‘Preliminary Findings of a Four Year Intervention Programme for Higher Ability Students’

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Abstract
The Brunel Urban Scholars programme was set up against plethora of research suggesting that Widening Participation initiatives had done little to improve the uptake of university education by those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. The Brunel Urban Scholars programme is a 4 year intervention programme aimed at supporting higher ability students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, aged 12-16. The programme collects a wide variety of both quantitative and qualitative data, and using a Design Research Methodology, the programme is rigorously monitored. The paper discusses the emerging findings after 2 years. It suggests the biggest change is to scholars’ confidence; a number of components of the programme are cited which may have encouraged this. Changes in aspirations seemed slower to achieve. This supports findings from pilot programmes; justifying and calling for longer intervention programmes.

Introduction and National Context for Study
This paper presents the emerging findings from the first two years of a four year intervention programme delivered to 105 teenagers (12-16 years of age), drawn from inner-London state schools operating within areas of relative deprivation (DfCLG 2007). The context is located within two major initiatives in England and Wales – raising achievement of gifted and talented children in disadvantaged areas (DfES, 1999) and the Widening Participation policy of the Labour government in England and Wales (Blunkett, 2000). The aims of the two initiatives interact in that both are designed to raise achievement and aspirations of gifted or high potential students in State Schools. Despite ten years of sustained effort by universities and £3 billion in funding to attract students from disadvantaged backgrounds and £392 million spent on Widening Participation initiatives, little has changed: only 10% of those students from the poorest fifth of families have got a degree by the time they are 23, compared with 44% of students from the richest fifth (Smith, 2008).

The issue of underachievement and lack of aspirations amongst urban students has been highlighted in the last decade by various agencies in the UK (Office for Standards in Education, 2001). A recent article in The Guardian Newspaper pointed out that bright but disadvantaged children are most likely to drop out of education and underachieve:
Education records of every child who started secondary school in 1997…..show there are 60,000 who scored in the top 20% in tests at 11, 14 or 16 but still dropped out of education. The lost pupils are significantly more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds. (Curtis, 2008)

Additionally, it was found that poor young people are only half as likely as others to be in the government’s Gifted and Talented programme: ‘only 7% of Gifted and Talented pupils receive Free School Meals compared with 14% nationally.’ (Lisbett, 2008)

Researchers (Casey and Koshy, 2001) who have worked with high potential students in inner-cities for a number of years have shown that there is submerged talent in inner-city schools in the UK, and that this talent may be submerged but not eradicated by disadvantage.

**Purpose of the study and the research question**

The interacting objectives of the study were to:

- Design and evaluate a multi-facetted 4-year intervention programme to raise students’ academic achievement and aspirations.
- Consider issues relating to participation of these students in University education.
- Explore students’ perception of self and their life world.
- Offer a model for wider use, which could be replicated by practitioners in different settings and impact on policy and practice.

The research question is: *How effective is the intervention programme in encouraging gifted and talented students from inner cities?* The effectiveness is being assessed by taking into account the on-going gathering of data from programme participants and other key players – programme tutors, mentors, parents, school and district co-ordinators.

**Background and context of the study**

In recent years, the UK government has made generous funding and support available to schools to make adequate provision for gifted and talented pupils in inner
city areas and also to encourage Widening Participation of students from lower-income families in Higher Education. In order to achieve this, the Labour government has launched several new initiatives in the past 9 years. For example, the Excellence in Cities (DfES, 1999), Excellence Challenge (DfES, 1999) and Aim Higher (HEFCE, 2004) programmes aimed at enhancing the achievement and attitudes of children in inner-city, state-funded schools.

In policy terms, the selection of gifted and talented pupils in the inner-city areas and encouraging the Widening Participation of students from poorer areas to go to University can be described as being at the heart of Tony Blair’s vision of a meritocratic society which concentrates on the investment in cognitive ability. It validates the idea of ‘equality of opportunity’ and the distribution of awards according to ‘merit’.

However, there were mixed reactions from the school and district co-ordinators to the efforts of the government to take account of gifted and talented children on the agenda for inclusion. Some saw the policy as creditable as it would force some teachers to change their perspective, that there are no gifted students in the inner-cities and teachers would be forced to look for potential, not just identify the confident and the articulate or the teacher pleasers for the gifted cohort. On the other hand, some teachers were struggling to align their educational philosophy with a selection process that they felt offered particular children extra resources: ‘I think it is elitist in that perceptions are that you are targeting already privileged children from affluent backgrounds and giving more to those who already have a lot’ (Radnor et al 2007).

Nationally, the prospect of Widening Participation of students from lower-income families in Universities was not greeted with much optimism either, as Thomson and Tysome (2002:3) put it:

‘When the current policy objective of 50% participation target is reached, young people from the poorest backgrounds will still be under-represented.’

All the above challenges were in the background when we designed the study.

**Literature review and theoretical framework**

Van Tassell-Baska (1998) maintains that one of the most neglected groups amongst gifted students is the bright student from a disadvantaged background and that the
underrepresentation of students from minority ethnic groups and lower social classes in enrichment programmes needs to be addressed.

In view of the evidence base, the need for considering practices designed to improve academic opportunities of promising learners from lower income families is highlighted by Robinson et al (2007). The authors list two possible barriers preventing these students from realising their potential: first, identification practices may not work in their favour and secondly, assumptions are made by educators, parents and policy makers about their potential for academic progress. The authors emphasise the need for programmes and services that are of sufficient intensity and duration and which take into account family circumstances in order to increase achievement and ultimately leverage these learners into a successful learning trajectory. The reassuring message from Robinson et al is that, although these students confront grave challenges, they also have the resilience and the ability to be successful.

As the students for our intervention programme were to be recruited from the gifted and talented cohorts from inner-city schools as part of the Excellence in Cities initiative of the British government (DfES, 1999), the issues relating to identification had to be addressed. The complexities of identifying higher-ability students from inner-city areas where true potential was often masked, due to external influences, are well known from previous studies in England and Wales (Casey and Koshy, 2001; 2005). These studies showed that test results were not a true indicator of the potential of students from inner-city schools. Diane Montgommery, Emeritus Professor and Patron of NACE echoed these findings in a recent newspaper article

‘The danger is that school don’t use enough of the different strategies that there are to spot bright children. Just using an IQ test or SATS test won’t do. Even using both together will miss the most gifted’ (Lisbett, 2008)’

Renzulli’s (1986) Three-Ring model which emphasizes other indicators such as creativity and task commitment as just as important as the level of ability, Gardner’s (1983) theory of Multiple Intelligences which provides a framework of identifying diverse talents and Sternberg’s (2000) view of giftedness as developing expertise were adopted for identifying the gifted and talented students who were to be selected for the intervention programme. Theoretical support for the design of the programme
for the individual was provided by Vygotsky’s (1978) Zone of Proximal Development and Maslow’s (1970) notion of Self-Actualization.

Six key elements were highlighted in the Selection Criteria document given to LEA and School Coordinators to help them identify students for the current Urban Scholars Cohort and overcome barriers to identification of ‘submerged talent’:

- At least above average academic ability as indicated by classroom responses, national tests or non-verbal reasoning tests as quantitative evidence
- Teacher observation of fast acquisition of new material and capability to think deeply
- A potential to eventually embark on university studies. This is particularly important in the case of parents not having had opportunities for higher education or for a student from a relatively disadvantaged background for any reason
- Pupils for whom it is felt that schoolwork is not sufficiently challenging or providing opportunities for enrichment. This may, for some pupils, lead to some disenchantment with school
- An entitlement to free school meals
- A flair for one or more dispositions; analytical thinking and creative and imaginative responses. A street-wise maturity, which may not necessarily manifest in academic performance, but may be strengthened by being supported by the programme.

Although Selection Criteria was not a comprehensive document, in interviews with LEA and School coordinators, staff have commented that the guidance it provided was useful, particularly the final point, as a method of identification that could be shared with other staff who were helping to identify possible candidates for the programme and those who might have been missed off Gifted and Talented registers because other issues masked potential.

In designing an intervention programme, the research team did not underestimate the challenge of influencing young people’s identities as learners. Many of the students in disadvantaged areas hold strong views about Higher Education being ‘not
their place’ (Ball and Vincent, 1998) and have developed negative images of studying (Archer, 2000) and consequently were not achieving their potential.

Although the complexities of Widening Participation are challenging to interpret, we hoped that the findings from our study would provide some useful indicators for two reasons. First, it is one of the very few intervention programmes in the UK which spans a period of 4 years, and secondly, the study targets students at an earlier age than most of the other UK interventions, when malleability may be greater. Our intention was that the issues highlighted during the 4 years – both in terms of programme details and student trajectories - could be disseminated to both policy makers and practitioners.

**Methodology and Data Sources**
The programme has five main aims all of which are considered when designing each session for the programme. These aims and their definitions are listed below:

- **A1: Understanding of self and life world**: a greater understanding of personality and emotions, understanding of own ability and capacity to learn, importance and influence of friends and family, confidence with self and life;
- **A2: Engagement with learning**: increasing interest and liking for school, increased interest in academic subjects, the adoption of new skills and the ability to utilise them effectively, increased interest and enjoyment of the Urban Scholars programme;
- **A3: Increased aspirations**: a move towards more professional, focused and realistic career goals, move towards wanting a good life for themselves;
- **A4: Increased Higher Education (HE) orientation**: increased desire to attend education post-A-level, or increasing realisation that it is a viable option;
- **A5: Increased academic achievement**: examination grades to exceed predicted grades.

The fulfilment of these aims and the effectiveness of the programme are continually evaluated through qualitative and quantitative techniques, using a Design Research methodology (Gorard et al, 2004). It enables data to be collected before, during and after the intervention, to be used in the refinement of theories and the intervention programme design modification (Burkhart and Schoenfeld, 2003). This modification
requires regular data collection and swift analysis. Consequently, the programme collects a wide variety of data which are detailed below:

**Quantitative**

- Key Stage 2 results and predicted Key Stage 3 results. At the time of writing, we were waiting for the release of Key Stage 3 results, relating to Aim 5, so increased academic achievement will not be considered in this paper;
- Socio-economic information about scholars such as those receiving free school meals. Parents’ educational history, as well as their current occupation is also known;
- Attendance at school and on the programme;
- Statistics about the schools the scholars attend, for example, the percentage of students gaining the benchmark of 5 A*-C GCSE grades.

**Qualitative**

- A sample of around 24 semi-structured interviews with scholars. This sample was randomly stratified, with every fifth scholar being selected from an alphabetised borough by borough list. A full list of questions can be found in Appendix 1A;
- Skills and attitudes trajectories of a sample of the scholars;
- Focal group; this is a self-nominated group who provides us with feedback immediately after sessions, so that changes can be made in response to the scholars' opinions. The three questions asked monthly of the focal group can be found in Appendix 1B.

**Quantitative and Qualitative**

- Open-ended questionnaires completed by scholars at the start and end of each academic year; 4 have thus far been completed by the current scholars. These questionnaires ask the scholars about five main areas: their thoughts about school, their spare time, their thoughts about the Urban Scholars programme, their thoughts about 'Gifted and Talented' and the future. A full list of questions can be found in Appendix 1C.
- Open-ended questionnaires completed by the scholars’ parents. These are completed annually on our dedicated parents’ days. The questionnaires ask about the same areas to those completed by scholars, so that they can be cross-referenced.
The programme has also gathered data on another cohort of students from the same Local Authorities and from similar backgrounds. This group will start the programme in October 2008, and so will act as a comparison for the influence of the programme on our current scholars’ Higher Education orientation.

**Data Analysis**

This paper presents the interim findings from two years of a four year intervention programme. It discusses three main types of data based on the aims of the programme: questionnaires completed by scholars, interviews with scholars, and focal group responses.

Due to the design and nature of the questionnaire, interviews and focal group, scholars were noted to sometimes stray from the question being asked, or provided responses which were vague or lacking real explanation. This is particularly true of the questionnaires. Consequently, only responses which provide answers directly relating to the aims are included in this paper. The following quotation represents examples of responses from the questionnaires which have been excluded from analysis because of a lack of relevance or clarity.

> “I want to be a woman with a good life” (response to question 6 “what kind of life do you think you will have 10 years now?” start of Year 8 questionnaire)

Figure 1 represents the relationships between the aims of the programme and the individual questions asked on both the questionnaires and interviews. It was felt that responses from the focal group were too broad and varied to map in this way because of the diverse nature of each Saturday session. However, it is clear that each aim has many questions relating to each aim; so this paper merely provides a summary of the most important findings.
It is important when considering the results for the questionnaire to know the total number of scholars who completed each questionnaire. Attendance on the programme over the two years on average has been 81%, with attendance being particularly low in June. This is the month scholars complete their end of year questionnaire, and so in some cases of analysis, the numbers presented may be lower due to lower attendance. The total number of questionnaires completed is noted in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Number of scholars completing each questionnaire

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<tr>
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<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Start of Year 8</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>Start of Year 9</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>End of Year 8</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>End of Year 9</td>
<td>72</td>
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Results

Aim 1: Understanding of self and life world

Over the course of 2 years, we found that scholars’ understanding of the phrase Gifted and Talented has improved, with a higher number of scholars having a ‘good understanding’ and significantly less having a ‘bad understanding’. Understanding of the phrase was based on the government’s definition of Gifted and Talented; good understanding thus covered both dimensions of ‘academic gifts’ and ‘visio-spatial or practical talents’ (DCSF 2008). More information about the classification of these, and later responses, can be found in Appendix 2. Good understanding increased from 9 (out of 85) to 20 (out of 72) scholars over the two year period. Understanding of this phrase is important for scholars as it helps them to understand their talents and how others view them. This is further supported by the decline in the number of scholars stating as a response to Question 4b ‘I don’t know’, which fell from 22 scholars at the start of Year 8 to 14 scholars by the end of Year 9 (out of 85 and 72 respectively). Reasons for this can only be speculated upon at this stage. It may be that the Critical Thinking sessions, and in particular a session which focused on how the current government defines Gifted and Talented, how school cohorts are selected and exploring scholars’ talents may have contributed.

Some responses from Question 5 suggest that the programme helps improve scholars’ confidence, as well as providing them with skills and knowledge. The number of scholars stating increased confidence rose from 15 scholars out of 85 at the start of Year 8, to 26 out of 72 scholars at the end of Year 9. This is supported by comments relating to various questions during interviews with the scholars and focal group responses.
Interviews:

“Personally, it has taught me how to relate to other people more, it helps me focus more, helps me to become like true to myself…I just feel different from that, more confident…it helps me to become more stable, so that I’m more focused on what to do, stuff like not mixing with the wrong crowd, it helps make your self-esteem higher” (Ayomide, Year 8).

“I feel more confident, before I wasn’t very confident working with big groups of people, but now I’m quite confident just to join a big group and meet new people” (Aisha, Year 9).

“I think I’ve matured a bit since then, being like, because you are in a university you feel a bit more grown up, and then because there’s the helpers that go to uni as well and you can talk to them about it, it helps you mature a bit…it’s not just helping me in school, but in life…because we do lots of stuff in a team, I know we learn it in school, but because we do it in a different way from what you do it school, its not the same, because when you are learning as a group, it’s the same as when you go to have a job, you can use the same skills that you’ve learnt there in your job” (Layla, Year 9).

Focal group:

“I didn’t like acting before because I struggled and was shy. When I started at Brunel I had the confidence to talk louder and show what I can do. I am also trying hard to get good levels and Brunel is helping me to achieve that” (Thao, Year 8)

“I think it’s [the programme] also given me a boost of confidence at school and at home and out and about” (Lucy, Year 8)

One of the key elements of the programme was highlighted by some scholars during their interviews; the outside speakers. The following comments from scholars suggest the influence that some of these speakers can have on the scholars, by changing their opinions and/or behaviour;
“The one that we did with Scott, he said that we should try and start doing what we want to be in the future, start preparing for it, so that helped me because I’ve started joining some clubs, and I’ve been doing something in science because I want to be a doctor, so that advice was good” (Jinal, Year 8).

A visiting speaker talking about gang culture and knife crime seemed to have the most influence upon the scholars. This was articulated in both the interviews and the focal group, indicating how influential a talented and experienced speaker can be in altering perceptions and impacting on the issues scholars face in their day to day lives:

*Interviews:*

“He was able to open himself up and tell us, tell us about the mistakes that he’s made in his life, and how to prevent them, like how to not mix with the wrong people” (Aisha, Year 9).

“The talk with the guy that came in about people being stabbed and stuff, I think that changed me a lot, because like, I don’t know, I’ve had lots of experiences with friends and stuff, and stuffs happened, and like I think when I heard him talking, like he’s actually been involved, it felt really weird, and I came back and talked to my friends about it, and I said I thought it was all getting a bit stupid, and its changed me a lot” (Layla, Year 9).

*Focal Group:*

“I have thought more about things that I do and things my friends do due to the lectures. I have also advised some about the dangers of doing some things and the consequences that may happen” (Lucy, Year 9)

“The talk was probably the best thing of whole day. It was honest and changed people’s ideas about guns and knives. It was a great way of getting through to young people. He was like an older version of us and spoke to us on our level…. The talk helped me to explain to friends who are a bit rowdy how one wrong move can lead to bad things” (Ashlee, Year 9)

Regardless of academic ability for most students, in order to be successful in both professional and personal life, having good social and emotional competencies is
important. This has been recognised by the current Labour Government and is being addressed in secondary schools through ‘SEAL’- Social and Emotional Learning (DCFS, 2007).

In order to help achieve Aim 1: understanding of self and life world, Tutor Time has been provided for activities that help the scholars bond and mix with students from other schools and LEAs and develop different aspects of their emotional and social well being. Development of personal skills and understanding of self and emotions has also been encouraged across a range of sessions and subject areas on the programme. These have included sessions on Dweck’s (1999) Theories of Intelligence, thereby encouraging scholars not to see intelligence as a fixed entity and to see failures and mistakes as an opportunity to learn; self awareness taught through English and role play; activities to develop Internal Locus of Control; and team games to improve communication skills. Scholars in the focal group commented on the usefulness of these various sessions:

“I enjoyed the anger management session because now I ignore my classmates when they’re playing up instead of shouting at them to be quiet. The same goes for when I’m at home and my brothers annoy me, I just walk away and go to another room. I would have liked the session to last longer and to have done more role play” (Samuel, Year 9)

“I have used quite a few things from the programme outside of the programme such as the: Fight, Flight, Freeze lesson. By learning about how to look at the situation and calm down it has helped me a lot” (Rebecca, Year 9)

“October was really fun and exciting, we got to try things I wouldn’t normally have tried if I wasn’t at Brunel. Things such as the game where you had to draw out a picture without actually seeing it…. It taught me to listen more to what people are saying and think carefully about what I say instead of just blurt ing it out without giving it a second thought. I talked to new people that I didn’t know and got on really well with them and learned different things about them and their lives” (Michelle, Year 9).

“I have used Critical Thinking and Self Awareness (English) parts outside the programme. The self awareness has helped me when I feel stressed and I
now keep a diary/journal and write down all my negative thoughts” (Sophie, Year 9).

**Aim 2: Engagement with learning**

Scholars, on the whole, suggested both things they liked and disliked about school. Responses for disliking school tended to be concerned with things like the building and lunch and so did not provide great insight into the scholars’ engagement with learning. Table 2 below shows responses relating to engagement with learning. The increase in scholars stating ‘friends and subjects’ as a reason for liking school relates to both Aim 1 and Aim 2. Scholars are enjoying school more because of their liking for subjects, as well as the relationships they are developing with other students. This is further reinforced by the addition of ‘friends, subjects and learning’ as a reason at the end of Year 9.

**Table 2: Reasons provided for liking school**

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<th>Start of Year 8</th>
<th>End of Year 8</th>
<th>Start of Year 9</th>
<th>End of Year 9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Friends, subject and learning</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends AND subject</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>97</td>
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There is evidence from Question 5 that suggests scholars’ engagement with their learning has increased. 8 scholars (out of 97) provided the new option of ‘gain skills’ at the start of Year 9. At the end of Year 9 another new response of ‘gain skills and increase confidence’ was seen, which raised the total number to 10 (out of 72) at the end of Year 9. The addition of these new responses suggests scholars are showing greater appreciation for the opportunities the programme provides, and recognise that the programme provides them with a greater level of expertise in various areas.
Responses to Question 2, which was directed to the focal group alone, also indicate the scholars recognise they are gaining and applying skills learnt on the programme:

“I have used some Critical Thinking skills in my life outside the Urban Scholars, it has helped me to think outside the box and all the other possibilities rather than the obvious” (Megan, Year 9).

“I am trying to use Critical Thinking in all aspects of my education. In subjects like English, History and Science, we always have to prove our theories and explain our arguments. Critical Thinking helps me do this” (Helen, Year 9).

Interviews with scholars also yielded potential evidence that the programme increases engagement with learning.

“We have sets for Maths, and I was in the second group, and I was quite upset, but I worked really hard last year, and this year, and I got moved up to the higher set, so I think achieved a lot because I worked so hard to get there” (Elshadaie, Year 8).

“I’m proud of my Maths, I used to be very low in Maths…partly Brunel with all the Maths and number jumbles that we do, the teacher also helped me and
explained something to me, and I've been doing extra revision here [at school]” (Aisha, Year 9).

This determination to do well was noticeable. Several scholars suggested an increased engagement with learning.

Some scholars were slightly more cautious about their achievement during the Year 9 interviews. The following quote from Nohman seems to suggest he has changed and improved his behaviour, but remains slightly modest about it.

“[My achievement is] medium…there have been points when I've been really good and points when I've been really bad like in Year 7… I've matured, like I don’t get angry when someone who like cusses me or something” (Nohman, Year 9).

Interview
Question 3: Is the programme influencing you in any way?

Throughout the interviews conducted with each student in Year 8 and Year 9, scholars frequently mentioned that the programme had helped them in school, particularly with Maths and English. It was also articulated, during several of the Year 9 interviews, that Critical Thinking was having an impact upon scholars. It is important to note here that this was first instance of Critical Thinking being mentioned by scholars as having an impact. Critical Thinking has always been a key element of the programme, suggesting that only sessions sustained over a long period of time have an influence. The following quotations represent evidence of the programme’s influence on the scholars’ engagement with learning;

“The maths, with the codes and ciphers I didn’t know about codes and ciphers until I learnt it them, and the English, there were certain skills, that I already knew but I didn’t know to the level that they were teaching too, so that improved me” (Niall, Year 8).

“I think some the skills that I've learned, like in Maths, we’ve done some code breaking and in English we've learned like different narrations and everything, that really helped me because I just took my English exams and I had to
describe the language…so the things that I learnt here were really helpful” (Jinal, Year 8).

“It helps you think about stuff, when we done Critical Thinking sessions, it’s like ‘thinking outside of the box’, so it makes you see things in a different way” (Jahmilla, Year 9).

Comments from the focal group also reveal that scholars believe the programme is helping them in school:

“Descriptive writing work: we were doing an essay on descriptive writing in school at the time. It ended up being one of my best essays yet” (Lucy, Year 9).

After a session on revision for SATS on Shakespeare’s Plays, Rebecca commented: “I have used some of the English Skills...At my school we were doing Much Ado About Nothing and it was a lot easier to see what type of skills he used in his plays...It also helped me when I had to deliver a speech on writing styles on Shakespeare”

The majority of scholars both in Year 8 and Year 9 also believed that the programme helped them outside of school. While these influences often related to Aim 1: understanding of self and life world, a few scholars articulated during the interviews aspects which related to their engagement with learning:

“Like here [at school], in some lessons I’m better than other people, but in Brunel, there are people that are much, much higher than me and much better, and it just goes to show that I have to work hard to get up to standards that I can get up to” (Elshadaie, Year 8)

“My homework, and just stuff that I do...some of the stuff you don’t usually learn at school” (Lee, Year 8).
“The stuff I learn, I bring it back the code breaking and stuff…I teach my friends and my family” (Nohman, Year 9).

This drive to better oneself in order to stay ahead and work hard outside of school indicates that the scholars are gaining a greater degree of engagement with learning as a result of attending the programme.

**Aim 3: Increased Aspirations**

Evidence for enhanced aspirations seems to follow findings from pilot programmes (Koshy and Casey 2008). These programmes often suggested that change was a slow process, and students needed time for reflection.

Responses to Question 6 were coded, based on three different aspirations: career, lifestyle and ‘general’. More details of their definitions can be found in Appendix 2. Overall, lifestyle and general aspirations did see a small increase over the two-year period, with high aspirations going from 22 (of 85) to 32 (of 72), and 41 (of 85) to 45 (of 72) respectively.

Career aspirations at the start of Year 8 were already high, with 49 out of 85 scholars having high aspirations. We speculate that aspirations may have already been high due to the volume of information the scholars received about joining the programme, how they were chosen and the university. Scholars also completed the questionnaire on campus, and had already received a campus tour and spent a few hours there. At the end of Year 9, 40 out of 72 scholars had high career aspirations. This shows no real change in aspirations. Patterns from previous cohorts of scholars have shown a post-exam fatigue, and with the holidays approaching it is possible that scholars are simply tired. Combined with the idea that this kind of change is slow, we hypothesise that by the end of Year 11, scholars’ aspirations will have increased more noticeably.
There is some evidence from Question 5 that the programme is increasing scholars’ aspirations. The number of scholars saying that they believed the programme would ‘help them achieve more in life’ increased from 3 out of 85 scholars at the start of Year 8, to 8 out of 72 scholars at the end of Year 9. The number of scholars stating that the programme would ‘help with school then life’ was a new response at the start of Year 9 (2 scholars). By the end of Year 9, 8 out of 72 scholars responded to Question 5 in this way. Thus, there is some evidence to imply that as some scholars believe the programme can help them with their future, they may believe they can achieve their aspirations as a result of attending the Urban Scholars programme. Evidence supporting this can also be found in focal group responses:

“I think the Urban Scholars Group is very useful to youths. We have the chance to go to an elegant university and fulfil our dreams as careers. This course helps is to explore what we can do in the future with what we are good at now….we have been taught that you won’t make it to the big business if you don’t start now” (Zimuzo, Year 8)

“I have used the information about the university experience and the aims from the 2 presenters. ‘I have started to look forward to my university planning and I have been thinking about how I should organise my future. The presentation about the aims also influenced me and gave me a motive to work towards my future dreams. It made things easier to understand and organise” (Jinal, Year 9)

During the interviews, there were examples of the programme raising aspirations from Questions 2 and 3. Responses to these questions overlap, and so the latter responses relating to increasing aspirations are presented below:
“I liked the dreams and aspirations [session], especially when the speech with the guy, yea the boxers when they came in, I liked that speech... [I started] to think about where I am going and what I want to do... [question 3] the speech did, I thought about what I was going to do later, and how I wanted to progress to do that” (Molly, Year 8).

“Well you know when you go to university, you go to lectures and stuff, so it’s giving me experience of what it’s going to be like when I’m older, going to lectures, and it kind of gives you a head start to know what you’re going to be doing” (Aisha, Year 9)

**Aim 4: Increased HE orientation**
The number of scholars displaying HE orientation at the start of Year 8 was again already fairly high, with 41 out of 85 scholars. We would hypothesise that the reason behind this is similar to Aim 3; scholars had spent time on the university campus and had been sent a lot of information about the university. By the end of Year 9 this proportion had increased, as we see that 42 scholars out of 72 displayed HE orientation. We see that this has increased from just under half of the scholars to almost two-thirds. While there may be other external factors influencing scholars’ HE orientation, the consistent exposure to the university campus, university style teaching and interaction with university undergraduates afforded to the scholars by the Urban Scholars programme could arguably play a part in this increase. This idea is backed up by comments from the focal group:

“When the mentors told us about what they were studying it really opened my eyes to the possibilities of what I might be able to achieve by the time that I leave high school and start thinking about university” (Rebecca, Year 9)

“I found it very interesting finding out what its actually like to go to university and what you actually have to do in the courses and it gave me a inside look on university life and it actually assured me that it isn’t as scary as it may seem. From the lecture that one of the students made about what its like studying maths I’ve decided I want to study maths at university as it seems interesting and exciting and not as hard as it may seem on the outside” (Michelle, Year 9)
The last comment in particular was an eye opener as the team had never considered that the university was something that might seem ‘scary’ to the scholars. Yet if family members or close friends had not attended university, it was an unknown quantity for the scholar, something that was not for them or a place where they would have trouble fitting in. This echoed the findings of Ball and Vincent (1998), cited earlier, that suggested that many of the students in disadvantaged areas hold strong views about Higher Education being ‘not their place’.

The number of scholars displaying no HE orientation is also interesting. This decreased from 20 out 85 scholars at the start of Year 8, to 9 out of 72 by the end of Year 9. While there are no clear reasons for this decline, we feel it important that fewer scholars are displaying no interest in HE.

Additionally, we have evidence which suggests that scholars’ HE orientation is not associated with their parents’ educational experiences, and thus must be a consequence of something else. When parents’ educational experience was compared to scholars’ HE orientation at the start of Year 9, it was found that there were 15 scholars with HE orientation whose parents had experience of HE, compared to 25 scholars who had HE orientation whose parents had no experience of HE. The same analysis was undertaken at the end of Year 9; and it was seen here that 14 scholars with HE orientation had parents with experience of HE, compared with 20 scholars with HE whose parents had no experience of HE.

Questionnaires

Question 7: What do you think you will have to do in the next 10 years to lead the kind of life you described in answer to Question 6?

The number of scholars suggesting that in order to achieve their dreams they would have follow a full academic path through to university, as well as work hard and get good grades increased from 9 (out of 85) scholars at the start of Year 8, to 15 (out of 72) at the end of Year 9. This not only shows that some scholars are becoming more aware of the necessity of a university degree in their desired career, but that success will not come easily and they will have to continue to work hard in order to achieve their dreams.
During the interviews the majority of scholars displayed HE orientation, with 20 out of 24 scholars already displaying HE orientation in the Year 8 interviews. This HE orientation was primarily displayed when scholars were asked about their future career plans (Question 4) and the steps they would have to take. It was often unclear as to how the scholars had chosen these plans, but some responses to Question 3 suggested the programme had had an impact on their choices:

“Well it’s making me think that maybe I’d like to go to university when I grow up… it’s only been recently, as [before] I thought of university, it's like, it's a lot of work and I'm not really up to that, but I'm trying my best to be up to it” (Connor, Year 8).

“Well its helping me we want to go to university because, when I'm older I want to get a job, but I need to go to university to get a good one, so it’s making me want to go there” (Thomas, Year 8)

Conclusion
After two years of this four year intervention programme, quantitative data collected on the programme does not show any major change. As with previous pilots of the programme (Koshy and Casey, 2008) changes in aspirations, HE orientation and other areas are slow. This is consistent with the arguments of Hatcher (1998), who observed a ‘resistance to change’ amongst teenagers in various intervention programmes, particularly in their aspirations and hopes for the future. In order to contest this he suggested longer intervention, which supports and justifies the Urban Scholars programme continuing for four years.

However, the qualitative data collected from interviews with the scholars and the focal group indicate that positive change is taking place. The biggest change that has been seen so far in the scholars is in enhanced confidence both on and off the programme, which is part of Aim 1. We hypothesise that this is for a number of reasons: firstly, scholars are made to feel special as they are selected from a whole year group by their school teachers for the programme and there are usually only a few students per school. Secondly, scholars are regularly told on the programme that
they have the potential to achieve and excel. Thirdly, scholars feel privileged to be studying at a university, using university facilities and experiencing university-style sessions before most young people - the majority of the scholars’ peer group will not have attended university by this age. Finally, the scholars interact with students possibly of similar ability, and feel able to display effort and their talents and ability in sessions without fear of being labelled a ‘nerd’ or ‘boffin’.

Although there is only some evidence of meeting its aims, the programme tutors are optimistic that there will be more data, including qualitative data over the next phase of the project that shows more change in attitude and aspiration.

The Design Research methodology has proved invaluable to the programme as it has meant, through rapid data collection and analysis, that frequent evaluation of whether the five aims are being achieved takes place and that the programme is regularly refined and modified to make it as enjoyable and effective for the scholars as possible. Some of the changes that have been made so far are:

- The twice yearly questionnaire is to be completed in e-format in response to scholars’ requests. Scholars commented that they would enjoy completing the questionnaire more if they could do so on a computer. This also allows results to be collated and analysed more quickly and efficiently.
- Scholars expressed interest in sport and outdoor activities. Due to the academic focus of Saturday sessions, Easter Schools have included outward bound activities to fulfil this request.
- Audits of scholars’ social and emotional skills revealed scholars are unsure of, and lacking confidence in, how to achieve the goals they have set for themselves. Questionnaire responses have also revealed scholars have little realistic idea of how to achieve their career goals. Sessions involving professionals will be used to discuss their educational and career pathways.
- At a Parent’s Day, some parents expressed concern about funding children through university. The funding talks planned for the final year of the programme will now be brought forward to be included in the third year.
- Despite a project to enhance presentation skills, few scholars took up the challenge of making presentations at the end of year gathering of scholars and parents. There will be a greater focus on developing presentation skills for all scholars this year through debating, drama and public speaking sessions.
Despite change being slow, it is taking place. The majority of the evidence for this is qualitative but scholars have proved to us through this data that they are aware of the changes they feel are brought about by the programme and the benefits to themselves.

References


Department for Communities and Local Government (DfCLG) (2007) Index of Local Deprivation. London: DfCLG


Resources
Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) (2008)
http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/giftedandtalented/identification/gandt/
Accessed on 08/08/08
Appendix 1A: Interview Format

Interviews with scholars were semi-structured. The set questions are provided below.

1. You have been selected for the Brunel Urban Scholars Programme, how do you feel about being chosen?
   Possible probe questions;
   Do you have a G&T programme within school?
   Have you heard the words G&T?
   How are you doing in school?
   How would you describe your achievement in school? (Explain achievement if necessary.)
   Some schools use the word setting or streaming, do you know what that means?
   Do you have sets in school, what sets are you in?
   Do you think you are doing as well as you could in school subjects?

2. What do you think of the programme so far?
   Possible probe questions;
   Do you like anything in particular?
   Why do you like it?
   Can you give an example of?
   Is there anything you have not enjoyed? Why?
   Think about the lessons, which were the most enjoyable, why? Least enjoyable why?
   Is there any part of the programme that worries you?
   Do you think we can improve the programme?
   If yes… how?

3. Is the programme influencing you in any way?
   Possible probe questions:
   Is it influencing you in school?
   How?/ Why?
   Can you give me an example of when in school?
   Is it influencing you out of school?
   In what way?
How/ why?
Can you give me an example when outside of school?

4. Now we are going to think about the future, where do you think you will be in ten years time?
Possible probe questions;
Where do you think you will be?
How do you think you will get there?
What will you have to do to achieve this?
Do you think you will be able to do all of this?

Appendix 1B: Focal Group Questions
1. What did you think of the programme this month?
2. Have you used anything from the programme in your life outside Urban Scholars?
3. Is there any way we could improve this month’s session?

Appendix 1C: Questionnaire Format
The questionnaires are formatted in a way so that almost all questions have a box which is the size of half an A4 sheet for the scholars to answer in. The questions are as follows;

- 1A. What do you like/dislike about school?
- 1B. Write down the names of the subjects you like and give your reasons.
- 2A. Please tell us about how you spend your time when you are not in school, tell us about any hobbies you have.
- 2B. If you had an opportunity to develop a hobby what would it be?
- 3A. What are your thoughts on the Urban Scholars Programme?
- 3B. Are there any aspects of the Urban Scholars Programme which you are worried about?
- 4A. What do you think the phrase gifted and talented means?
- 4B. What do you think are the abilities you have that make you Gifted and Talented?
- 5. What difference do you think this programme will make to you?
- 6. What kind of life do you think you will have in 10 years from now?
- 7. What do you think you will have to do in the next 10 years to lead the kind of life you described in answer to question six?
Appendix 2: Definitions and details of questionnaire coding

Question 4a
Good understanding: scholar describes the phrased encompassing both aspects as described the government definition i.e. the scholar mentions in some form or another ‘academic gifts’ and ‘visio-spatial and/or practical talents’

Average understanding: describes only one of the above
Bad understanding: describes neither of these or provides unclear answer.
Statements such as ‘quick-thinker’ and ‘ability to achieve’ are included here despite being valid dimensions of a G&T student.

Question 6
Career:
- High: professional/sport/famous
- Middle: non-professional/“high paid job”/”good job”
- Low: “just a job”/don’t know etc

Lifestyle:
- High: big house/car/own house/family
- Middle: comfortable lifestyle/friends/by self/social life
- Low: living at home/other

General:
- High aspirations: aspiration in both career and lifestyle
- Middle aspirations: high in either career or lifestyle (and middle in the other) OR middle in both
- Low aspirations: middle in one and low in the other OR low in both

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