**Specific Evaluation Showcase – Higher Horizons+**

During the summer of 2017, EMWPREP carried out an evaluation of Higher Horizons+ two residential events 'UNiFY'. The residential days were based on showing what life is like for a student in Higher Education (HE) and providing guidance and advice about the process of getting onto a higher education course. The days included lectures, seminars, campus tours, inspirational talks, as well as time for reflection. Attendees were also given a programme of social activities/independent time, mainly taking place during the evenings.

The 3 key aims of the two residential days were:

1. To help learners make informed decisions regarding post-18 options.
2. To develop learners' understanding of Higher Education and student life.
3. To encourage learners' development of soft skills, primarily team-building and communication.

As part of the evaluation participants were given questionnaires to complete immediately pre-residential, immediately post residential and 8 weeks post residential (‘follow up’). The questionnaires contained a combination of free text, likert scales and single choice questions.

**Results**

**Return Rates**

118 questionnaires were completed at the pre-residential stage, 107 at the post-residential stage and 48 during the follow up collection period (8-12 weeks after the end of the residential).

**Free Text Questions**

***Post***

In the post-residential questionnaire (n=108) the participants were asked what skills they felt they had learnt during the residential. 44 of the responses mentioned the words ‘team’ or teamwork’:

*“How to work as a team”*

The words ‘communication’ or ‘communicate’ were mentioned 29 times:

*“I learned how to communicate better and because of that I made new friends”*

*“Communication (how to start a conversation to people you don't know)”*

The next most popular topics related to either meeting new people (14 mentions) or experience/gaining an understanding of university life (11 mentions):

*“Meeting new people and getting to live a student life for a couple of days”*

4 of the respondents in this section questioned how authentic the university experience they had been provided was:

*“It is just like another school trip and be guided by teachers”*

*“How realistic this experience has been”*

The next most popular topics brought up in response to this question related to participants feeling that they were not given enough freedom/time to be independent or that the courses covered during the days were not varied enough:

*“Students not given enough freedom to know what student life is really like We were supervised more than we would have been on a high school trips”*

*“Maybe include more things about other courses”*

***Follow up***

In the follow up questionnaire (n=48) the participants were once again asked about the skills that they learnt at the residential. Like the post questionnaire responses, the most popular skills given were ‘team work’ / ‘team building’ (17 mentions) and ‘communication’ (7 mentions). Participants were then asked to give examples of where they had applied these skills that they had learnt since finishing the residential:

*“In group tasks at school, I have used teamwork to complete tasks to a high standard”*

*“I have openly joined in debates and given my views and opinions on different subjects”*

*“When taking part in activities at school (e.g. open evening) and in my voluntary work - I have more confidence.”*

The participants were again asked what they found the most valuable parts of the residential. Like the post questionnaire responses, most of the responses revolved around making new friends and being able to experience aspects of university life:

*“I made new friends and understand the full immersive experience of university”*

*“Getting to know new people and learning lots of new things about university life.”*

Finally, when asked about whether they still have any concerns for the future 26 respondents either left the answer blank or responded that they didn’t. Of those that still had a concern, these were primarily either around either doing well at school or what university/course to choose:

*“not getting the grade to get to university”*

*“I’m not sure what unis to apply to.”*

**Single Choice Questions**

There were not any substantial changes in the plans of the participants for once they finished their final year of college, those who expected to go to University and those who felt they had the academic ability to achieve at University between the pre and follow up questionnaires. Around three quarters of respondents indicated that they wanted to continue in full time education, 88.8% of the participants who completed the post-residential questionnaire either agreed or strongly agreed that they enjoyed their time at the residential.

The proportion of participants answering ‘Yes’ to whether they knew enough about Higher Education to make a decision on whether to go significantly increased by 22.5% from the pre to post questionnaires (‘Yes’ responses: Pre = 62.4%, Post = 84.9%). The proportion then remained steady when the follow up questionnaires were completed (‘Yes’ responses: follow up = 87.5%).

**Statistical Testing**

A total of 42 of the 113 participants who attended the residential returned a questionnaire at all 3 time points, resulting in a return rate of 37.1 % for statistical testing.

Significant increases (between pre scores to post and follow up scores) were seen in questions relating to:

* How to apply to University
* The costs of going to University & the support available
* The difference between course options
* The difference between Universities
* What living in student accommodation is like
* What student life is like
* Which is the best university for your subject of interest
* How to find out about post-18 options
* Future career options and choices open to you

**Discussion**

The results of this evaluation have suggested that the main aims of the residential were met. However, the questionnaire analysis identified some key areas for improvement for any future residentials.

**Areas for development**

With regards to the evaluation, the results of the statistical analysis is only representative of around half of the participants. This is mainly due to the lower numbers of questionnaires returned at the follow up stage (48) in comparison to the pre and post stages (118 and 113 respectively).

Some of the likert scales used did not allow for a neutral response. For example, the options available for the data in Figures 11 to 25 were ‘nothing’ ‘a little’ ‘quite a lot’ and ‘a lot’. Generally these scales should be 5 to 9 items with the opportunity for a neutral response at the centre of the scale. Changing the wording of the question ‘How much do you know about the following?’ to a statement such as ‘How much do you agree with the following statements’ would allow the switch to a list of answers such as ‘strongly disagree’, ‘disagree’, ‘neither agree nor disagree’, ‘agree’ and ‘strongly agree’ which would be more statistically robust.

Focus groups would have proven useful for providing the context behind certain quantitative results. These were planned to run as part of the evaluation. However, the response from the participants was not sufficient for these to be conducted. For future years the planning and recruitment for them may need to begin earlier.