

Grand Union Collaborative Studentship Competition 2020

Project Proposal

Section A: Supervisor applicant details

Applicant: Dr Neil Harrison

Pathway: Education

Department: Education (Rees Centre)

Section B: Proposed non-academic partner organisation

Name and sector (commercial

/government/NGO) of proposed partner organisation:

Villiers Park – national educational charity– national social mobility

Please describe the nature of the non-academic partner's work:

Villiers Park Educational Trust is a national charity that works to improve social mobility for young people aged 11-19 from disadvantaged backgrounds by:

1. Providing young people with tailored programs of coaching and educational support.
2. Enabling young learners to define their own pathways to future success and building their skills and competencies to fully realise their potential.
3. Empowering students to fully participate in their educational communities.
4. Facilitating access to higher education institutions, universities and employers.

The Villiers Park Programme provides support to individual learners over a four-year period, spanning school years 10 to 13. They provide one-to-one continuous coaching to disadvantaged young learners, enabling them to visualise multiple positive possible selves and establishing pathways to their goals. Through continuous coaching, workshops and residential courses delivered to the learner over the four-year period the programme empowers them with the skills, confidence and subject-specific education to boost educational attainment. Throughout this period the programme facilitates and forges links between the learners, employers and higher education institutions to ensure that the learners progress through education and into the workplace. With a long history dating back to 1909, Villiers Park has impacted the lives of tens of thousands of young people through their educational programmes. Their educational hubs are currently operating in five areas of the UK; areas characterised by deprivation, low levels of access to higher education and a distinct lack of social mobility. They work in partnership with local authorities, schools, colleges, universities and business to provide disadvantaged young people with personalised support programmes to raise their critical skills and educational attainment, ultimately leading to places in

universities or productive employment. The young people that Villiers Park typically work with are those from low income families, young people who have been in contact with social services, those who care for a sibling or parent, and those in the first generation to consider higher education.

Please outline any previous personal/pathway links or collaboration with the proposed partner:

I have longstanding professional relationships with the Chief Executive (Rae Tooth) and the incoming Director of Operations (Dr Julian Crockford). My work with Rae dates from 2014 and her time as Head of Evidence and Effective Practice at the Office for Fair Access (now the Office for Students), when I was commissioned to deliver a series of research projects around access to higher education for disadvantaged students – I worked with Julian as a collaborator on these projects in his previous role as Director of the Widening Participation Research and Evaluation Unit at the University of Sheffield.

Please describe the role of the partner organisation within the proposed project, including any in-kind contribution:

Villiers Park's strategy for 2020 to 2025 sets out ambitious plans to extend their work with disadvantaged young people, with specialist interventions targeted at specific needs dependent on the disadvantages experienced, for example young people with experience of social services. The aim of all such interventions is to support the development of skills, attributes and behaviours in the young people they work with to improve life outcomes, primarily through access to and success in higher education.

They will therefore be providing a generative environment at a time of strategic innovation for the organisation. The student will have the opportunity to develop new ideas in collaboration with Villiers Park's educational developers and evaluators, putting them into practice and then reviewing and reflecting on the results. This will also provide the student with ready access to research participants, including those from groups that can otherwise be difficult to engage in doctoral research. Villiers Park will make an in-kind contribution in the form of free accommodation for research stays with their team at their premises in Cambridge and travel costs to visit Cambridge and other hubs where work will be delivered (most likely in Plymouth and Tyneside).

In what sense(s) will the project be collaborative? What activities will enable ongoing dialogue and/or knowledge exchange?

This has largely been answered in the previous section. Villiers Park are keen to collaborate because of the access to academic expertise provided through a link with the University, mediated through the student and, indirectly, their supervisors. The final output will be a co-constructed intervention programme, grounded in academic research and developed with a commitment to rigorous evaluation. As part of the partnership, it is expected that the student will spend several extended periods co-located with the Villiers Park team – amounting to around one to two months per year, as appropriate. This time will be used to engage with the processes around devising and reviewing the programme, as well as with more general activities of the organisation particularly around improving their evaluative practices. This will

benefit the student by giving them access to a 'real world' educational environment, as well as an opportunity to contribute directly into work to improve outcomes for disadvantaged young people.

Section C: Research project details

Project title: Improving GCSE outcomes for young people in care and other vulnerable groups through trauma-informed interventions to support agency for learning

Project outline:

Collaborative studentship projects are 'partially defined' in advance of any student application. Be sure to include context, rationale, probable aims, likely research questions, scope, anticipated methods, design. It is understood that some aspects of projects will change in due course. [max. 500 words]

Villiers Park annually works with around 2,000 disadvantaged young people, supporting them to improve their educational outcomes to enable them to access higher education or other positive pathways. They are predominantly drawn from low income backgrounds, but Villiers Park have become aware that they are also working with some who are (or have been) in care. These are likely to have undergone significant educational and social disruption, as well as having experienced trauma related to abuse or neglect. In addition, they are also working with adjacent groups such as those in contact with social services or who have otherwise experienced childhood trauma (e.g. from refugee or military families).

Villiers Park have come to understand that their existing programme is not optimal for these groups, concurrent with a desire to increase their work with them due to their low participation in higher education (Harrison, 2017). There are difficulties in building and maintaining relationships between young people and mentors which allow the former to maintain and extend their agency without developing dependencies. This is particularly problematic for those with few trusted adult relationships.

The aim would therefore be to co-devise a new programme that is trauma-informed – i.e. engages with the neurobiological and psychosocial legacies of trauma (e.g. Anda *et al.*, 2006; Teicher *et al.*, 2016) – based around the following research questions:

1. What are the implications of childhood trauma for a young person's ability to engage successfully with a long-term educational enhancement programme?
2. How can existing programmes be adapted to best meet the needs of young people with the legacy of trauma, including training and support for relevant professionals?
3. What 'success milestones' might be used to evaluate the long-term impact of the adapted programme on a young person's propensity to access higher education or other positive pathways?

The student will be expected to work within a broadly social realist epistemological framework, respecting the socially-constructed nature of individual experiences while recognising the need to better understand the (quasi-)causal impact of the programme on those experiences. They will be expected to draw on the realist evaluation paradigm (Pawson, 2013; Pawson and

Tilley, 1997) to explore (and increase) the impact of social interventions in real-world environments. The study will use an action research methodology (e.g. McNiff, 2013) based on working with the Villiers Park educational developers to trial, collect qualitative data, reflect upon and revise the programme through two annual cycles.

The research participants will be young people (c. 30-50 individuals aged 13-16 across two annual cohorts and based in two geographical hubs) and Villiers Park staff working with them (around 20 individuals). The principal data collection method will be semi-structured interviews, either face-to-face or Skype, enhanced through visual/creative techniques or peer-to-peer interviewing. It is envisaged that each individual will be repeatedly interviewed to provide a longitudinal perspective – e.g. 30 minute interviews every three months. Observational data will also be analysed. In keeping with realist evaluation, deductive analysis will primarily be used to test causal hypotheses derived from the embodied theory of change.

References:

- Anda, R., Felitti, V., Bremner, J., Walker, J., Whitfield, C., Perry, B., Dube, S. and Giles, W. (2006) The enduring effects of abuse and related adverse experiences in childhood: A convergence of evidence from neurobiology and epidemiology. *European Archives of Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience* 256(3): 174-186.
- Harrison, N. (2017) *Moving On Up: Care Leavers and Care-Experienced Students' Pathways Into and Through Higher Education*. Winchester: National Network for the Education of Care Leavers.
- McNiff, J. (2013) *Action Research: Principles and Practice* (third edition). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Pawson, R. (2013) *The Science of Evaluation: A Realist Manifesto*. London: Sage.
- Pawson, R. and N. Tilley (1997) *Realistic Evaluation*. London: Sage.
- Teicher, M., Samson, J., Anderson, C. and Ohashi, K. (2016) The effects of childhood maltreatment on brain structure, function and connectivity. *Nature Reviews: Neuroscience* 17: 652-666.
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Section D: Supervision arrangements

Please outline the proposed supervision arrangements (including details of the supervision provided by the partner organisation) and the level of 'fit' with interests of supervisor/cohort:

The academic supervisors will be Dr Neil Harrison and Dr James Robson. The former is deputy director of the Rees Centre (which specialises in educational and life outcomes for young people in and around the children's social care system and adults with experience of care) and leads on the Centre's work around (a) participation in post-compulsory education and training, and (b) trauma-informed interventions in schools. The latter has a broad-based interest in social justice and widening access to higher education. As such, there is a strong and experienced supervisory team in place, with a high level of fit between the project and the supervisors' interests. Supervision within Villiers Park will be provided by Dr Julian Crockford, who will also have some informal input into the academic supervision as appropriate to his

professional experience of evaluating social justice interventions in higher education and expertise in realist evaluation.

Section E: Knowledge Exchange and Impact

Please summarise briefly the potential impact of the proposed project for the University and for the project partner:

From the perspective of Villiers Park, they gain access to the Rees Centre's extensive knowledge and experience of working with young people in and around the children's social care system. This includes, for example, both the psychosocial elements of childhood trauma and the network of professionals (e.g. social workers, foster carers, virtual school) surround the young person. This will, through the student, provide them with the tools to reinvigorate their programme for new groups of young people who have undergone severe educational disadvantage and to navigate the organisational complexities of the professional networks supporting them. This will include both access to academic research within the Rees Centre and engagement with practitioners and policymakers.

From the perspective of the University, this project would provide new insights into how best to widen the pool of potential applicants from profoundly disadvantaged groups and a strengthened relationship with one of the principal national organisations providing long-term support for them. Furthermore, there are useful synergies with the Timpson Programme – a major study based in the Rees Centre focused on training school staff in working with children with a legacy of trauma.

Please submit this form to granduniondtp@socsci.ox.ac.uk by 10 January 2020