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Career  
Academies  
UK

# Raising aspirations

Independent research into the  
impact of Career Academies UK



FRESHMINDS Research

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# Key findings

- *The principles on which the Career Academy ethos is based - broadening the opportunities for middle-achieving students - are being upheld.*
- *99% of Career Academy coordinator / Senior Management Team (SMT) respondents agreed that the programme 'raises the aspirations of students'*
- *97% of alumni respondents said that the Career Academy programme had had a positive impact on their 'education or career aspirations'*
- *98% of Career Academy coordinator / SMT respondents said that the programme had had either a 'very positive' or 'somewhat positive' impact on students.*
- *80% of Career Academy coordinator and SMT respondents felt that to 'a great' or 'some' extent principles of the Career Academy programme had been used to enhance their school or college at a broader organisational level.*
- *90% of Career Academy coordinator / SMT respondents felt that by offering a Career Academy programme their institution had 'greatly' or 'somewhat' 'differentiated itself from others.'*
- *Over 95% of the 503 Career Academy coordinators, SMT members, students and alumni who took part in this research would recommend the Career Academy programme to others.*
- *98% of the Career Academy schools and colleges are located in an urban setting and are more likely than the national average to be in deprived areas.*
- *Career Academy schools and colleges tend to have more challenging student populations than the national average.*

## Why this research was commissioned

Career Academies UK is a registered charity set up by the business community in 2002. We lead and support a movement of over 800 businesses and 120 schools and colleges, working together to raise the aspirations of 16 to 19-year-olds. We work largely in urban areas and those of social need with middle achieving students, to widen their choices in life and improve their levels of achievement. Key features of the programme include a six-week paid internship, a Partner in Business (mentor), classroom lectures from employers and a range of trips and visits.

The Career Academy movement is currently making the transition from a being a new initiative to becoming a more mature programme. At this critical point in our development, we want to identify how and to what degree Career Academies UK is succeeding in its aim to improve the aspirations and achievements of participating students. We also want to confirm that building links with local employers demonstrably improves the skills of staff within schools and colleges. It is intended that this will inform and improve existing policy and practice so that we ensure that we continue to offer a successful and sustainable programme.

With this in mind an independent research consultancy, FreshMinds, was commissioned in October 2009 to evaluate the impact of our national programme. The broad aims of the research were to:

- Build an understanding of what makes a good Career Academy
- Gather robust evidence of the programme's impact on students, schools and colleges
- Collect compelling qualitative narratives and case studies
- Identify areas of strength and areas for development.

We are pleased to say that it has demonstrated that the Career Academy programme is having a clear and positive impact on participating students and their schools and colleges.

## About the research

This five-month evaluation project gathered a wealth of data, from a wide range of sources, to build evidence of the impact of Career Academies UK. It involved four main stages of research:

- 1 Desk research to review existing data.
- 2 A telephone survey with 101 Career Academy coordinators (the school or college staff member running the programme) and senior management team members.
- 3 An online survey with 402 Career Academy current students and alumni.
- 4 Compilation of case studies from Career Academy students, coordinators and senior management team members.

## Career Academies UK is reaching its target schools, colleges and students

Career Academies UK aims to engage with urban schools and colleges in challenging areas and, it appears that on the whole, it is reaching its target institutions.

Analysis of Department for Education and Edubase data has shown that 98% of the Career Academy schools and colleges are located in an urban setting<sup>1</sup> and are more likely than the national average to be in deprived areas. It has also shown that, on average, Career Academy schools and colleges tend to have more challenging student populations than the national average, with a higher proportion of EMA (Education Maintenance Allowance), FSM (free school meals) and EAL (English as an additional language) students. Students at Career Academy schools and colleges are slightly less likely than the national average to achieve five A\*-C grades at GCSE including English and Mathematics.

The Career Academy programme aims to engage with 'middle achieving' students all of whom must be engaged in a Level 3 course of study equivalent to 360 UCAS points (three 'A' Levels or equivalent BTEC or Diploma). Career Academy student selection processes are in place in over three quarters of schools and colleges. Students are typically selected for their enthusiasm, interest and commitment, rather than purely on the basis of their academic achievement. It therefore appears that the principles on which the Career Academy ethos is based - broadening the opportunities for 'middle achieving' students - are being upheld in the ways in which students are identified for inclusion on the programme.

*'We look for commitment, interest and enthusiasm. Not necessarily high flyers but those willing to commit.'* (Career Academy coordinator)

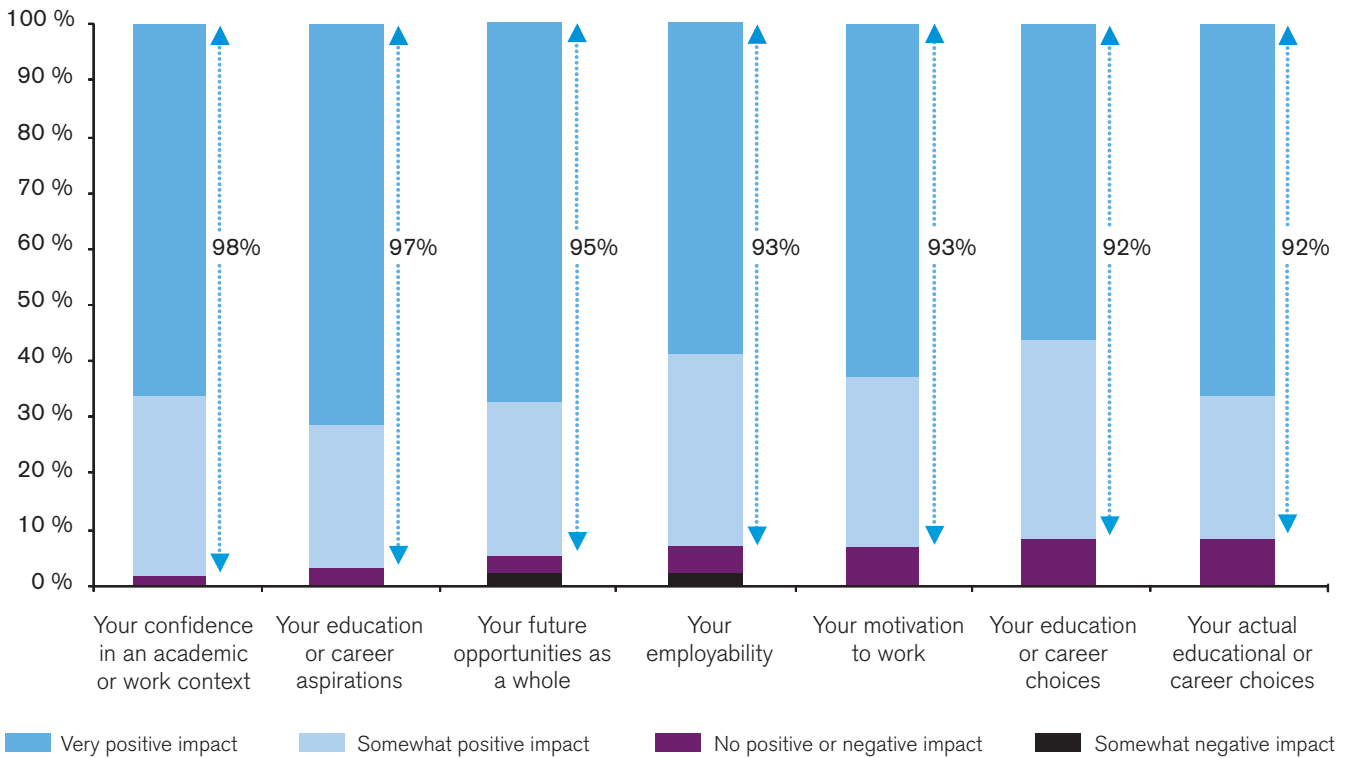
## The programme is having a broad and positive impact on students

The research has shown that the programme is achieving its aims of broadening the life chances of students by increasing their confidence, raising their aspirations and giving them opportunities that they would not otherwise have had.

<sup>1</sup> As defined by Edubase based on postcode

## The impact of the Career Academy: Alumni

What impact do you think the Career Academy programme as a whole has had in the following areas?



## Case study

### Student impact

Longley Park Sixth Form College, Sheffield – Career Academy coordinator

In the first year of the Career Academy, college staff explained to all the students that the formal application process would require business dress. However, one boy turned up for the interview in jeans and a T-shirt. When asked why he had not taken the advice, he said that he had put on a suit that morning, but that when his father had seen him, he told him to take it off. The Career Academy coordinator told us that '[his father] told him he would never get in and that he would be no good in a business job. This student took a photo of himself on his phone to prove that he had been dressed in the suit. He had no confidence, but we took him on.'

The student went on to thrive because he felt that the selection panel (which included employers) had faith in him. As a consequence of the guidance he received through the Career Academy, he went on to win a post-16 enterprise competition and when 15 of the top 200 civil servants visited, he showed them around the college. He achieved A grades in his A level exams and after leaving Longley Park, he has pursued a career in investment banking.

### Overall impact of the programme

When asked to rate the overall impact of the programme, 98% of Career Academy coordinator / SMT respondents said that the programme had had either a 'very positive' or 'somewhat positive' impact on students.

Year two students and alumni were also extremely positive about the learning experience that the programme had provided them. 100% of alumni and 94% of year two students said that it was either an 'excellent' or a 'good' learning experience.

It was only possible to collect a limited amount of data from schools and colleges on the comparative performance of students on the Career Academy programme and those not on the programme studying the same qualifications. However data from individual schools and colleges showed that Career Academy students achieved better results than non Career Academy students studying the same qualifications at the same institution. In one institution Career Academy students had considerably higher retention and achievement with a success rate 18% above the expected benchmark and 30% above non Career Academy students.

## Performance against specific aims

The five areas in which the programme was rated by students / alumni / SMT and Career Academy coordinators as having the greatest impact on students were:

### Raising aspirations

- 99% of Career Academy coordinator / SMT respondents agreed that the programme 'raises the aspirations of students'.
- 97% of alumni respondents said that the Career Academy programme had had a positive impact on their 'education or career aspirations'.

*'I am more determined now to go on to university and get a degree.'* (Year two respondent)

*'A lot of the students come from disadvantaged backgrounds and genuinely don't believe in themselves... and now they see what's on offer. It raises the aspirations of those on Level 3 qualifications but also of younger students who see what they can do with a bit of hard work!'* (Career Academy coordinator)

### Increasing confidence

- 98% of Career Academy coordinator / SMT respondents agreed that the programme 'increases the confidence of students'.
- 98% of alumni respondents said that the Career Academy programme had had a positive impact on their 'confidence in an academic or work context'.

*'It has increased my confidence and motivated me to complete a degree so that I can start my own business in the future.'* (Year two respondent)

### Equipping students with valuable life skills

- 96% of Career Academy coordinator / SMT respondents agreed that the programme 'equips students with valuable life skills.'

### Preparing students for employment

- 95% of Career Academy coordinator / SMT respondents agreed that the programme 'prepares students for employment.'
- 93% of alumni respondents said that the Career Academy programme had had a positive impact on their employability.

### Providing experiences that broaden life chances

- 94% of Career Academy coordinator / SMT respondents agreed that the programme 'provides experiences that broaden life chances'.
- 95% of alumni respondents said that the Career Academy programme had had a positive impact on their 'future opportunities as a whole'.

## Case studies

### Increasing confidence

Adam Hopley – Alumnus, Blackburn College

Adam says that he was forced to become more confident because of all the people he met through the programme.

The Career Academy also helped improve his confidence in public speaking. He was chosen to visit London for a workshop on presenting and communicating with other students from around the country. The group were given a task to create and deliver a press statement about how Career Academies UK would survive in the recession.

'I was put on the spot and I realised I like being under pressure sometimes. Since then, I have learnt to put myself forward for things.'

Zandra Godfrey – Alumna, John Kitto Community College, Plymouth

At a conference hosted by Career Academy students at Royal Mail's offices, Zandra was asked to stand up before an audience of business mentors and introduce the event. 'My teacher sprung this on me last minute. I had done public speaking in front of other students, but it was much more nerve-wracking having to speak to business people. That experience gave me so much confidence.'

'Talking to people in suits intimidated me. I thought they were posher than me, that they would think they were above me. I have learnt that I can be myself around people. Once you have had to speak to lots of business people, you feel more at ease.'

### Providing experiences that broaden life chances

Longley Park Sixth Form College, Sheffield – Career Academy coordinator

'Being in the Career Academy makes the young people stand out from other 16 to 19-year-olds... a lot of our students wouldn't have that access to business without the connection to Career Academies.'

Cheadle and Marple Sixth Form College, Cheshire – Career Academy coordinator

'At Cheadle and Marple, eighty per cent of the Career Academy students hope to go on to university, but for some, their experience at work has made them eager to choose the office over the lecture theatre.'

'It really forces young people to think, do I want to start a 9-5 life now, or do I want to keep on studying?' says the Career Academy coordinator. 'One girl went to the Bank of New York Mellon and decided she didn't want to put off working. She has taken a job at HSBC. Another girl, who thought she wanted to be a lawyer, shadowed her Partner in Business in a law firm and decided that she would be better suited to marketing.'

## The Career Academy programme offers multiple benefits to the schools and colleges that run it

The Career Academy coordinator / SMT survey also showed that 80% of respondents felt that to 'a great' or 'some' extent the principles of the Career Academy programme had been used to enhance their school or college at a broader organisational level.

The most significant organisational impact has been the enhancement of relationships between schools and colleges and employers.

- **Improved their relationship with employers:**  
96% of Career Academy coordinator / SMT respondents agreed that offering the Career Academy programme had 'greatly' or 'somewhat' improved their organisation's relationship with employers.
- **Improves links between schools, colleges and employers:**  
95% of Career Academy coordinator / SMT respondents agreed that the Career Academy programme 'improves links between schools, colleges and employers'.

*'It's really good for developing links between the school and business community. It's been very powerful there.'* (Career Academy coordinator)

## Case studies

### Impact on relationship with local employers

Cheadle and Marple Sixth Form College, Cheshire – Career Academy coordinator

'Our Local Advisory Board Chair is really supportive and has brought in national and international businesses who didn't engage with the college before. This, in turn, has enthused local employers who want to network more widely and has resulted in the college becoming a hub for business-to-business networking.'

Woodhouse College, Barnet – Career Academy coordinator

'We've definitely made businesses more aware of the college by bringing together local employers and students through the Career Academy. Those parties engaged get to know the college and look out for ways to help it.'

Further areas showing evidence of a positive impact of the programme on the schools and colleges running it included an enhancement in the way in which these institutions are perceived. 90% of Career Academy coordinator / SMT respondents felt that by offering a Career Academy programme their institution had 'greatly' or 'somewhat' 'differentiated itself from others'. 85% agreed that their school or college had 'become more attractive to students' as a result.

## Internships and Partners in Business (mentors) are clear areas of strength

The six-week paid internship is clearly the flagship element of the programme, receiving the highest ratings for appeal, uptake and impact:

- It is the element of the programme that has the highest levels of student engagement.
- 87% of alumni said that the internship had been 'very important' or 'important' in getting them to where they are now.

*'The internships give them greater confidence, greater aspirations: they come back grown up.'* (Career Academy coordinator)

Partners in Business (PIB) rated second only to internships in terms of level of student participation, appeal to new students, and the benefits recognised by those who engage with it.

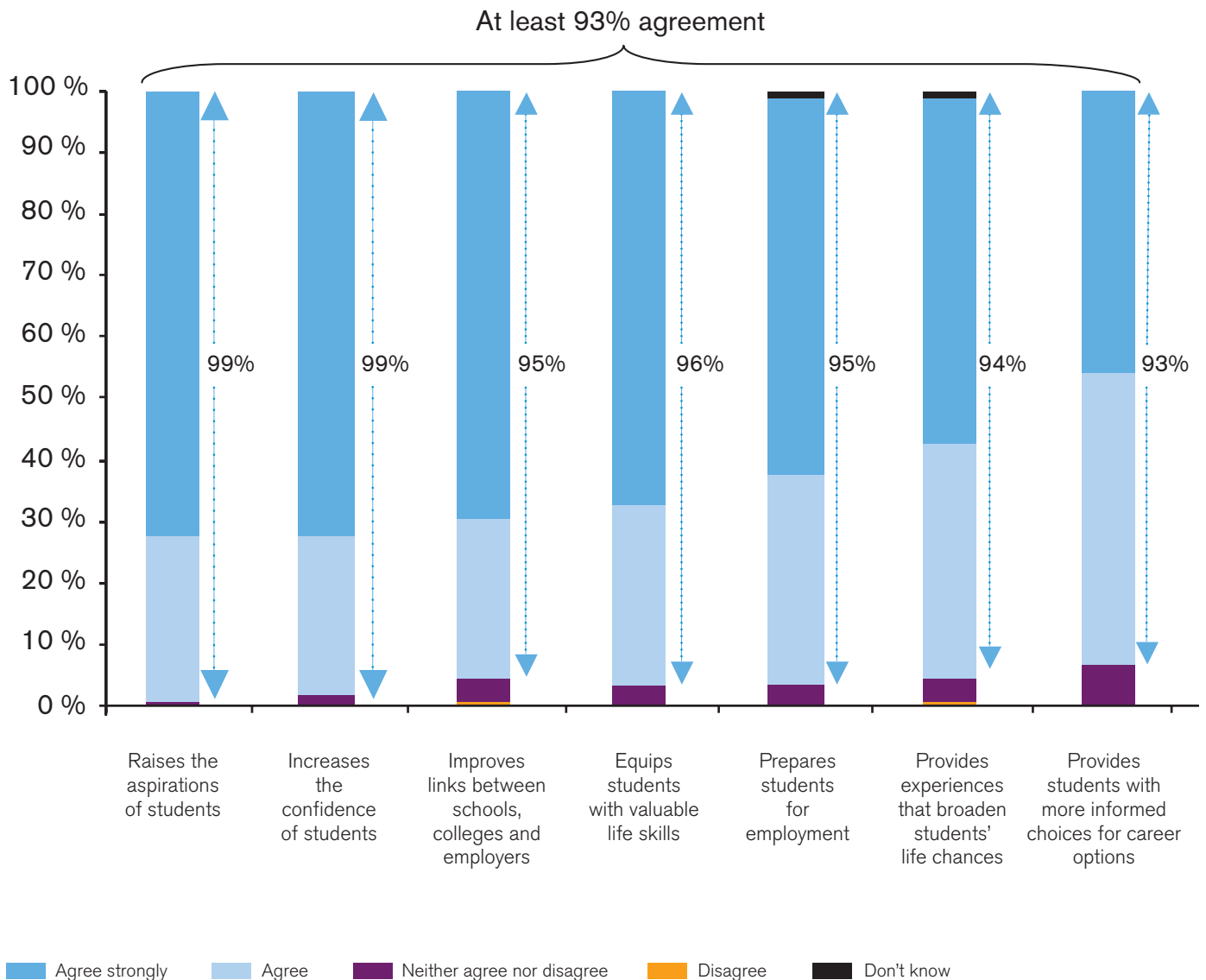
*'My mentor really helped me to achieve my goals last year by giving me his time and support whenever needed.'* (Second year student)

Having a PIB is the only element of the programme that is voluntary to students. Whilst all students are offered a PIB, only 60 to 70% take up the opportunity and the research found that the practice varied between schools and colleges. In the case of one alumni student it was clear that they now felt that not engaging with a PIB was a missed opportunity:

*'I'm not too sure why I didn't take it up. Looking back I believe I should have, as it would have provided me with crucial information within the field I wish to pursue as well as guidance on my current course at university.'* (Alumni)

## The impact of the Career Academy: SMT and Career Academy coordinators

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the Career Academy programme achieves each of the following aims?



## The likelihood of students and teachers recommending the programme is high

Over 95% of the 503 Career Academy students, alumni, coordinators and senior management team who took part in this research would recommend the Career Academy programme to others. It appears that this willingness to refer is actually borne out in practice.

This research has shown that, in 25% of cases, a recommendation influenced a school or college's decision to start a Career Academy in the first instance.

Qualitative feedback on why students would recommend the programme included:

*'This course is not just a school or college course, it is an experience, a way of changing young peoples attitudes towards what is expected of them...Career Academy students fit in a lot easier and quicker.'* (Second year student)

*'Overall, Career Academies gives you the complete package: training that everyone needs, an opportunity to learn, meet new people, and gain experience in a different way that all students will enjoy!'* (Second year student)

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Career Academies UK leads and supports a movement of over 800 employers and 120 schools & colleges, working together to raise the aspirations of 16 to 19-year-olds.

Chairman: Sir Win Bischoff Chief Executive: James McCreary  
With thanks to the Career Academy students pictured and to Shelley Williamson for the photography.

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