficult to identify within an allocated area unit (Harrison & Hatt, 2010; Fecht et al., 2018; Burke & Jones, 2019).

Moreover, measures used to identify 'disadvantage' spans more than socio-economic factors and can also include a number of demographic indicators, particularly when

considering disadvantage and progression to university (Jerrim, 2021). Within higher education the term 'under-represented' is more commonly used than disadvantaged. The term 'under-represented' referring to individuals who meet certain criteria and who, by numbers of population, should be progressing and succeeding in higher education in greater numbers than they are (Davids, 2024). Consequently, for identification of participants for the programme, and therefore, also for the purposes of this study, other demographic categories of those 'under-represented' in higher education as classified by the OfS are also used. This includes those eligible for free school meals or pupil premium, disabled students, or care-experienced students (OfS, 2021).

This lack of progression amongst under-represented groups can be quite stark. Comparison figures from the OfS show that in 2022/23 whilst 30% of young people (21 and under) progressed to higher education from high progression areas, this reduces significantly to 13% for those living in areas of least progression (OfS, 2024). A range of reasons for this lack of progression has been proposed, which reference in particular the structural barriers that disadvantaged and under-represented groups may face, including insufficient advice and support, prior attainment, and financial concerns (Bolton & Lewis, 2025). Access to high quality information is vital in supporting progression of disadvantaged and under-represented groups as these students are less likely to access formal sources of information themselves (Pickering, 2021). They also require clear and easily accessible information appropriate for themselves and their circumstances (Pickering, 2021). If that can be achieved, high quality information can positively influence their intentions to continue into post-compulsory education (McGuigan et al., 2016).

Access to high quality careers information for disadvantaged young people is further compounded for those in rural areas, with what can be seen as a lack of specialist knowledge of local labour market information combined with lack of access to reliable transport and work experience opportunities (Aldridge Foundation, 2023). Concerns have been raised by a number of organisations who support rural communities, such as the Commission for Rural Communities and the Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) that careers advisors have 'insufficient knowledge of local economies, local labour markets, and the range of employment, education and training opportunities available within rural areas' (Commission for Rural Communities, 2012), and that the solution is to ensure there is 'fair access to opportunities and services' for young people in rural areas that is 'focused on their needs' by the provision of 'specialist advice and tailored support' (ACRE, 2014).

Programme development

In the first instance the WA team conducted desk-based research into rural and semi-rural areas of Derbyshire using the EIMD to identify local need in line with outlined research. This line of enquiry revealed a small area in the Derbyshire Dales that was ranked amongst the 10% most deprived in England, despite being surrounded by areas of high advantage. Due to the small geographic size of the area it would not be identified as an area of high need by the OfS, who use ward-level data, which suppresses rural pockets of deprivation such as this, to allocate outreach funding, such as for the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (now Uni Connect), leaving local disadvantaged young people excluded from opportunities available to urban peers (OfS, 2018). The WA and LE teams identified a maximum cohort size of 28, in line with both organisations' standard class sizes for their outreach activities. As numbers of potential participants within this small geographic

area did not meet that threshold, they employed the POLAR4 dataset and other personal and demographic indicators of disadvantage in line with the OfS categories of under-represented groups (OfS, 2021) to ensure the programme could run with a full cohort.

With the potential participants of the programme identified, the WA and LE teams have developed a Theory of Change (TOC) to map programme aims, expected outcomes, and activities (see Figure 1). TOCs provide a visual framework for interventions and an early test of whether the design and evaluation methods are appropriate (TASO, 2023).

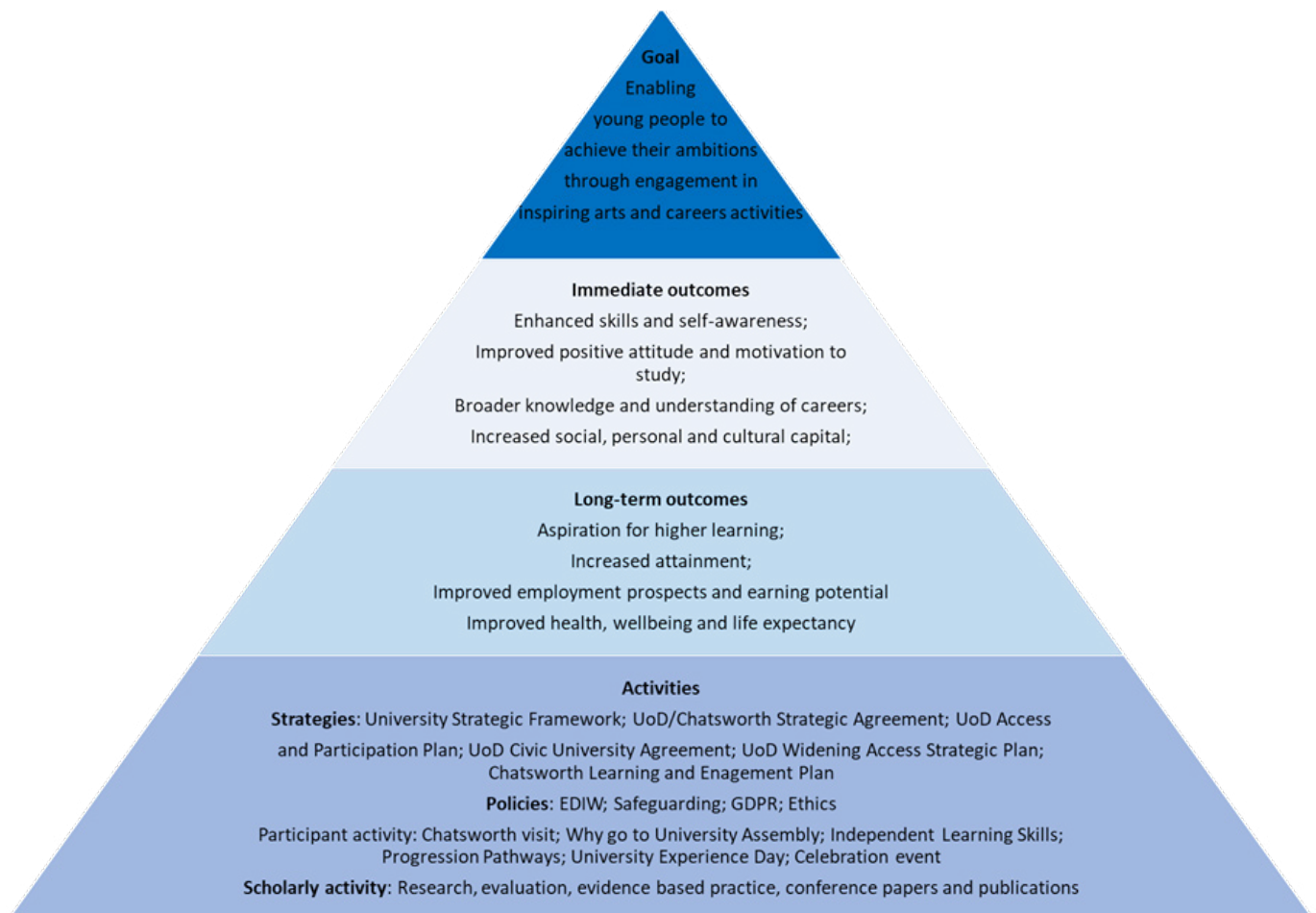


Figure 1: Original Rise High Theory of Change

The Rise High programme is designed as a progressive, sustained outreach programme to be delivered over the course of 18 months, with multiple engagements embedded to build trust and familiarity with both the team members and the careers concepts and pathways being presented. The programme is jointly delivered by the WA team and the LE team, taking advantage of the WA team’s expertise in widening access, higher education progression and evaluating outreach, and the LE team’s experience in rural, heritage-based learning, enabling a blend of careers-focused education and experiential learning grounded in the local context. The programme’s primary aims are to:

- Broaden participants’ knowledge and understanding of career pathways;
- Enhance participants’ learning skills and confidence;
- Introduce the concept of higher education and progression to university.

The programme begins with a launch event at school for participants and their parents/carers to introduce the WA and LE teams, the programme activities, and expected outcomes of participation. The launch is also used as an opportunity for parents/carers to complete consent paperwork for their child to take part in activities, data collection and be photographed. The programme delivery content includes two immersive experiences: real-world learning encounters at Chatsworth House, giving exposure to the variety of professional roles and working environments Chatsworth House provides; and a university campus discovery day to demystify higher education and showcase pathways from school to degree-level study. These are underpinned by a series of thematic workshops delivered within a classroom setting at school, led by WA team staff supported by undergraduate student ambassadors, which are focused on career awareness, skills development, goal setting and reflective exercises to help participants link experiences, both on and outside of the programme, to their own aspirations. The final element of the programme is a celebration event at Chatsworth House for the participants and their parents/carers which includes the presentation of certificates and floral buttonholes, the opportunity for photographs in a university cap and gown, and fun games and activities.

Table 1 summarises the main elements of the programme, outlining the sequence of activities, content, and areas of responsibility:

Activity	Focus	Location	Delivered by
Launch event	Introduction to programme	School	LE team WA team
Why go to university assembly	Goal setting	School	WA team
Skills development workshops	Enhancing learning skills and building confidence	School	WA team
Careers visit	Workplace experience and local labour marketing info	Chatsworth House	LE team
Progression Pathways workshop	Career pathways mapping and self-reflection	School	WA team
Experience Day	Higher Education progression knowledge	University	WA team
Celebration event	Reflection and celebration	Chatsworth House	LE team WA team

Table 1: Rise High programme summary

By providing a structured, multi-session intervention the Rise High programme has sought to increase knowledge of career pathways, develop transferable skills, and raise confidence in learning and abilities. A progressive, sustained model has been adopted to allow concepts to be revisited and built upon, creating a cumulative engagement rather than a series of isolated events. This structure reflects research emphasising the effectiveness of

progressive, multi-intervention approaches in widening participation outreach (Bainham, 2019; TASO, 2021; Patel & Bowes, 2021; Harding & Bowes, 2022; Williams et al., 2024).

Methodology

The methodologies employed within the case study were selected to explicitly evaluate the impact of the Rise High programme and to understand if it has met its primary aims. A robust evaluation structure forms the basis for the case study (see Table 2).

Data collection	Point in programme	Age of participants	Number of respondents
Pre-programme survey	Before	11-12	28
Event evaluation form – University Experience Day	During	12-13	24
Event evaluation form – Chatsworth Careers Day	During	12-13	25
Focus group	During	12-13	7
Teacher interview	During	N/A	1
Teacher informal feedback	During	N/A	2
Practitioner reflection	During and after	N/A	3
Post-programme survey	After	13-14	20

Table 2: Summary of data collection methods and timeline

A mixed methodology for the evaluation of the programme has been adopted, with research suggesting a mixed methods approach provides a strong evidence base. Thiele et al. (2018), when reviewing the evaluation of similar outreach initiatives, acknowledged that this approach can support the building of a compelling evidence base. The strength of the methodology is further endorsed by the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, (OHID) whose evaluation guidance for public health practitioners favours the use of a mixed methods approach to garner robust and comprehensive findings (OHID, 2018). The triangulation of data through the use of mixed methods supports the validation of findings, strengthens conclusions and, importantly for this case study, incorporates participants' voices in the evaluation (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2021).

The evaluation was developed so that there would be a significant break between the Chatsworth House visit and the evaluation of that visit taking place (four months) and another significant break of six months between the last activity, the celebration event, taking place and undertaking the post-programme survey. This was to evaluate, not just the engagement in activities as they happened, but also the impact and retention of information, including career concepts over a longer period of time.

The sample for the case study evaluation was 28 pupils who were all in Year 7 (11-12 years old) at the beginning of the programme and who all met at least one OfS indicator of disadvantage or under-representation, with some meeting multiple criteria (OfS, 2021). This included pupils who were living within an area of high deprivation or low progression to university using the EIMD and POLAR4 datasets, pupils who were in receipt of free school meals or pupil premium, care-experienced pupils, and/or SEND/disabled pupils.

Due to the age of participants (11-12 years old at the commencement of the programme) consent was sought from their parents/carers for all aspects of the research and data collection used in this case study. The consent form was approved for use for the purposes of this study through the University of Derby ethics committee approval process.

As the case study participants were children, those who engaged with them for research purposes were all required to have Disclosure and Barring Service certificates from the Home Office (a pre-requisite in the UK for people working with children) and have safeguarding training before the commencement of the programme data collection.

The research data collection was embedded with the delivery of the programme from the outset. This included a pre-programme survey which provided a baseline dataset in order to measure the 'distance travelled' of participants in relation to programme aims. The question set was created in order to ascertain participants' knowledge of career pathways; university life/study; and to measure a self-assessment of their skills, confidence, and motivation to study in the classroom. This was completed at the launch event before participating in the programme activities. A post-programme survey, replicating the pre-programme survey, was then completed by participants at the end of the programme.

In addition, individual event evaluations were collated using questionnaires with a mix of open and closed questions and Likert scales (Likert, 1932) to gather quantitative and qualitative data about the impact of the experiential visits to Chatsworth House and the University of Derby from both participants and teachers. The questionnaires focused on knowledge of progression routes and careers gained from the visits as well as how they could apply this knowledge to their current studies and future careers. The WA team use event evaluation forms as standard practice on outreach activities, developed through years of practice and experience of delivering and evaluating outreach and cited in two national papers as examples of best practice (The Purpose Coalition, 2021; Atherton & Webb, 2022). Template evaluation forms had questions adapted for each visit dependent on the focus of the activities (career progression/planning; skills acquisition; or confidence building).

All participants were invited to join a focus group and seven volunteered to take part. Use of focus groups with young people was identified as a suitable method of data collection following a review of similar papers (such as Adler et al., 2019; Moore et al., 2021; and Hanson et al., 2021) to ensure best practice was employed in facilitating focus groups with children. The qualitative element of the evaluation framework was developed in order to follow up and gain context in relation to the themes that emerged from the survey data and event evaluation. This was conducted in a relaxed discussion setting where participants were able to use their own words to illustrate their experience on the programme and the learning they have gained from participating in it.

Teacher voice was also important to understand the programme from multiple perspectives, and this was gathered using survey questions, a semi-structured interview, and unstructured feedback at a number of touchpoints. This included review meetings, email correspondence, and informal discussions captured whilst their pupils were engaging in activities.

Analysis and interpretation of both the quantitative and qualitative data collected was then undertaken to consider if, and how, any impact aligned with the Rise High programme aims. Quantitative data, which was primarily gathered using Likert scales (Likert, 1932) as numerical and statistical data, was collated and analysed based on descriptive analysis methods (O'Dwyer & Bernauer, 2014). Qualitative data, collated through the focus group, interviews and open text, was analysed and mapped against a series of themes linked to the programme aims (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Findings

Analysis of findings identified four main themes: increased knowledge and understanding of career progression; enhanced skills development and confidence; sustained impact and concept retention; and mixed outcomes for university aspirations and motivation.

Increased knowledge and understanding of career pathways

There are clear indications the programme had a positive impact on the participants understanding of career progression, including progression to university. Pupils reported a broader understanding of career options and clearer awareness of routes to those careers, including the role of university. Experiential learning opportunities, such as the Chatsworth House visit and university discovery day, provided evidence of participants linking education to employment. One pupil reflected:

It showed you different jobs, improving your knowledge for your future career.
(Participant 1)

Another described how the programme had increased their awareness of new possibilities:

It helped me look at the different paths I could take in life and what career paths I could go down. (Focus Group Participant)

Several comments suggested that visiting a university demystified it:

You get a good insight into university. (Participant 2)

It has helped me have more of an understanding of university. (Participant 3)

Teachers observed similar shifts in participant knowledge and reflection, noting that students were asking practical questions about university life, such as where they would live and how could they get to university, indicating genuine curiosity and engagement.

Quantitative survey data supported these perceptions, with the proportion of participants agreeing 'I have a good understanding of jobs I could do in the future' rising by 5 percentage points and 'I know where to go to get information about careers' rising by 11 percentage points between the pre- and post-programme surveys.

Overall, it can be seen that there is sufficient evidence to suggest that the programme had met the key aims to broaden participants' knowledge and understanding of career pathways.

Skills development and confidence building

There is emerging evidence that the programme has been effective in supporting participants to improve their skills and confidence in their learning. Many participants highlighted skills they had developed, particularly teamwork, communication, and presentation skills. One participant noted:

It taught me lots of skills and I had new experiences. (Participant 4)

Others commented:

I learned about different skills and why they are important. (Participant 5)

It was teaching you skills you need in the future for when you get your job. (Focus Group Participant)

And one reflected the mix of activities had supported their skills acquisition:

(The University and Chatsworth visits showed) different skills from different places that we make sure that we have for life when we get a job of our own. (Focus Group Participant)

The University Experience Day appeared to reinforce this, with 78% of participants indicating they understood the importance of developing skill sets for careers. Teachers also reported 'an improvement in learning skills' across the cohort, with one commenting:

With some I've seen a real spark, far more dedicated than peer group of same ability, more oomph and dedication and motivation. (Teacher 1)

Confidence emerged as a recurrent theme. Participants linked programme activities to feeling more assured in the classroom:

I feel more confident answering questions and knowing more stuff. (Participant 6)

Standing up and speaking helped me gain confidence. (Participant 7)

It helped me feel confident in lessons. (Participant 8)

Underpinning the qualitative findings, eight post-programme respondents specifically named confidence as one of the top benefits gained from the programme in survey responses.

It is clear the emerging evidence indicates meaningful gains in both skills and confidence, highlighting the programme's impact on participants' personal and academic development.

Sustained impact and concept retention

Evidence from the post-programme survey and focus group indicates that participants could recall key concepts delivered through programme activities and experiences months after they occurred. Participants were able to articulate their key learnings from taking part in the programme, frequently highlighting careers knowledge, understanding of university and their own confidence building:

I now know about different careers. (Participant 5)

Greater understanding of universities and what they are like. (Participant 4)

The sessions had made me confident. (Participant 9)

Others responded positively when asked if the programme had helped them think about their future career:

I am now more confident in the job I want to do when I'm older. (Participant 4)

This retaining of careers knowledge is further evidenced through recall of activities which took place at Chatsworth House, with many able to articulate the relevance to their own career thinking:

It gave me ideas of what I can do when I'm older. (Participant 10)

It showed you different jobs improving your knowledge for your future career. (Participant 1)

Participants could also distinguish clearly, and differentiate between, each experience:

We went to Chatsworth to see jobs around animals and the work that they do there and the trees and all that. And then we went to Derby University, like the actual university in Derby, to see what different jobs we could do there and what different courses we could take there. (Focus Group Participant)

And how the experiences had helped with their own future decision-making:

Well, I feel more prepared for things that could get thrown at me in a way because I could be finishing school and I have a chance of university, college or sixth form. (Focus Group Participant)

(It has) helped me and other people hopefully know how much commitment they'll have to do if they want to pursue a career that they want to have in life. (Focus Group Participant)

Teachers have noted the sustained impact of the programme on participants:

One pupil has a lot of challenges and she is working so incredibly hard and making more progress beyond what was expected. (Teacher 1)

And so, taking into consideration the findings from each element of the evaluation, it is evident that the programme has had a sustained positive impact on participants who could successfully recall career and university concepts, apply these to their own experience and preferences, and feel confident about their future beyond school.

Mixed outcomes for university aspirations and motivation

There were a small number of elements where the programme has appeared not to have met the intended aims. For instance, while initial exposure to university generated enthusiasm, this did not appear to be sustained. Positive responses to the statement 'I would like to apply to university in the future' dropped from 61% immediately after the university visit to 30% in the post-programme survey.

There were limited qualitative comments which could suggest reasons for this, however, one comment does clarify that university was simply not relevant to their chosen career:

Yes, a bit, but not much, because I don't need university for football. (Participant 11)

On the whole though the data provides no clear explanation for the reduction of the impact of the university visit over time, and so further speculation in relation to this outcome, beyond potential relevance to careers aspirations is not possible.

Participants were asked about their current studies to see if there were any marked positive changes which could be attributed to engagement in the programme. There was no compelling evidence indicating an upturn in feeling motivated in the classroom. There were initial positive responses to the question 'I feel motivated to work hard in school' in the pre-programme survey, taken when participants were in Year 7 (11-12 years old), however, this does not seem to be mirrored in the post-programme survey, taken when participants were in Year 9 (13-14 years old), with a 14 percentage point reduction giving a positive response. And whilst teachers reflected that the majority of participants did appear more motivated than peers who had not participated in the programme, the lack of qualitative commentary makes a definitive assessment difficult as the downturn highlighted by the quantitative data could be impacted by any number of external factors.

Overall, the use of mixed methods has ensured that the evaluation of the programme has been robust. There is clear emerging evidence that the programme has largely met its intended aims and has had a positive, sustained impact on the knowledge, skills, and confidence of the participants.

Discussion

This case study has explored the emerging findings of the Rise High programme, which aimed to broaden participants' knowledge of career pathways, strengthen skills and confidence in learning, and support the articulation of career ambitions through careers-focused activities. The interpretation of findings in this case study is informed by a pragmatist analytical perspective (Morgan, 2014), focusing on how participants make sense of their experiences within the specific context of a progressive, place-based outreach intervention (Biesta, 2010). While the programme aims and Theory of Change provided

an orienting framework for evaluation (TASO, 2023), the qualitative analysis was primarily inductive, allowing themes to be generated from the data rather than being predetermined. Data from focus groups, open-text survey responses, teacher feedback, interviews and practitioner reflections were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), through an iterative process of familiarisation, initial coding and theme development, with themes refined through analysis of the dataset and across the data sources.

Evidence suggests the programme aims are largely achieved, demonstrating the value of sustained outreach for young people in rural areas, where disadvantage is often hidden and opportunities more limited than for urban peers (IntoUniversity, 2015; Local Government Association, 2017; Burke & Jones, 2019; Davies et al., 2021; Graham, 2024). While much of the literature highlights the negative effects of rural disadvantage, relatively little research has evaluated interventions designed to address these challenges, situating this study as a useful contribution.

The findings indicate a clear link between participation and increased knowledge and understanding of career progression. Participants also reported improved skills and greater confidence in applying them, with positive responses sustained over time. However, the programme's influence on aspirations towards university study and motivation for participants' current engagement in school appeared weaker, reflecting wider evidence that these elements can be shaped by contextual barriers beyond programme control. It is important to note that no detrimental outcomes for participation in the programme have been observed.

A distinctive strength of the programme lies in its collaborative design. Delivered jointly by two organisations, it has pooled expertise and resources to create a more impactful learning experience. Such partnerships are increasingly favoured by universities and third-sector organisations (Eddy, 2010; Ankrah & Al-Tabbaa, 2015) and are encouraged by policymakers for their potential to increase innovation and cost-effectiveness (OfS, 2023). Recent analysis confirms that collaborative outreach can extend reach, reduce duplication, engage harder-to-reach groups, and improve efficiency (CFE Research, 2023). While challenges exist in cross-organisational delivery, the evidence suggests that benefits outweigh disadvantages, particularly when shared goals are clearly defined (Eddy, 2010; Bowers, 2017).

The positive outcomes appear closely linked to the programme's progressive, sustained structure. By engaging participants at multiple points of contact over time, the Rise High programme enabled repeated reinforcement of knowledge and skills, producing more durable effects. This supports growing evidence that sustained, multi-intervention outreach generates stronger impacts on progression outcomes than one-off activities (Bainham, 2019; TASO, 2021; Patel & Bowes, 2021; Harding & Bowes, 2022; Williams et al., 2024). Participants' increased confidence in articulating their ambitions echoes McGuigan et al.'s (2016) finding that high-quality information can positively influence career intentions (McGuigan et al., 2016).

The findings also highlight that, despite concerns from organisations such as the Aldridge Foundation (2023) and the Commission for Rural Communities (2012) regarding limited access to local work experience and labour market opportunities, impactful and relevant careers interventions can be designed for rural contexts. The Rise High programme demonstrates

that tailored, place-based activities can broaden horizons without requiring young people to disengage from their rural identities, offering a practical framework for future interventions.

With regard to positionality, the author developed the initial programme structure but did not contribute to content development or delivery, having stepped back from operational involvement to maintain analytical distance. Contact with participants was therefore limited to a small number of formal touchpoints, including the programme launch, focus group and celebration events. While this does not remove the interpretive nature of the analysis, it reduced the risk of conflating delivery and evaluation perspectives. The analysis prioritised participant voice, triangulated findings across data sources, and retained mixed or inconclusive outcomes where programme aims were not fully met, supporting the credibility of the findings.

Limitations

This case study is not without limitations. First, its short timeframe restricts assessment of long-term impact. Data was collected up to six months post-programme, but the full value may only be realised at key educational transitions, such as GCSEs or post-16 progression (Careers & Enterprise Company, 2023; TASO, 2021; Robinson & Salvestrini, 2020). Longitudinal research is needed to establish whether early gains in skills and confidence translate into sustained outcomes.

Second, the study raised further questions, particularly regarding declining motivation in school. This is unlikely to be attributable solely to the programme and may instead reflect the 'Year 8 dip' in engagement commonly observed during early adolescence (Bromley, 2016; Martin et al., 2024, Jerrim, 2025). However, time constraints limited deeper exploration of this phenomenon.

Finally, the small scale of the study constrains its wider applicability. With only 28 respondents, findings are not statistically significant and should be interpreted with caution. Nonetheless, the local impact is potentially substantial, particularly in shaping the continuation and refinement of the programme for future learners from disadvantaged rural communities.

Conclusion and recommendations

This article has presented an exploratory case study of the Rise High programme, a progressive, sustained outreach initiative delivered to 28 under-represented secondary-aged pupils from small but significantly disadvantaged rural and semi-rural areas of Derbyshire. By situating the programme within the wider context of rurality, hidden disadvantage, and place-based inequality, the study highlights the importance of targeted interventions in areas often overlooked by conventional outreach criteria.

The emerging findings indicate the programme has been successful in meeting its key aims of increased knowledge and understanding of career progression, improved skills acquisition, and sustained positive impact. It is clear participants feel more confident about their future career choices as a result of being involved in the programme and that these positive impacts persist beyond the life of the programme.

The case study also highlights the value of collaborative, place-based delivery. The partnership between the WA and LE teams brought together complementary expertise,

enabling the programme to offer both higher education insight and employer-linked learning. This approach appears well-suited to addressing complex, localised barriers to progression within rural and semi-rural locations.

As a small-scale, context-specific study, these findings, whilst non-generalisable, do offer insights relevant to practitioners designing outreach for under-represented groups in rural and semi-rural contexts. The benefits of long-term, progressive, multi-intervention programmes appear to outweigh the challenges, provided delivery teams remain responsive to local context and evolving participant needs.

To strengthen both the programme and the evidence base, the following areas for further study are proposed:

- mapping the long-term outcomes of participants beyond compulsory schooling;
- conducting comparator studies with matched cohorts from similar localities;
- exploring the most effective ways to sustain post-programme motivation and aspiration; and
- examining how government policy and funding mechanisms influence provision for rural communities.

For the programme itself there are also recommendations to further increase positive outcomes for participants, including reviewing and reflecting on the content relating to university aspirations and participant motivation in their current studies to better understand why the programme may not be meeting these intended aims as effectively as other elements.

With thoughtful refinement the Rise High programme offers a promising model for collaborative, place-based careers-focused outreach that builds confidence, skills, and knowledge among young people in rural and semi-rural communities.



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