



Ditch the Doubt: Headline Project Evaluation Report 2022/23

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Introduction

The Higher Education Progression Partnership South Yorkshire (HeppSY) works with cohorts of students who face additional barriers to progression to higher education (HE), beyond those of other students of the same age. We work with certain students from a UCP postcodes, to equip them with the knowledge required to make an informed choice about HE. Previous research and evaluation revealed that there are certain groups within those UCP postcodes that face even more barriers despite already being at a disadvantage, including White working-class males, females and black students.

Often these groups face increased barriers or imagined barriers, due to a lack of knowledge of pathways, negative perceptions of HE in terms of 'perceived fit', a sense of belonging and parental influence. This can lead to a lack of confidence and the emergence of imposter syndrome and/or myths surrounding the process.

Ditch the Doubt was developed for UCP students who face additional barriers beyond those of their peers and ran across 7 centres between March 2022 and June 2022. A total of 93 students participated. Without a more intensive and bespoke intervention between March and June 2022, the UCP students who participated in this project were expected not to have the confidence to overcome the barriers, and not to access and make the best use of other resources and opportunities open to them.

The topics covered in the Ditch the Doubt strands were:

- Is it for me?
- How do I get there (Pathways)?
- Support available at HE?
- Is it worth it? (Where might it lead)?

The bespoke programmes selected by the 7 centres included SHE Can, aimed at high achieving working class girls who need to 'find their voice'; HE Can for White working-class boys; Amplify for BAME students and Just tHE Job, aimed at those interested in routes into HE through Higher and Degree Apprenticeships.

Methodology

To ensure a successful evaluation, a mixed approach was developed, incorporating a triangulation design with both qualitative and quantitative elements. Such an approach allowed the evaluators to identify the individual's cognitive change before and after the project and to effectively locate the association between the cognitive change and the specific interventions of the project.

A pre-survey consisting of Likert scales, sourced from relevant validated surveys and aligned with the CFE Learner Survey, were issued with the programme welcome packs to determine students' HE knowledge, career knowledge, perception of their future selves, academic confidence level, and their likelihood of applying for HE at age 18/19. The pre-survey was embedded in the Welcome Pack, which was distributed directly to students.

Students were asked to complete a rating scale task, which was embedded within the learning objectives of the coaching workshop. On a scale of 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest), students indicated the degree to which they agreed with a series of statements at the beginning and end of the session. Both sets of scales were presented on separate sheets of paper to limit the influence of their initial scores on those given after completing the session.

Following completion of the programme, the students were asked to complete a post-survey. The post-survey consisted of the same questions included in the pre-survey, for purposes of comparison, as well as three additional qualitative questions to capture feedback and encourage self-reflection.

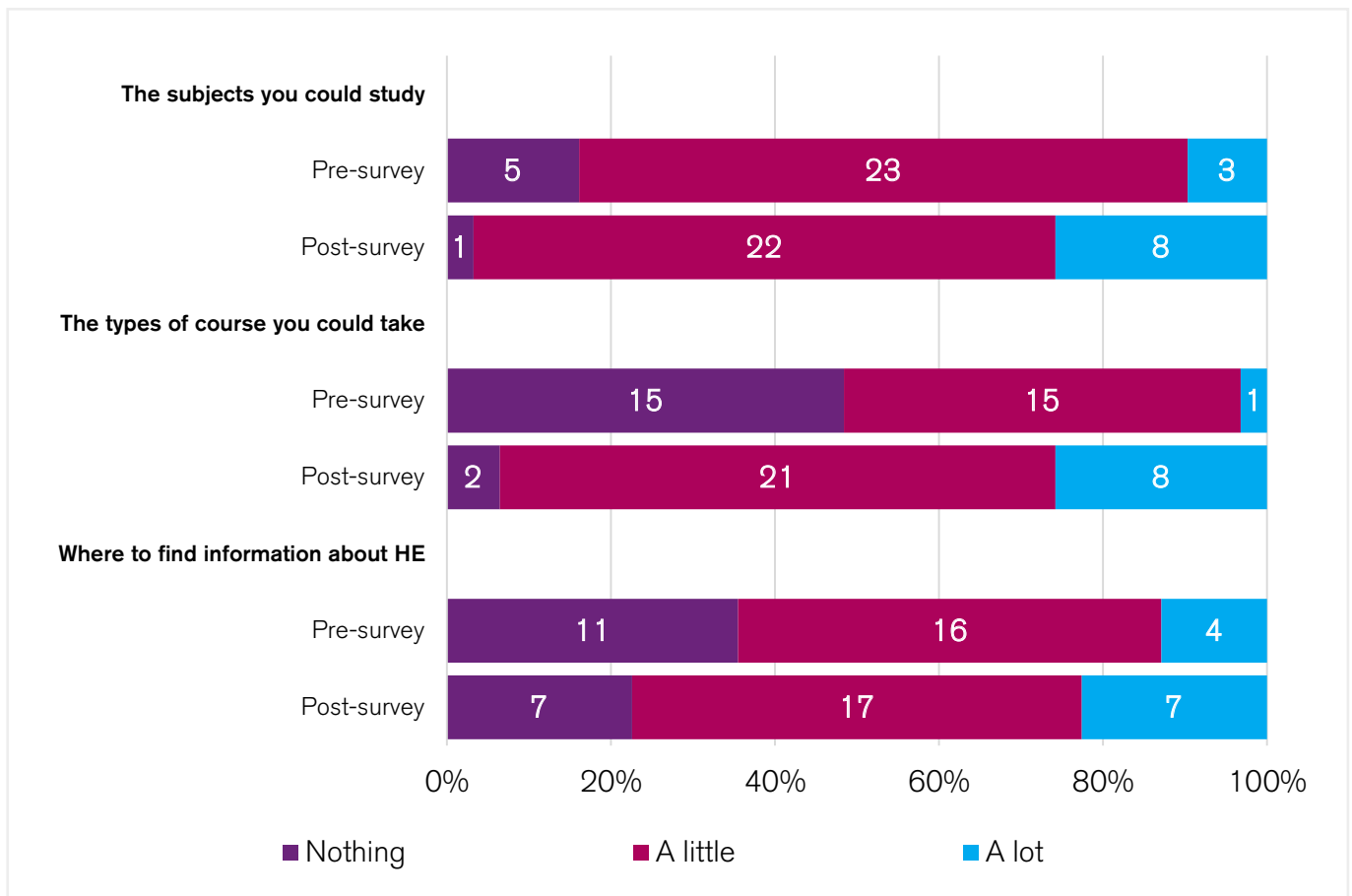
Three focus groups were completed prior to the end of the 2021/2022 academic year to contextualise quantitative findings and to collect direct student feedback, which will factor into the planning of the 2022/2023 Headline Project, serving as an element of co-creation.

Findings

Higher Education Knowledge

Prior to engaging with Ditch the Doubt, more than 50% of survey respondents indicated that they knew 'nothing' about the financial support available or how much HE would cost. After Ditch the Doubt, 58% of respondents stated they knew 'a little bit' or 'a lot' about the cost of HE and the support they could access.

Figure 1. How much do you know about higher education?

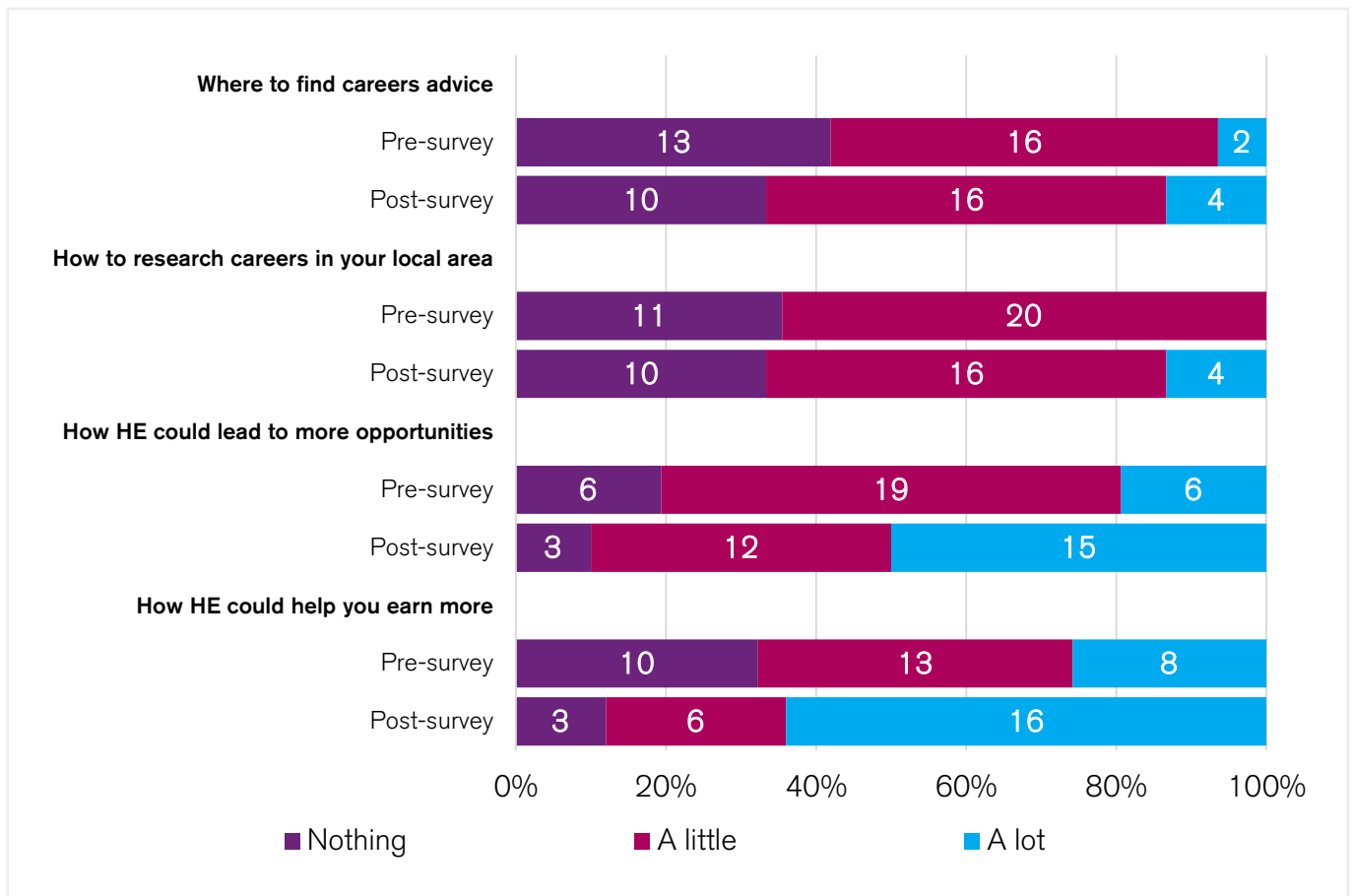


Although confident in their knowledge of subjects available to study at HE, 48% of students stated they knew 'nothing' of the types of qualifications available to them (such as foundation degrees or degree apprenticeships). Following the programme, 94% percent of students indicated they knew 'a little' or 'a lot' about the variety of options available to them. Overall, there was an increase in knowledge across all statements presented in Q2: 'How much do you know about higher education?'

Career Knowledge

Following Ditch the Doubt, students had a much greater understanding of how going to HE could impact their future earnings and lead to more opportunities. Students also had a greater understanding of how to research careers in their local area and where to find advice. When presented with the statement 'I am able to make contact by myself with universities or employer' after completing Ditch the Doubt, there was an 180% increase in the number of students agreeing and an 800% increase in those selecting 'strongly agree.'

Figure 2. How much do you know about the following topics?



The focus groups after the programme also show that several students appeared to have relatively clear ideas of what they would like to do once they had finished school and those who did not yet know felt that they had time to learn and find a path for themselves. Students were able to identify paths into their desired careers and recognise how apprenticeships and degree apprenticeships could help them gain career experience.

“I’m thinking about getting a degree apprenticeship after college, like getting a job I really want to do but also want to get a degree at the same time.”

“I think I would do a degree apprenticeship just so I actually get experience in whatever I’m planning on doing at the time.”

Seeing Your Future Self

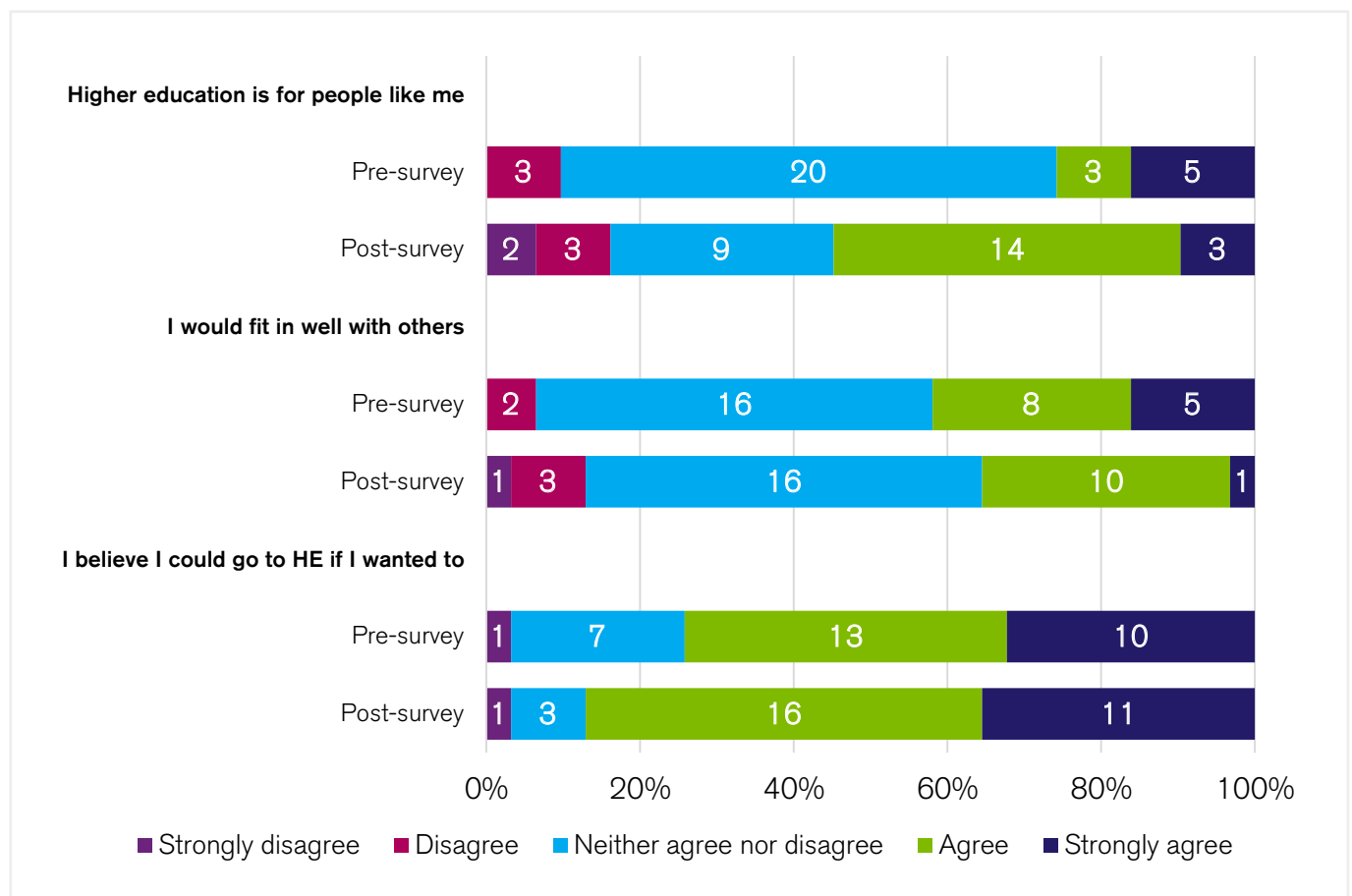
The session-embedded evaluation scales reveal that the coaching workshop had a significant impact on students’ perception of their future selves. After taking part in the workshop, students indicated a 24% increase in their confidence to communicate strengths and abilities to others, a 26% increase in their feelings of confidence in their ability to achieve things they set their mind to, a 21% increase in feeling they could trust their own judgement and a 25% increase in positive feelings about their futures.

Table 1 Coaching Workshop pre- and post- rating scales. Average score based on responses from 54 students.

Statement	Pre-Session (Av.)	Post-Session (Av.)
I can communicate my strengths and abilities to others	5.50	6.83
I feel confident in my abilities to achieve things I set my mind to	6.11	7.70
I trust my judgement	6.17	7.48
I feel optimistic about the future	6.40	8.00
I have goals and plans for the future	7.93	8.76
	P(T<=t) two-tail	0.000667211

Students reported a greater understanding of what student life might be like, with a 27% increase in the number of ‘a little’ and ‘a lot’ responses when asked to quantify how much they knew. When asked to rate the degree to which they agreed with a series of statements, there was an increase in the number of students agreeing that they could go to HE if they wanted to, that they would fit in when they got there and that HE was for people like them.

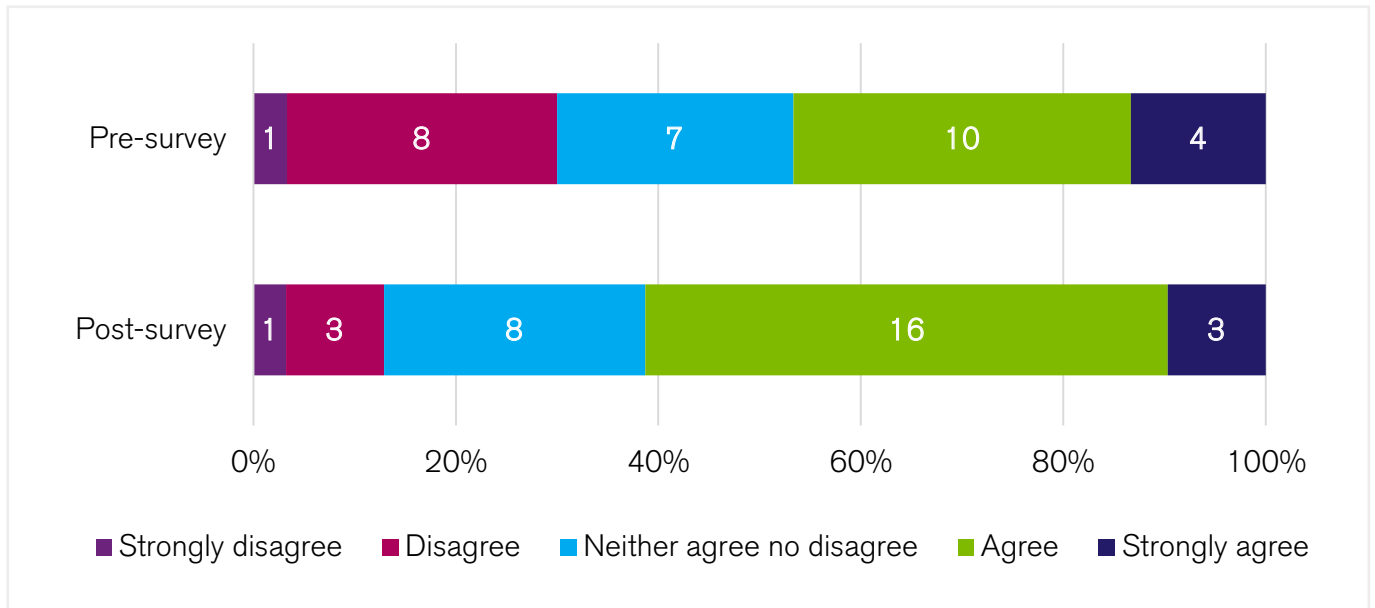
Figure 3. How much do you agree with the following statements about higher education?



Academic Confidence

The coaching element of the programme was found to have a significant impact on student confidence. The pre- and post- rating scales indicated an average increase of 24% in their confidence in communicating their strengths and abilities to others and a 26% increase in their feelings of confidence in their ability to achieve things they set their mind to. This was further reflected in their responses to a statement given in question 4 of the survey about HE, ‘I am confident I could succeed’.

Figure 4. I am confident I could succeed (at HE).



A student chose to highlight their confidence in their post-survey response, stating “[Ditch the Doubt] has made me more confident in what I can do to get into higher education.”

Likelihood to Apply for Higher Education at Age 18/19

Students indicated that they felt they would belong in HE and could handle the responsibility at a higher frequency after completing the Ditch the Doubt programme. This was reflected in the qualitative section of the post-survey, where some students explicitly stated that the programme changed their plans regarding HE when asked ‘Has taking part in Ditch the Doubt changed how you feel about yourself? If so, how?’

“Maybe as it has inspired me to possibly go to higher education.”

“Just made me want to go to higher education.”

Focus Groups

Focus groups were attended by students who had completed SHE Can and Just tHE Job across 3 of the 7 centres. Students reflected on the coping mechanisms and self-regulation techniques shared with them throughout the programme, with several using the '5, 4, 3, 2, 1' method to reduce anxiety and ground themselves when nervous.

"She taught us as well how we can stay still [...] we're not showing that we're scared, that we're trying our best to be more confident."

"I can speak more properly without having problems or fiddling around."

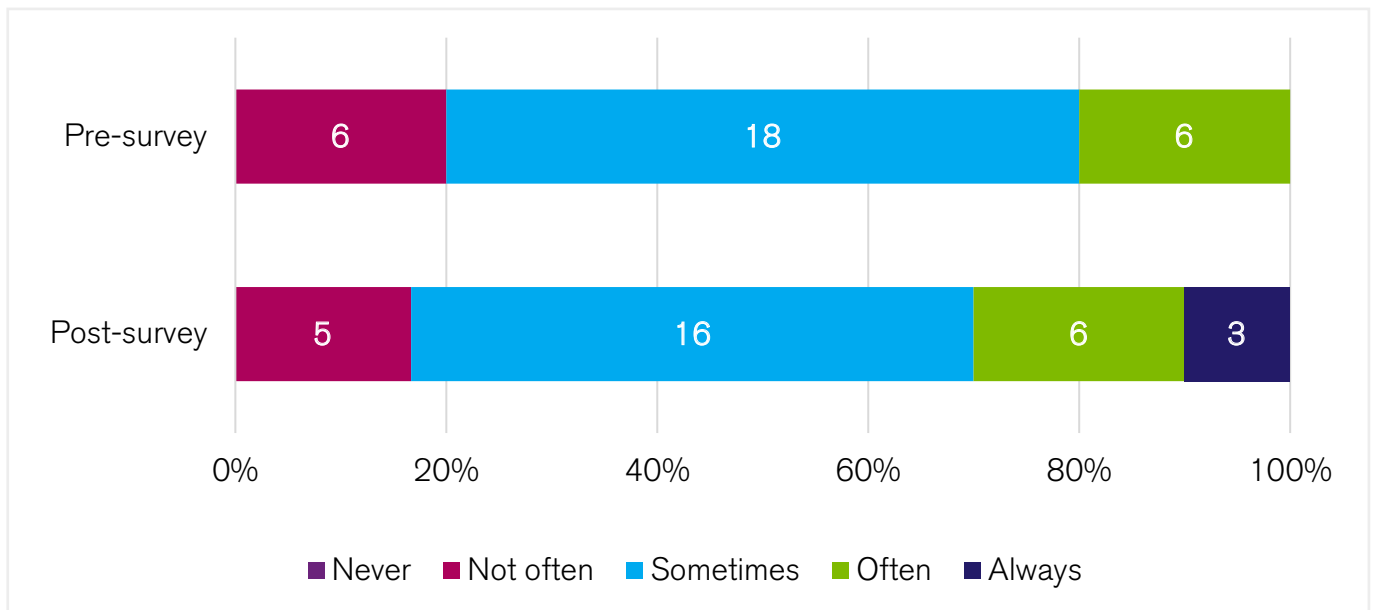
While the Talk the Talk session proved incredibly popular with students, the focus groups yielded important insight into what did not work well in the session. Feedback from a SHECan group who shared the session with boys highlighted the importance of single-sex spaces within the programme. The SHE Can strand aimed to help academically capable girls 'find their voice.' It became apparent that the inclusion of boys in the session made it difficult for some to speak confidently in front of others. Female students who had taken part in the communication session without boys accompanying them reported that they had since found it easier to speak in front of a group.

"[The deliverer] was like almost confronting us and praising the boys and I think that's what raised their confidence and made us feel like not so confident."

While the communication workshop was the most prominent topic in the focus groups, students also reflected on topics that they would like to be covered in greater detail, should Ditch the Doubt run again. These topics were predominantly life skills and included finances, such as taxes and how to handle money as an adult. While the programme covers student finances and the support available, there appeared to be level of apprehension when considering how they would manage their money relating to bills and essentials. Students who took part in Just tHE Job felt that they would also benefit from practice job interviews and more detail on degree apprenticeships.

The students' attitudes towards trusting their judgment varied within the group, depending on which setting they were considering. For example, many students would trust themselves more when their decisions would only impact themselves, whereas would be slower to trust themselves when their decisions effected their peers. Despite this distinction, students demonstrated an increased sense of trust in themselves when amongst peers and an overall increase in trusting their judgement (table 1).

Figure 5. I trust my judgement when amongst peers.



Students also revealed that attending the celebration event was difficult for some. Reasons for not attending were largely linked to the timing of the event. Students would have to travel home (either on foot, or by bus), before waiting for their parents to return from work and travelling to the city centre. Some students were unaware that the celebration event was taking place, as the schools did not give students enough notice.

Conclusion

The Headline Project has had a clear impact on the students who participated. Students are equipped with greater knowledge of pathways, which will support them in making an informed choice about HE. Students have an increased understanding of what student life might be like, a greater sense of perceived fit within HE.

An increase in personal and academic confidence also emerged through survey and focus group data, as well as via the embedded coaching rating scales. The rating scales indicated that the coaching is a key component of Ditch the Doubt highlighting its positive impact on the students' confidence, trust in their own judgement and perception of their future. Confidence was further impacted by the Talk the Talk element of the programme, which was frequently referenced in the focus groups as a source of tactics used by students to reduce nervousness and anxiety prior to giving presentations. However, it is key to ensure the Talk the Talk session is a single-sex space.

Recommendations

- Identify centres and year groups that would benefit from particular strands of the Ditch the Doubt project and adopt a targeted approach to the 2022/2023 Headline Project offer. This could encourage higher engagement with HE Can and Amplify, which were not delivered in 2021/2022.
- Ensure the communication skills workshops delivered to students taking part in HE Can and SHE Can are maintained as single-sex spaces to give female students a safe space to develop confidence and 'find their voice'.
- Focus group data indicated that some students found it difficult to attend the celebration event. Reviewing the timing of the celebration event and supporting schools in circulating clear and early updates could increase attendance.



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